

GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY

Bridging the Divide

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1

On the relations of geography and history

Intentions

Richard Evans, in his powerful ‘*defence*’ of history against its attack by postmodernism, claims that the 1960s saw ‘the *invasion* of the social sciences into history in Britain’ and that in the post-war years in France the *Annales* historians aimed to make history far more objective and scientific than ever before by ‘incorporating the methods of economics, sociology and especially *geography* into their approach to the past’ (Evans 1997: 38–9). The writing of regional histories and of histories which addressed geographical concerns became such a distinctive characteristic of the *Annales* school that some observers claimed that its historians had ‘*annexed*’ geography (Harsgor 1978; Huppert 1978). A geographer, Etienne Juillard (1956), had written earlier of the ‘*frontiers*’ between history and geography. Use of these military and territorial metaphors (in all cases, the italics are mine) is indicative of the tensions which have long existed between historians and geographers, tensions which cannot be made to disappear simply by counter-citing pleas made for greater collaboration between the two ‘rival’ camps. We need to engage with the relations of geography and history in a more sustained fashion. How can that objective be achieved?

Let me initially approach the question negatively. It is not my aim to provide a history of historical geography, although I will employ a historiographical approach to the problem of the relations of geography and history. I have provided a brief history of historical geography elsewhere (Baker 1996a; see also Butlin 1993: 1–72). Nor am I setting out to present a critical appraisal of the sources and techniques available for researching and writing historical geography: some such already exist (for example: Morgan 1979; Hooke and Kain 1982; Courville 1995; Baker 1997; Grim et al. 2001). Nor is it my purpose to review recent progress in historical geography: such reviews are published regularly in an international journal, *Progress in Human Geography*. Nor is it my aim either to police the boundaries between geography and history or to promote the autonomy of historical geography as an academic discipline. When I identify categories of geography

and of history I will not be doing so in order to fence them off from each other, providing each with its own demarcated intellectual territory. On the contrary, my purpose in labelling different kinds of geography and history is simply to promote a common language in which their practitioners can conduct meaningful dialogues. I am seeking connection not closure.

Now to expand my aims positively. I am writing mainly for a senior undergraduate and graduate student audience, both in geography and in history, but what I have to say will also be of interest more generally both to historians seeking more knowledge and understanding of the ideas and practices of geographers and to geographers wishing to improve their knowledge and understanding of the ideas and practices of historians. My central aim is to contribute to the long-standing discourse on the relations of geography and history, doing so through a critique of the practices of their two intellectual hybrids, historical geography and geographical history, but primarily that of the former and only to a lesser extent that of the latter. I seek to identify both the potential for, and the achievements of, close relations between geography and history. I want to bridge what one place-sensitive historian has described as 'the Great Divide' between geography and history (Marshall 1985: 22).

Indeed I see contact rather than separation between the aims and methods of geographers and historians. That contact will be demonstrated sometimes in terms of common interests and at other times in terms of collaborative projects. Beneath the passions of individuals and even the enthusiasms of each generation of historical geographers, there lie some basic characteristics of historical geography and of its relations with history. My concern is primarily with those fundamental characteristics. I maintain that the changing subject matter of historical geography does not of itself matter: that beneath the changes there can be detected structural continuities. Moreover, as the baton is handed on to a new generation of historical geographers, I want to make it clear that there is not one, monolithic, prior tradition of historical geography to be replaced. Historical geography is better viewed as a dynamic discursive formation. New interests and new directions being taken up by a new generation of practitioners are to be both welcomed and expected, and they are also needed if historical geography is to continue to flourish.

So, to outline my basic argument. History, historical geography and geographical history have a shared experience over a wide range of matters. They address very similar, and often the same, problems and sources; they employ very similar, and often the same, research and presentational techniques; they straddle, not always without difficulty and sometimes with great discomfort, knowledges and understandings from both the natural sciences and the social sciences while they themselves are part of the broad spectrum of humanities or historical sciences. But, given the different epistemological positions of geography and history, they provide distinctive perspectives upon the past. Every object, phenomenon or idea – such as sugar, singing and sorcery – has its own geography and its own history as well as its own structural forms and associated functions. To consider this

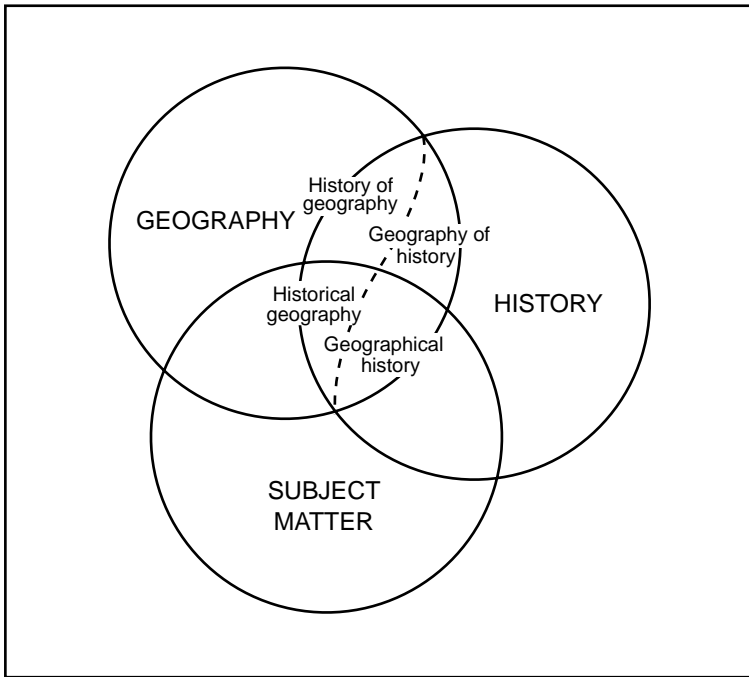


Figure 1.1 Venn diagram of the relations of geography, history and their subject matter

trilogy – of subject matter, geography and history – as three sets, overlapping in Venn diagrammatic form, is to appreciate the central roles of historical geography and geographical history, poised at the intersection of all three. In this light, historical geography may be viewed as being concerned with the historical dimension in geography and geographical history with the geographical dimension in history (Fig. 1.1).

Geography and history are different ways of looking at the world but they are so closely related that neither one can afford to ignore or even neglect the other. Moreover, each of them offers not just one perspective upon the world but multiple perspectives upon the characters of peoples, places and periods. It is sometimes argued that historians focus upon people in past periods and historical geographers upon places in past periods (Mitchell 1954: 12). But contrasting history and geography as being concerned respectively with people and with places is a distorted representation of their concerns. The fundamental difference between them is better expressed in terms of history's focus upon periods and geography's focus upon places, fully recognising that both periods and places were (and are) peopled and were (and are) constructed and experienced by people. Historical geographers tell us stories about how *places* have been created in the past by people in their

own image, while historians tell us different stories about how *periods* have been created in the past by people in their own image.

While the difference between the perspective of the historian and that of the geographer is significant, it can too easily be exaggerated. There is a substantial overlapping of interests between history and geography. If period, place and people are represented as overlapping concerns, then where all three intersect may be described as both historical geography and geographical history: any difference in practice between those two will reflect the specific intellectual origins, distinctive cultural baggages and personal preferences which individual researchers bring to their enquiries. We do not all – and do not all need to – ask exactly the same questions: there are many ways of journeying to even one destination and there are also multiple historical and geographical destinations.

Geographers and historians have expanded enormously the range of subjects they study. They embrace not only almost every conceivable aspect of human activity but also many features of the natural world: for example, not only canals and criminality but also cotton and climate, not only mining and music but also marshlands and malaria, not only factories and fears and but also forests and furs. Moreover, histories and geographies embrace both the actions and the attitudes of individuals and of groups, and they do so taking into account the shaping and experiencing of histories and geographies by people who differ, for example, in terms of their class, ethnicity, gender, age, wealth or education. In addition, histories and geographies are drawing upon a widening spectrum of social, cultural and literary theories and so are adopting increasingly diverse perspectives upon historical geographies.

To take just one example, the emergence of a feminist historical geography and of a historically informed feminist geography. Mona Domosh (1990) and Gillian Rose (1993), drawing upon feminist theory, highlighted critically the foregrounding of white males in historiographies of geographical knowledge and thus the gendered nature of that knowledge. They argued for greater recognition of the roles of formerly marginalised groups, especially women. Similarly, Jeanne Kay (1990: 619) argued that ‘the US historical geography literature is unintentionally yet largely racist and sexist’ and pleaded for ‘more rounded and diversified presentations of our heritage’. The challenge of establishing closer links between feminism and historical geography (Rose and Ogborn 1988; Domosh 1997) is being taken up in a variety of ways, as exemplified in a set of geographical essays on gender and the city in historical perspective (Mattingly 1998). For some it means focusing more sharply on the gendered use of space, on the spatial and material expression of gender relations and power struggles between women and men; for others it embraces the role of women in the making and in the observing of past geographies; and for yet others it involves trying to understand those geographies from a feminine perspective and listening to the voices of women in the past. For example, Kay (1991, 1997) specifically explores attitudes to nature revealed in the writings of nineteenth-century Mormon women and she has argued more

generally that historical geographers of rural Canada and the United States are to some extent limited by their frequent use of one narrative form, the national epic, that cannot readily portray women as important actors unless its essential plot line is reinterpreted in ways less familiar to geographers. Taking examples of three western frontier women, Kay discussed how their narratives indicate ways of providing a more balanced impression of both women and men in studies of regional economies and landscape modification.

A particularly fruitful avenue in feminist historical geography leads to the ways in which places and their landscapes have been experienced and represented by women. For example, K. M. Morin (1999) examines English women's 'heroic adventures' in the nineteenth-century American West while Mary Kingsley's travels in West Africa at the end of that century have been given differently nuanced, gendered, readings by Mary Louise Pratt (1992), Alison Blunt (1994) and Gerry Kearns (1997). That men and women saw things differently has been forcefully argued in relation to landscape painting in the Western world where, in the eighteenth century, it was a product of a 'male gaze' upon a landscape considered to be a natural and feminine body, a subject unsuitable for women to paint. But in the colonies white women were freer to paint landscapes because they assumed the colonial authority of white men, the advantaged position of their ethnicity counting for more than the disadvantages of their gender (Blunt and Rose 1994). While feminist historical geography emphasises the gendering of spaces, environments, landscapes and places, it also stresses the importance of acknowledging the diversity of women and of not treating the category 'woman' as unitary. Alongside this feminist discourse within historical geography one could lay the colonial and post-colonial discourses which address the geographical practices, experiences and imaginations of both the colonisers and the colonised (Lester 2000; Ploszajska 2000; Yeoh 2000).

This increasing attention to the multiple voices in the past and to multiple perspectives upon the past could be a cause for celebration or grounds for gloom. While some might find the new pluralism and interdisciplinary perspectives challenging, others might deplore what they see as the intradisciplinary fragmentation and even disintegration of history and of geography into more and more divisive specialisms. Can we find a balance between these two extreme positions? I believe we can.

I will try to do so – as an aspirant *Annaliste* – by identifying some of the *événements*, *conjonctures* and *structures* in historical geography and then listening for resonances within history. Each individual historical researcher pursues his or her own interest, each of us becomes personally involved with the period, place and people we choose to study in the past, often doing so to an extent and with a passion that others find difficult to comprehend. Thus one nineteenth-century historical geographer might be excited by covered bridges in one American county, a second by marriage fields in a few French communes, and a third by Owenism in a handful of English parishes. It is certainly the case that individual historical

geographers have been animated by some very specific topics, as H. C. Darby – one of the founding fathers of historical geography – was by the architectural geography of south Britain, the birds of the undrained English Fenland, the geographical ideas of the Venerable Bede and the regional geography of Thomas Hardy's Wessex (Darby 1928, 1934, 1935, 1948). Such 'one-off' and essentially autarchic studies conducted by individual researchers giving rein to their own interests and enthusiasms are examples of *événements* in the practice of historical geography. Such individual work stands on its own merits and undoubtedly possesses intrinsic interest and value. It may, but does not necessarily, provide a stimulus for similar research by others. Its contribution to knowledge and understanding could be considered to be more additive than cumulative, making advances arithmetically rather than geometrically.

When the product of historical researchers is viewed collectively, then it becomes possible to identify patterns of research interests in both the medium and the long term. The research foci of one generation are often abandoned or at least neglected by the next, which prefers setting out its own agenda to inheriting that of its elders (who are, rightly, not deemed always to be their betters). As Aidan McQuillan (1995) points out in his progress report on historical geography, research interests – what he terms 'research clusters' – wax and wane over time as the intellectual climate changes. All historical and geographical research (like all research) reflects the ideas and techniques of its own time: each generation seeks answers to questions which are framed in terms of the concerns of its own 'present day'. Like McQuillan, Deryck Holdsworth (2002) sees generational vitality in the emergence of 'new directions' in historical geography which respect rather than reject 'old ways'. The considerable current interest in historical geographies of modernisation and modernity may be seen in this light as also connecting with intellectual trends in contemporary human geography and in the social and historical sciences generally (Dunford 1998; Ogborn 1999; Graham and Nash 2000). New ideas and interests and the use of new sources or the reinterpretation of familiar sources made possible by the use of new techniques combine with an understandable desire on the part of a new generation to prosecute a 'new' history or a 'new' geography to produce a different – if not always entirely 'new' – kind of history and geography.

Conjunctions of research in history and in historical geography can be identified and used to impose a pattern on the work of scholars as an academy. This assumption underpins the designation of 'schools' of history and of geography, which wax and wane to varying degrees and which are often grounded in clusters of influential individuals. But it also relates to specific research agenda. For example, in the 1960s and 1970s, many historical geographers in Britain were working on field systems and on urban systems, and many were exploiting the Tithe Surveys and the manuscript enumerators' returns of the Population Census; by the 1980s and 1990s, many were more concerned with issues flowing from debates about modernity and postmodernism and excited by exploiting a wider range of literary and pictorial sources. But I would not expect researchers even in the near future – in

the 2010s and 2020s – to be enthused by the same problems and to be restricted to using the same sources and techniques as those currently attracting attention – and if some are, I would not expect them to be addressing ‘our’ problems and sources in the way we are now doing. Innovations come in waves that break, and of course (as physical geographers know well) waves can be both destructive of existing features and creative of new ones. Historical geography is constantly seeking and finding new research realms, it is constantly renewing itself, constantly moving on to new periods, new places and new topics. Thus Richard Schein, as editor of a set of methodological essays on practising historical geography, argues that the topics embraced in his collection ‘represent new directions in, and perhaps even a break in tradition for, historical geography’, because ‘they signal a certain engagement with contemporary critical and reflexive scholarly practice across the social sciences and the humanities’. Schein’s edited essays are presented as reflecting the post-positivist turn in historical geography. He sees them as ‘a re-placing of historical geography’, with the double meaning of bringing to historical geography both the theoretical and methodological debates of post-positivist scholarship and a new generation of scholars prosecuting a non-traditional form of historical geography. But even Schein admits that many of the ideas presented in these essays – such as the problematic nature both of archives and of geographical description – ‘are at least foreshadowed in the annals of historical geography’ (Schein 2001: 8–10).

While I will from time to time refer to the *événements* and *conjonctures* of historical geography, they are not my main focus. I am not concerned here principally with ephemeral enthusiasms. I employ instead what might be considered to be the *structures* of geography, because they give coherence to the increasingly diverse and expanding output of historical geography. While it is appropriate to acknowledge the exceptionalist position of those who are fascinated by *événements* and to celebrate the changing character of historical geography’s *conjonctures*, I will argue for the fundamental significance of some of its underlying *structures*. Here I concur with D. W. Meinig (1997: 8) that while every generation rewrites its history, this is ‘not to say that everything in history is mutable’. While the interests of individual historical geographers and of generations of historical geographers change, there are some basic continuities in the theory and practice of historical geography. Fundamentally, and perhaps surprisingly, the subject matter of historical geography does not matter. Viewing the intersections of *événements* and *conjonctures* – of individual historical geographers and of successive generations of historical geographers – within the wider intellectual *structures* in which they have been and are situated moves towards a structurationist approach, with its emphasis on both the human agents and the social and intellectual systems and structures in which they are necessarily imbricated (Giddens 1984). I will use these *structures* as a platform from which to explore the relations of geography and history. My argument is grounded in the major discourses of geography. The three ‘deviant’ or peripheral discourses – of location, environment, and landscape – can

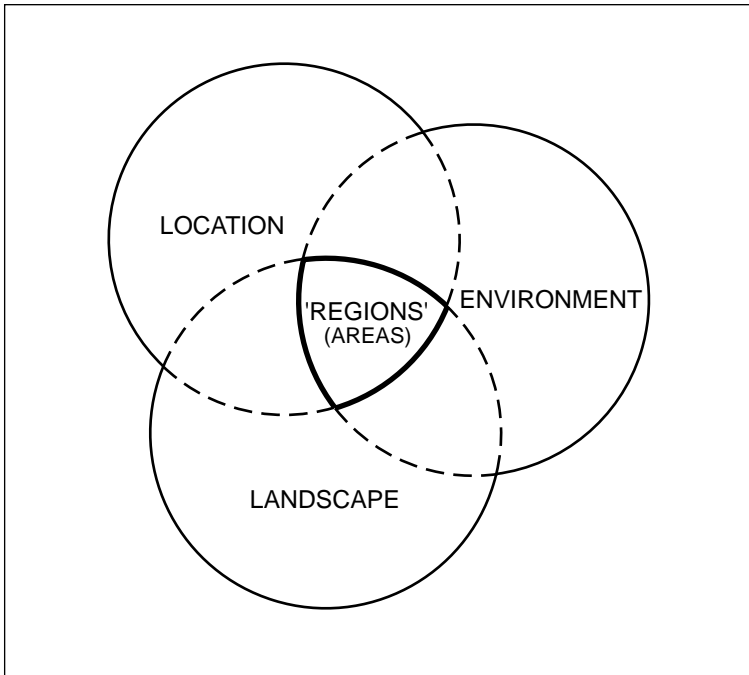


Figure 1.2 Venn diagram of the four principal discourses of geography

be overlapped in Venn diagrammatic form to create a central discourse of regional geography at the intersection of all of those three (Fig. 1.2). These four discourses are interconnected: there are no impermeable boundaries between any of them. Individual geographers and their writings are unlikely to be situated exclusively within just one of these discourses. They serve, none the less, as a useful framework for discussion of the nature of historical geography and of the relations of geography and history.

I shall illustrate my argument with reference to selected examples of 'best practice' in historical geography, those examples being drawn not only from burgeoning recent work but also from historical geography's bulging library of classical studies. It would be easy, but in my view misleading, to draw just upon work published during the past dozen or so years. Easy, because there has been a great flowering of new work in historical geography during this period, with new problems, new sources and new analytical techniques enriching the quality of the increasing quantity of studies being undertaken. Misleading, because even the most original and novel of recent works have been constructed – knowingly or otherwise – on foundations laid by earlier generations of scholars. I am reminded of Julian Barnes' comments on developments in French cinema and cuisine:

The *nouvelle vague* was a revolt against *le cinéma de papa*, but it was less a matter of mass patricide than of selective culling. The wisest innovators know – or at least find out – that the history of art may appear linear and progressive but it is in fact circular, cross-referential and backtracking. The practitioners of the *nouvelle vague* were immersed (some, like Truffaut, as critics) in what had preceded them . . . Like the *nouvelle vague*, twentieth-century *nouvelle cuisine* was a noisy, useful, publicity-driven revolt: one against *le cinéma de papa*, the other against *la cuisine de maman*. Both resulted in temporary forgetting of just exactly what Maman and Papa did; and of how ineluctable genetic inheritance is. (Barnes 2002: 38–9 and 56)

There are lessons here for advocates of any ‘new’ departure. Accordingly, before entering into my main discussion of the relations of geography and history, I want briefly to consider both specific possible forerunners to this present book and the general intellectual context within which it is situated. How has historical geography been conceptualised? How have historians regarded geography and how have geographers viewed history?

Legacies

There have been very few book-length treatments of historical geography as a field of study as opposed to books on the historical geographies of particular places, periods, and topics. Books bearing the title ‘historical geography’ have been published since at least the early seventeenth century, such as those by Edward Wells on the historical geography of the New and Old Testaments (Butlin 1992, 1993: 1–72) and many such works were published in the closing decades of the twentieth century, too numerous even to exemplify judiciously. But there have been remarkably few endeavours to write at length about ‘historical geography’ *per se*. It might, therefore, be instructive to consider those works briefly but individually, to ponder the approach which each adopted to its subject matter.

In 1954, Jean Mitchell published her *Historical Geography* in a series of books under the general title ‘Teach Yourself Geography’. The bulk of the work comprised essays on important themes (such as ‘the peopling of the land’ and ‘the evolution of villages and farms’) in ‘the changing geography’ of Britain from prehistoric times to the early twentieth century, but it also included a chapter on the data of the historical geographer and two others on general issues. In her introductory chapter, Mitchell posed the question: ‘What is historical geography?’ She considered that both geography and history were difficult to define and concluded that historical geography was ‘a still greater mystery’. She continued:

few go further than a belief that it is about ‘old’ maps, and perhaps concerns itself too much with tales of ancient mariners, medieval travellers and merchant adventurers. Some feel that it is an unsound attempt by geographers to explain history, and think that the historical geographer is most certainly trespassing and probably should be prosecuted. That is not so, the historical geographer is a geographer first, last and all the time . . . (Mitchell 1954: 1–2)

But the object of geographical study was, for Mitchell, no mystery: it was the study of places, both in their individuality and in their generality, of places as products of interactions between peoples and their physical environments. The central geographical question for Mitchell was to describe and explain the distribution, the location, of phenomena. Accordingly, for Mitchell, 'historical geography is, simply stated, a geographical study of any period in the past for which a more or less ordered and dated sequence is established in human affairs'. To Mitchell, historical geography was the geography of the past, but the historical geographer was always a geographer and never a historian. She argued that just as a historian could write a history of France without becoming a geographer, so a geographer could write a geography of some place in the nineteenth century or the ninth century and remain a geographer. Mitchell was absolutely clear that historians and geographers have different perspectives:

There is much in common between the historian and the geographer, both are attempting to see the pattern in a multitude of facts in order to appreciate the world about them, but there is a fundamental difference in outlook between them. The 'world' to the historian means civilisation; the 'world' to the geographer means the surface of the earth. (Mitchell 1954: 12)

Thus Mitchell argued that many books with the title 'historical geography' would be better titled 'geographical history', 'for they are concerned essentially not with the place but with the civilisation . . . It would seem that the attempt to examine historical events in relation to their geographical setting is best left to the historian' (Mitchell 1954: 11).

For Mitchell, history and geography had different objectives, they occupied separate intellectual territories. That exclusive stance was reinforced by her view that the historical geographer is concerned mainly with the geography of an area at some past time: 'the historical geographer is not concerned with the survival of geographical patterns [into the present] or with the evolution of geographical patterns in time, but with the establishment and study of their design at any one particular time [in the past]' (Mitchell 1954: 14). Here Mitchell was not only exclusive but also confused, because much of her book was in practice a consideration of changing geographical patterns, of their evolution through time. But, as Mitchell made clear in her final chapter, she had no doubt that the analytical work of a historical geographer should ultimately be seen as contributing to a geographical synthesis, to a study of place in both its physical and human aspects. 'If every historical geographer must be versed in all parts of geography, every geographer must be to some extent a historical geographer' (Mitchell 1954: 328). She argued for the necessity of a historical approach in all geographical work; for her, historical geography was not an ornamental coping to geographical study, it was instead with physical and biological geography the foundation upon which the geography of the modern world rested (Mitchell 1954: 332).

For thirty years, Mitchell's survey remained the only book-length, English-language treatment of the nature of historical geography. It was a remarkable

achievement, justifiably claimed in its Preface to be a pioneering effort. But the book's substantive focus upon the changing geography of Britain meant that its impact was more limited than its general discussion of the nature of historical geography merited. The next such general survey of historical geography to be published, William Norton's *Historical Analysis in Geography* (1984), has also had a relatively constrained impact but for a different reason: it aligned itself primarily with a particular and limited view of geography.

Norton initially acknowledged three major concerns of geography (and thus of historical geography) – those of geographical change through time, the development of landscape, and the evolution of spatial form. But it was the last of these which attracted most of his attention. In the first chapter of his book, Norton examined developments in history and economic history, surveying debates about the relative merits of positivist and idealist modes of explanation. He focused upon methods adopted by the 'new' economic history, on the blinkered grounds that 'social, rural and political history . . . are generally of less relevance to historical geography' (Norton 1984: 15). Norton was especially attracted to the quantitative, theoretical and counterfactual methods of the 'new' economic history, to the 'scientific' approach to historical explanation. In his second chapter, Norton explored the problem of temporal explanation in geography, examining briefly solutions to it offered by cultural analyses, by diffusion studies, and by time geographies, but reserving most of his attention to, and approval for, analyses of process-form relationships through time. In the following two chapters, Norton reviewed developments in historical geography. He argued that the main concerns of historical geography during the 1960s and 1970s could be listed as being the study of past geographies, of changing geographies, and of relict features in present-day landscapes. He argued that the ideas and methods of spatial analysis then being increasingly adopted within geography generally had as yet made little impact upon historical geography specifically. He recognised that there were indeed lively debates among historical geographers, for example, about problems posed by available data, about the role of theory and quantification in historical research, and about alternatives to positivism (such as phenomenology, idealism, and structuralism). But Norton's main advocacy was of a 'temporally oriented spatial analysis', focused upon studies of the evolution of spatial forms and employing, for example, simulation techniques and counterfactual methods.

In six succeeding chapters Norton reviewed what he identified as some major themes in historical geography: regional studies; frontier studies; analyses of the evolution of settlements and of agricultural, transportation, industrial and urban landscapes; and population studies. In each of these, wherever appropriate, he highlighted studies of process-form relationships. Then, in his final chapter, Norton argued that developments in historical geography might benefit from those taking place within the 'new' economic history (especially in relation to regional growth and staple theory). While suggesting that advances might be made by making greater use of simulation modelling, of the idea of progress, and of the attitudes

of historical actors, Norton reserved his main sign-post to the way ahead for his advocacy of studies of 'spatial form evolution'.

While acknowledging the diversity of historical geography, both Jean Mitchell and William Norton could not avoid lending their support to one approach (but different in each case) above others. Surprisingly, each backed an approach just at the time when it was coming increasingly to be questioned. Mitchell's view of historical geography as being concerned exclusively with geographies of past times and not with changing geographies through time reflected the traditional view of the subject inherited from the 1930s which was already by the 1950s, when she was writing, being challenged by Darby's (1951a, 1953a) rethinking of historical geography, with his additional emphasis upon historical geography as the study of changing landscapes. Norton's view of historical geography as the evolution of spatial form, outlined in a paper in 1982 and then elaborated in his book in 1984, reflected the view of geography as spatial analysis which was developed during the 1960s and 1970s but which was coming under attack by the 1970s and early 1980s (Harris 1971, 1978a; Baker 1981). There are lessons to be learned here, and pitfalls to be avoided, in relation to the argument I will develop in this book.

Such hazards were, for the most part, successfully negotiated in Robin Butlin's *Historical Geography: Through the Gates of Space and Time* (1993), perhaps because he adopted a historical perspective which highlighted the changing character of historical geography itself. Of the book's eleven chapters, the first three examined the history of historical geography as practised in many parts of the world from the early eighteenth century to the late twentieth century. This consideration led Butlin to organise the bulk of his book thematically. After an essay on sources of evidence and data in historical geography, he presented chapters which treated in turn, systematically, some major topics: the reconstruction of physical environments; historical geographies of landscapes; historical geographies of social power and control; rural transformations; historical geographies of urbanisation; and historical geographies of industrialisation. Writing his book mainly during the 1980s, Butlin did none the less catch the incoming tide of postmodernism and dealt at various points throughout his book with issues such as representation, identity and power which feature so prominently in today's 'new' cultural and historical geography (Graham and Nash 2000). Butlin's book was very ambitious: it was offered as 'a celebration, critique, and demonstration of historical geography', and was constructed as a historiography of the subject and a review of its major research domains, stretching from prehistory to the present and encompassing the whole world. As a general overview, Butlin's book has expectedly – but not always reasonably or fairly – been criticised for omitting specific problems, periods and places, but its range was extensive and its astonishing breadth meant that Butlin could not achieve the comprehensive coverage which was his declared aim.

None the less, having defined historical geography straightforwardly as 'the study of the geographies of past time' (Butlin 1993: ix), Butlin went on to demonstrate the complexity, diversity and vitality of the subject. On the relations between

geography and history, Butlin was brief but instructive. In what he described as the 'proto-modern' form of historical geography before the early twentieth century, historical geography 'evolved as a branch of history, that is as an ancillary subject, providing in essence background or environmental information to the study of the chronology and major political and social experiences of peoples, states, empires, frontiers, and civilisations' (Butlin 1993: ix). From the 1920s and 1930s, a 'modern' form of historical geography began to emerge within the growing discipline of geography, to some extent distanced from that of history as historical geographers attempted to construct a separate existence for their sub-discipline. Such an endeavour created a gap between geography and history which was compounded by the retention by historians of an outmoded view of the nature of geography: many historians continued to think geographically only in terms of the influences of the physical environment upon the course of historical events. Then the move within geography in the 1960s and 1970s away from historical and towards functionalist modes of explanation widened the gap between geographers and historians, and so also that between contemporary geographers and historical geographers. Butlin concluded that 'there is still much scope for detailed examination of the relationships, past and present, between historical geography and history' (Butlin 1993: 47). I want to take up that challenge.

None of the three book-length accounts of historical geography considered so far – by Mitchell, by Norton and by Butlin – consistently addressed the nature of the relation between its two parent disciplines. As far as I am aware, the same is true of such accounts in other languages. Jean-René Trochet's broadly titled *Géographie historique* (1998) is not a general prospectus but a focused discussion of expressions of territoriality in traditional, pre-modern communities and societies. Helmut Jäger's *Historische Geographie* (1969) examined the history and methodologies of historical geography, and reviewed work specifically on the historical (physical and cultural) geography of Germany and on historical landscapes. Toshio Kikuchi's *Method in Historical Geography* (1977, 2nd edn 1987), drawing upon both Japanese and (especially for the second edition) Western literatures, examined the concepts, methods and techniques employed in historical geography. Ren-Zhi Hou's *Theory and Practice in Historical Geography* (1979) was a set of essays which monitored the history of historical geography in China, demonstrating that an earlier concern with changing political boundaries and place-names was replaced, after the establishment of the People's Republic, with an emphasis on applied historical geography, in relation to both physical and human environments. Zhang Butian's *An Introduction to Historical Geography* (1993) provided not only an account of the changing character of historical geography in China (showing that it has become both more systematically comprehensive and more explicitly responsive to developments in the field elsewhere in the world), but also an examination of the practice of historical geography in Asia, Europe, North America, Russia, Egypt and Australia. Xiaofeng Tang's *From Dynastic Geography to Historical Geography* (2000), while addressing not so much the relations

between geography and history in general but the practice of historical geography in China, does identify a significant change in the studies of the geographical past of China, with work on the historical geography of China coming to be influenced increasingly by its theory and practice in the West. Similarly, Weimin Que's *Ideas of Historical Geography* (2000) reviews recent work in historical geography in the English-speaking world and broadcasts it to the Chinese academy. The books by Kikuchi and Zhang drew upon both Asian and Western literatures and they are probably the most wide-ranging discussions so far published of the nature of historical geography. Even so, neither includes much consideration of the relations of geography and history and, to the extent that they do so, they rely mainly upon discussions of them in papers by Western scholars.

It is, therefore, to those papers that I will turn shortly, but before doing so there is one further book and a few other issues to consider. Serge Courville's *Introduction à la géographie historique* (1995) is essentially a very useful manual for the subject, a guide to the practice of historical geography: it considers the formulation of research problems, the need for a critical approach to historical sources, the use of qualitative, quantitative and cartographical analyses of data, and the problems of generalisation and synthesis. But Courville's manual is also prefaced by a lengthy review of the history of historical geography and a discussion of its character. Courville makes the point – although not in these words – that historical geography was born to history and adopted by geography before achieving a large measure of independence from both sets of intellectual parents while maintaining positive relationships with both of them. For Courville, historical geography is neither a discipline nor a sub-discipline but an interdisciplinary field of enquiry nourished by the ideas, languages and methods of both history and geography. He sees historical geography as a way of resolving the traditional tensions between history and geography. This is a perspective which deserves closer attention than Courville is able to give it, because his principal concern is with the practice, not with the theory, of historical geography.

Of course, the suggestion that historical geography should be seen not as a discipline or sub-discipline is not itself new. Similar suggestions have been made before. For example, Norton concluded that historical geography should be viewed not as a sub-discipline of geography but as 'a set of approaches' and Darby, claiming that he was not seeking to establish the frontier between history and geography, argued that it would be 'more true' to say that there are problems demanding investigation than academic subjects to be pursued (Norton 1984: 61; Darby 1962a: 156). It none the less remains the case that 'modern' historical geography, to use Butlin's term, has been institutionalised and developed largely within the disciplinary frameworks provided by university structures inherited from the nineteenth century. Moreover, Darby himself – unarguably the founding father of 'modern' historical geography in Britain but whose influence went far beyond its shores – set out deliberately to rethink the nature of historical geography, to promote historical geography as a sub-discipline within geography: he laboured with a

missionary zeal to establish historical geography as a self-conscious, distinctive subject, distinguishable from contemporary human geography and different from other historical disciplines (Darby 1979, 2002).

The practice of historical geography and its vigorous pursuit as a discipline or sub-discipline has largely shaded-out serious consideration not only of its epistemological status but also of its potential for making significant interdisciplinary contributions to knowledge and understanding. As has already been noted, the contributions of historical geography have changed in character through time. But they have also varied from place to place. A collection of essays published thirty years ago brought sharply into focus the contrasting characteristics of historical geography as practised in selected countries and continents of the world (Baker 1972). Since then, many further reviews of the practice of historical geography in particular places have been published and have emphasised the diversity of the problems being investigated and of approaches being adopted. Each continent, country or locality has its own historical and geographical questions, its own sources, and its own intellectual and scholarly traditions. For example, within North America have been identified different 'schools' of historical geography associated respectively with Carl Sauer and the University of California at Berkeley and with Andrew Clark and the University of Wisconsin (Conzen 1993), while the practice of historical geography in Canada developed its own distinctive character (Wynn 1993). Similarly, but not exactly in parallel, within Britain a distinction has been made between the 'school' of historical geography associated with Clifford Darby at University College London and Cambridge, and that linked with H. J. Fleure and Emrys Bowen at Aberystwyth (Langton 1988a). Again, the practice of historical geography has a different character in Germany (Kleefeld and Burggraaff 1997) from that in France (Pitte 1994, 1995), in capitalist countries from that to be found in socialist (or until recently socialist) countries (Baker 1986). Critical reviews of the practice of historical geography in particular places can be both informative and instructive, despite the inevitability of their becoming dated. I have in mind, as excellent examples in this genre, reviews of relatively recent work in historical geography in America (Earle et al. 1989; Conzen 1993; Wynn 1993; Colten et al. forthcoming), Australia (Jeans 1988), China (Weimin Que 1995) and Japan (Kinda 1997). My own encounters with the literatures of historical geography in different countries and continents (to the extent that my knowledge of the necessary languages allows them), coupled with meetings and discussions with historical geographers in different countries and continents during the past thirty years or so (if necessary, facilitated by interpreters), have led me to celebrate the diversity of studies being conducted under the single banner of historical geography (Baker 1996a).

That diversity can be – and has been – seen not only as a strength but also as a weakness. For example, Xavier de Planhol (1972) has argued that the ambiguous status of French historical geography in the schools both of history and of geography meant that it appeared, paradoxically, 'both everywhere and nowhere',

whereas Lucien Gaillabaud (1999) contends that the lack of a precise definition of historical geography in France, in effect its heterogeneous character, reflects a fertile interdisciplinarity. Far from suggesting that the scope and purpose of historical geography should be narrowed, I argue that it should be enlarged. It is not my intention to refine a purist definition of historical geography as a discipline or sub-discipline. I will instead argue the merits of historical geography as an interdisciplinary project, offering a number of distinctive perspectives upon peoples, places and periods in the past. In order to move towards that goal, I will now consider more closely views expressed by historians and geographers about the relations between their own subjects. I will not be conducting an overall review of progress in historical geography. Such assessments exist both as one-off ‘snapshots’ (Baker 1972; Pacione 1987) and as a series of on-going reports published periodically in the journal *Progress in Human Geography*. Such reviews tend to focus on the *événements* and *conjonctures* of historical geography. But what are its underlying *structures*?

Historians and geography

As the topics of interest to historians have changed, at least in emphasis, so also have their attitudes towards geography and to the relations of history and geography. From a restricted view of geography either as the physical stage upon which the drama of history is enacted or as the framework of physical frontiers and political boundaries within which history is to some extent contained, historians have developed a very much broader perspective upon geography which embraces concepts of environment, of space and of place.

In the late nineteenth century, historians viewed geography generally as the handmaiden to history and ‘geography’ itself was understood by them primarily as physical geography, necessarily providing the context for historical studies and also possibly providing evidence for historians to draw upon. For example, in J. R. Green’s *The Making of England* (1881), it was claimed that ‘the ground itself, where we can read the information it affords, is, whether in the account of the Conquest or in that of the Settlement of Britain, the fullest and most certain of documents. Physical geography has still its part to play in the written record of that human history to which it gives so much of its shape and form’ (Green 1881: vii). For Green, ‘History strikes its roots in Geography, for without a clear and vivid realisation of the physical structure of a country the incidents of the life which men [*sic*] have lived in it can have no interest or meaning’ (Green 1881: xi). The view of geography as crucial to historical understanding was widely held a century or so ago. James Bryce, for example, saw geography as ‘the key to history’ (Bryce 1902: 54). Bryce’s introduction to an eight-volume survey of world history argued that ‘Geography determines History’ and that ‘in all countries and at all times Geography is the necessary foundation of History, so that neither the course of a nation’s growth nor its relations with other nations can be grasped by one who has

not come to understand the climate, surface and products of the country wherein that nation dwells'. Bryce saw the relationship of Man to Nature (the physical environment) changing through time: from being its servant, Man became its master. Bryce's conception of geography embraced not only the characteristics of the physical environment but also locational and spatial relationships and what he termed 'the diffusion of European Civilisation' throughout the world (Bryce 1901: xxv, xxxix and liii).

Similar ideas permeated H. B. George's (1901) sustained examination of the relations between geography and history, in which he argued:

History is not intelligible without geography. This is obviously true in the sense that the reader of history must learn where are the frontiers of states, where wars were fought, whither colonies were dispatched. It is equally, if less obviously, true that geographical facts largely influence the course of history. Even the constitutional and social developments within a settled nation are scarcely independent of them, since the geographical position affects the nature and extent of geographical intercourse with other nations, and therefore of the influence exerted by foreign ideas. All external relations, hostile and peaceful are based largely on geography, while industrial progress depends primarily, though not exclusively, on matters described in every geography book – the natural products of a country, and the facilities which its structure affords for trade, both domestic and foreign. (George 1901: 1)

In his survey of 'the general nature of geographical influences', George ventured towards the position of an environmental determinist:

No one will deny, however firmly he insists on believing in free will, that the destinies of men [*sic*] are very largely determined by their environment . . . Climate determines what men's food shall be, at any rate before extensive commerce has been developed, and whether or not they need work hard for a living. The physical features of the earth, sea, mountains &c., go far to fix their occupations, and to decide whether they are to live within easy reach of intercourse with their neighbours. The aspect of nature about them colours, and to a certain extent suggests, their ideas and beliefs. (George 1901: 7)

But there were also factors other than the physical environment which George recognised as shaping history, such as race, so that 'in setting forth the geographical influences which have guided or modified history, it is necessary to guard against overstating their force' (George 1901: 8). In his book of more than 300 pages, George went on to explore the influence of geography – by which he meant mainly physical resources and position – upon the development of frontiers, of towns and of wars, before undertaking a remarkable survey of the relations of geography and history in some of the world's major countries, regions and continents. George's views on geography probably shaped the ideas of generations of British – and quite possibly other – historians during the first half of the twentieth century.

Similar ideas were to the fore at about the same time in the work of Frederick Jackson Turner, an American historian, when he was developing and elaborating his thesis about the significance of the frontier in American history. In his early study of the frontier in Wisconsin, Turner (1891) stressed the importance of

physical conditions, especially river courses, in shaping the pattern of settlement. When reflecting more generally upon some of the major problems of American history, Turner (1894) advocated careful consideration of 'the part played by the environment in determining the lines of [American] development' and emphasised 'the need for thorough study of the physiographic basis of [American] history'. Turner's report on the American Historical Association's conference in 1907 suggested that the relations between geography and history should be close, with study of the interactions between people and their environment being one of the most important fields of enquiry in America at that time. But it also showed that geography was then generally conceived by historians passively as physiography and as location, while history was seen as being concerned with people actively evaluating their geographical environment and situation (Turner 1908).

Such ideas about geographical 'influences' on history were discussed by many American historians (Sparks 1909; Turner 1914), but only a few, like James C. Malin (1955) and Walter Prescott Webb (1960), seem to have considered them critically or at length, at least not until recently. That task was, however, undertaken by historians in France and I will turn to their work in a moment, after lingering briefly with Webb's classic study *The Great Plains* (1931). When addressing a plenary session at the 1960 Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers, Webb took as his theme 'geographical-historical concepts in American history'. He explained the thinking which underpinned his account of the encounter between 'environment and civilisation' on the Great Plains of the American West. Webb described himself as 'a geographic historian', by which he meant one who elected 'to approach history, civilisation, if you please, through geography, by way of the physical environment'. He was pleased to admit that practically all of the history he had written, and certainly the best of it, was 'based solidly and consciously on geography, on the character of the land where the action described took place' (Webb 1960: 85–6). Webb saw the physical (geographical) environment as a structure, as a stage, upon which the drama of history was enacted, but because different groups of actors came with different ideas and used the stage in different ways, the precise unfolding of the drama depended upon them. Although Webb's conception of geography, like that of many American historians of his generation, was remarkably narrow, it none the less productively shaped much scholarly and valuable work.

Many French historians embraced a wider conception of geography. In France during the nineteenth century, studies of the history of changing political and administrative boundaries were often designated as 'historical geographies': such boundaries defined the geographical territories within which historical events and processes were researched. These studies had strong links both with the geographical dictionaries which had preceded them and with the historical atlases which often succeeded them. In all of them geography was seen as playing a very subordinate role to that of history. That was also to be the case in the second form which the relationship between history and geography took in France during the nineteenth

century, as enunciated by Jules Michelet and adopted by many historians. In his nineteen-volume *Histoire de France* (1833–44; 1855), Michelet argued that ‘the true starting-point of our history is a political division of France founded on its natural and physical divisions. At first, history is entirely geography’ (Michelet 1833: 2). Michelet accordingly presented a ‘Tableau de la France’, a geographical description of its regions. This approach to history through geography was one which came to be emulated by many French-speaking historians: it is an approach which emphasised the physical geographical settings for historical dramas. For example, Jean Brunhes and Camille Vallaux (1921) wrote a book on *La géographie de l’histoire* which examined the geographical (physical and locational) underpinnings of war and peace on land and sea. Earlier, Emile Miller, a French Canadian, in his 1915 essay on ‘La géographie au service de l’histoire’, had endorsed Victor Cousin’s famous claim: ‘Donnez-moi la géographie d’un pays et je vous trouverai son histoire.’ But Miller also went beyond that limited conception of the relations of history and geography, for he embraced other writings of Jean Brunhes, with their emphasis upon the landscape as a product of the interaction of people with their physical environments.

Indeed, with the development of a new school of geography, especially of human geography, in France during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the conception of geography held by historians had itself to be reworked. Particularly under the influence of Paul Vidal de la Blache, French geographers came increasingly to be concerned with the reciprocal relations between culture and nature, with the complex character of interactions between peoples and their environments, and with regions and places as products of such relations and interactions over long periods of time. With geographers rethinking such issues, French historians in turn had to reject any residual geographical determinism from their own works and embrace the new notions of possibilism and probabilmism (Sanguin 1993). The most thorough endeavour to do so was that provided by Lucien Febvre ([1922] 1925) in his (now classic) ‘geographical introduction to history’.

Febvre was an active participant in the broadly based reaction which spread in France during the early twentieth century against the positivist methods of nineteenth-century historical scholarship. A desire to go beyond the documents themselves and to conquer the distrust of historical generalisation had characterised both Henri Berr’s journal, *Revue de synthèse historique*, founded in 1900, and his edited book series, *L’évolution de l’humanité*, launched in 1913 as a synthetic history animated, as William Keylor put it, by ‘a passion for recapturing the complexity of past epochs through the broad sweep of historical narrative’ (Keylor 1975: 211). Febvre had written articles and reviews on geographical topics for Berr’s journal and then contributed to his book series an extended treatment of the interactions between environments and peoples, his *La terre et l’évolution humaine: introduction géographique à l’histoire* (1922). Febvre started from the assumption that ‘in reality’ little or nothing was as yet known of the influence of geographical environment on human societies, because, as he put it, the geography

which would explain that influence had scarcely been born at the time he was writing (Febvre [1922] 1925: 28–9). But Febvre then drew upon the concepts of the new Vidalian school of human geography to produce a powerful rejection of geographical determinism in history and to set out instead a strong case for possibilism. ‘There are’, he concluded, ‘no necessities, but everywhere possibilities; and man [*sic*], as master of the possibilities, is the judge of their use. This, by the reversal which it involves, puts man in first place – man, and no longer the earth, nor the influence of climate, nor the determinate conditions of localities.’ Again, ‘men can never entirely rid themselves, whatever they do, of the hold their environment has on them. Taking this into consideration, they utilise their geographical circumstances, more or less, according to what they are, and take advantage more or less completely of their geographical possibilities. But here, as elsewhere, there is no action of necessity.’ Just as importantly, Febvre argued against searching for geographical ‘influences’ upon history, preferring instead to advocate a concern with the reciprocal relations between environments and societies through time (Febvre [1922] 1925: 236, 315 and 363).

In his reworking of the relations between history and geography, Febvre explicitly challenged both the view of that relationship as being one concerned with changing administrative boundaries and the view of it as a study of geographical ‘influences’ upon history. He offered instead a much broader prospectus: ‘What’, he asked, ‘are the relations of human societies of bygone times, at different epochs in the various countries of the world, with the geographical environment of their day, so far as we are able to reconstruct it?’ And to Febvre it mattered ‘little whether those who undertake such research be labelled at the outset geographers, historians, or even sociologists’ (Febvre [1922] 1925: 394). Berr, in his ‘Foreword’ to Febvre’s book, expressed himself slightly differently: ‘The problem of the influence of environment is not the domain of a geographer pure and simple. The purely “geographical geographer” does not trouble himself about history, or is even disposed to absorb it in geography. The treatment of this complex problem needs a geographical historian, or an historical geographer, who is also more or less a sociologist’ (Berr 1925: v).

Febvre’s magisterial treatment of the relations between geography and history, combined with the conclusions which he reached, licensed ‘historians’ to practise ‘geography’ – and, of course, ‘geographers’ to practise ‘history’. Such licence was certainly to be one of the tenets upon which Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch, in 1929, founded the *Annales d’histoire économique et sociale* and also of the distinctive school of history which evolved from, and revolved around, that journal. French historians had no hesitation in drawing deeply from the well of geographical concepts to nourish their changing discipline (Friedman 1996). Febvre was to make explicit his own recognition of the very considerable intellectual debt owed by the practice of history in France to geography: ‘In fact, one might say that, to a certain extent, it is Vidalian geography which has sired the history of the *Annales* [school]’ (Febvre 1953: 374). For Febvre, the close relations between history and geography