

## ON GEOGRAPHY IN SCHOOLS

Dr Don Biddle 2001

### Dr Don Biddle's address at the Geography Fieldwork Awards ceremony 2001

Transcribed from Don's hand written speech by Lorraine Chaffer.

Mr. Nick Hutchinson, President of GTANSW and Mrs Elizabeth Riley, Vice President, thank you for the opportunity to say a few words to the students, whose high-quality Geography posters and research projects are on show this evening.

One month ago, I was invited to be in the office of the Geography Teachers Association where members of Council were marking the projects and posters. As a Geographer, who is in the twilight of his career, I have to say how impressed I was with the work of the Geography students and the obvious dedication of the teachers. It led me to reflect on how geographical studies had improved since it was introduced into schools in Australia.

At the beginning of the 18th Century there was considerable interest in Geography for commercial and political reasons. It was a period of exploration and fact finding, with an emphasis on resources, and trade, for the newly developing industrialised countries of Europe. These explorations provided the descriptions of places, required for scientific analyses, and led to the growth of geographical societies, and to the support of teaching Geography in schools.

My research indicated that Geography was an important subject in the Australian school curriculum in the 1830's, because of its relevance to the commercial life of a new settlement, and its practical interest for the colonial school students. That is, the pupils who had been born in Australia. Unfortunately for the students, there were no qualified Geography teachers in the schools. The majority of teachers came from Ireland, Scotland and England, and they used textbooks from each of those countries, where they were published for the benefit of their particular countries' students. Naturally, there were no references to Australian examples of regions or places.

An attempt was made to have textbooks, containing information about Australia, published for teachers. However, these textbooks used a gazetteer and question

– answer approach, so were not very inspiring for either the teacher or the pupils. For example, the first few pages consisted of definitions to be memorized, such as peninsula, cape, volcano etc, followed by questions and answers, such as:

*Question: What is the principal mountain range of Australia*

*Answer: The East Coast Range*

*Question: What is the character of the rivers on the eastern side*

*Answer: They are better sustained and more rapid in their courses than those rising on the western or interior side.*

This textbook was prepared in 1850, at the request of the Education Department in New South Wales. A less interesting textbook was published in 1877 by a school inspector in Victoria. I have looked at both publications and they were dreadful! Neither of these authors were qualified Geographers.

At this time a short course was introduced for training teachers who had gained experience through the pupil – teacher system. The principal method for teaching Geography was book learning, and assessment was concerned with memorisation of facts provided by the teacher. The Geography textbooks were published in England, and Australian students were disadvantaged when it came to studies of climate, vegetation, and rural industries, unless the teacher prepared notes and used fieldwork to enable students to relate to the real world, to what they learned from books. Henry Lawson referred to this problem in his poem about The Old Bark School, in 1897.

*"It was built of bark and poles, and the floor was full of holes*

*Where each leak in rainy weather made a pool;  
And the walls were mostly cracks lined with calico and sacks*

*There was little need for windows in the school.*

# Reflections on Geography in schools

*And we learnt the world in scraps from some ancient dingy maps  
Long discarded by the public schools in town;  
And as nearly every book dated back to Captain Cook  
Our Geography was somewhat upside down.  
It was in the book and, so well, at that we'd let it go,  
For we never would believe that print could lie;  
And we learnt pretty soon that when we came out at noon  
The sun was in the south part of the sky."*



Students outside the Severn River Provisional School, 1897 (State Library Qld)

The first school syllabus for high schools in NSW was prepared by the lecturers of Sydney Teachers College, for the Director of Education, in 1911. Even at this stage, the majority of the textbooks were published in England with few references to Australia. In the preface of the syllabus however, the Director of Education drew the attention of this problem to the teachers, who were instructed to overcome the problem by preparing material themselves.

Soon after 1911, Geography and Geology textbooks were produced by Australian universities for teachers. Again, the main problem, still, was that there were no qualified Geographers in schools who had been educated in Australia. The reason was that the first Geography Department did not open until 1921 with Associate Professor Griffith Taylor as the Head of Department. Prior to this, there had been a short course in Economic Geography, given by Griffith Taylor, for the Economics Department.

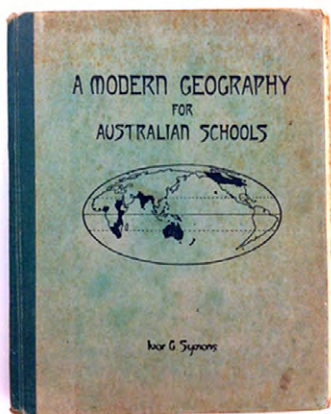
Griffith Taylor became the Chief Examiner in Geographer for the Leaving Certificate Course, and he immediately prepared textbooks to cover the course. This system was continued by Associate Professor MacDonald Holmes, when he replaced Griffith Taylor in 1929. MacDonald Holmes did not agree with Griffith Taylor's philosophy of determinism so he produced a new syllabus, and with a senior lecturer from his department, provided a new textbook for the course. Both professors (Griffith Taylor and MacDonald Holmes) believed that fieldwork was essential, and pupils had to develop skills in reading and interpreting topographic maps and photographs.

Because of the Great Economic Depression in the 1920's, it was not until the 1930's that qualified Geographers entered the

school system. One of the most outstanding Geography teachers at this time, who gained attention in the media for the consistently high standards achieved by his pupils, year after year, is remembered with the naming of the Brock Rowe Award for the Biophysical Environment Fieldwork Project, to be presented this evening. The Geographical Society and the Geography Teachers Association of NSW, also present a Brock Rowe Award for Excellence in Teaching Geography in Schools, because he was an inspirational teacher, who believed fervently in fieldwork excursions; he was the author of the best textbooks produced in the 1950's, as well as being an active member of the Society and the Association. In Murwillumbah, he is remembered for a story told by a local bushwalker and his friends, who struggled for hours to climb Mount Warning, only to find at the top, ten catholic nuns completing fieldwork projects, with Brock Rowe's guidance.

It was in my last year at secondary school in 1939, before I received tuition from a qualified Geography teacher. I have never forgotten her name, Miss Margaret Bell. She introduced us to the use of atlases, when we were studying correlations between people and their environments in a specific region, and she taught us to read and interpret topographic maps, which we had never seen before. The interest in Geography immediately increased, and the quality of our work took most of the class to "A" and "Honours" levels, at the final Leaving Certificate Examinations.

After the end of WW2, many servicemen, who had served in Canada, Europe, the Mediterranean, Southeast Asia, Southwest Pacific and Japan, entered universities on Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scholarships, and a large number selected Geography as their major subject. Although many of these entered industry, commerce, town planning and the public service, the remainder decided to become secondary school teachers. By the time of the Wyndham Scheme of Secondary Education was implemented in the 1960's, most secondary schools in NSW had qualified



# Reflections on Geography in schools

Geography teachers, who were able to teach one of the most progressive syllabuses in Geography, in the world at that time, based on systems theory. This syllabus was taught with minor modifications for 20 years from 1965 – 1985.

This approach emphasised the linkages among features and places and the integration of process and product rather than fragmentation of physical and human processes in geographical studies. The course could not have been implemented without the large number of Geography teachers, who had completed their university courses in the 1950's, and for their professionalism, in keeping up to date through their membership of the Geographical Society and the Geography Teachers Association.

In 1987, a new syllabus was introduced, which emphasised studies of the Australian environment; with particular reference to the biophysical environment, population and employment, followed by a synthesis of Contemporary Australia in the Preliminary Course in Stage 6. The Higher School Certificate provided a choice between two lobes: Global Environments and Australia's Neighbours lobe. This was a far less restrictive syllabus than the systems course.

The 1987 syllabus was the forerunner to the syllabus in Geography, studied by students today (2001) who are required to develop skills in formulating a plan of inquiry, of selecting, organising, and analysing geographical information from a variety of sources; of using maps, graphs, statistics, photographs and

fieldwork during their investigations; of applying mathematical ideas and techniques in analysing geographical data collected; and of developing the ability to communicate their information and ideas, in writing, or in cartographic and graphic forms.

These skills are developed sequentially over time commencing with reference to the mandatory global and Australian environments in Stages 4 & 5, followed by the Stage 6 preliminary course on Biophysical Interactions, Global Challenges and the Senior Geography Projects you see here today.

Finally, the Stage 6 Higher School Certificate course deals with ecosystems at risk, urban places and people and economic activity.

Students and parents, the level of geographical research communicated by these projects and posters tonight, are the result of the foresight of the formulators of the syllabuses, the authors of the textbooks, the quality and dedication of the teachers, and the conscientious work of the students. I must admit that the students here tonight, have been working at a level in Geography which I did not attain until my first year at university. The Year 10 geography projects on display here would have been marked at Honours level at the matriculation level in 1939; and the posters, which look at problems and solutions, would never have been seen at that age group at school.

Congratulations to all students here, and best wishes for your future success.



*Textbooks written by Geographers*



*Fieldwork studies by organisations such as Sydney Olympic Park and NSW Environmental Education Centres and Zoos.*



*The resources available to support the teaching of Geography today are a long way from the textbooks of old*





Students at the launch of The big plan for The Bays Precinct, Sydney - a primary school teaching resource about the Bays Transformation Plan.

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