

Alexander Maconochie: Britain's First Professor of Geography

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Captain Alexander Maconochie, 1787–1860, is often overlooked in the history of UCL and of the discipline of Geography, but not so in the history of penal reform.



The reason for the first omissions is the brevity of his appointments – 6 years as founding secretary of the Royal Geographical Society (July 1830–August 1836) and only three years (November 1833–November 1836) as the first professor of geography in a British university.¹

He was a pioneer in each of these three roles, which I celebrate today.

His activities at the RGS are a matter of recorded fact, but several erroneous claims for the first professorship of geography in Great Britain have been made – from Richard Hakluyt at Oxford in the 16th century, to Halford Mackinder, again at Oxford, where he was appointed Reader in 1887.

Alexander Maconochie (or M'Konochie as he spelled his name until 1832) was born in Edinburgh on 11 February 1787, the only child of the second marriage of Alexander M'Konochie, a lawyer and commissioner for the board of customs for Scotland, who died in 1795, and his wife, Ann Margaret, who died in 1821. The young Alexander was placed under the guardianship of his uncle, Allan Maconochie of Meadowbank (Lord Meadowbank, 1748–1816),

judge of the supreme court of Scotland. Until he was 15, Alexander had a series of private tutors who taught him classics and the law, but in 1803 he went against the wishes of his uncle and joined the Royal Navy.

During the Napoleonic Wars, Maconochie served in the West Indies under Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane and was twice wounded in the course of sieges and the capture of several islands. Aboard ship, he continued his studies, especially in mathematics and several modern languages, including Spanish.

In 1810 he was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant and joined the brig 'Grasshopper'. On Christmas Eve 1811, his boat was on convoy from the Baltic when it was driven on to sand bars off Den Helder. The remainder of the convoy was lost during that storm, but Maconochie and his shipmates survived, were captured by the Dutch, and were forced to march some 400 miles to Verdun where they were imprisoned. There, Maconochie made the acquaintance of an English lawyer and resumed his study of legal affairs. When he was freed in 1814, he rejoined the fleet and was present at the assault on Washington and at the Battle of New Orleans. In the following year he was promoted Commander, and was thereafter referred to as 'Captain', as was the custom of the time. In 1815, at the tender age of 28, he was paid off from active service when the fleet was demobilized after the Napoleonic Wars. He remained on half pay until he was formally retired in February 1855.

Forty years earlier, Maconochie returned to Edinburgh to live with his mother, in order to study and to write pamphlets. The first of these was a memoir entitled 'Considerations on the Propriety of Establishing a Colony in one of the Sandwich Islands' – the Hawaiian Islands. Maconochie presented a well argued case for such a British colony to be created in the central north Pacific. If established, the colony would help maintain a watch on Russian expansion in the north Pacific and could protect the British East India Company's trading activities. It could also act as a base for whaling ships, a distribution point for British manufactured goods, and a staging post between Asia and the Americas. Maconochie was undoubtedly inspired by Raffles's establishment

of a commercial colony at Singapore, and thought that – if the plan were to be accepted – he, himself, might be employed to carry it through. However, the Board of Trade thought otherwise. No colony was founded.

In 1818, Maconochie published a longer work, running to 366 pages and entitled A Summary View of the Statistics and Existing Commerce of the Principal Shores of the Pacific Ocean.² The book considered both natural and human factors which might influence trade in the Pacific. Of course, Maconochie has not visited that ocean and its shores, and relied on accounts by such travellers as Von Humboldt, Cook, Vancouver, and Lewis and Clarke. These writings were examined critically, checked one against another, and set against additional information that Maconochie obtained from correspondents who had direct experience of the lands he was describing. His writing style was far from tedious and he succeeded in incorporating statistical information in his text in a way that was very different from the lists of capes, bays and commodities that were typical of the time.

Having completed the book, which received good reviews, Maconochie remained in Edinburgh, marrying Mary Hutton Browne – from Bamburgh, Northumberland – in 1822. In the following year, the couple moved to live on a farm at North Queensferry, Fife. Whilst there, Maconochie built a school for local children whom he taught himself. The first three of Alexander and Mary's children were born on Northcliff Farm: – Mary in 1823, Catherine in 1824, and Alexander in 1826. But farming in Fife was not a particularly profitable activity and the family moved to London in 1828, taking up residence in Bloomsbury, at 15 Great Russell Street very close to the British Museum.

In the capital, Maconochie was soon reunited with old friends from his naval career. Such men as Sir John Barrow, Sir John Franklin and Admiral Sir Francis Beaufort were devising a plan to establish a geographical society to complement those founded in Paris (1821) and Berlin (1828). The aims of what would become the 'Royal Geographical Society' in 1830 included the publication of interesting and useful geographical facts and discoveries, the

support of exploration, the instruction of explorers, and the accumulation of a library and map collection (Freeman 1980, 3). Its reach was to be global.

At the inaugural meeting on 16 July 1830, Maconochie was appointed founding secretary of the RGS, a post that he would hold for six years. His duties were numerous: maintaining accurate minutes of Council business; arranging lectures and other meetings; ensuring that a learned journal was published; purchasing books and maps; finding premises for the Society's meetings; and dealing with its finances. He was not particularly interested in the latter aspect of the job but appears to have acquitted himself well in the secretaryship. Indeed, he helped negotiate funds for expeditions to the Arctic, to Southern Africa, and to British Guiana. Whilst Secretary, he did not publish articles in the Society's Journal but he was responsible for editing everything that appeared on its pages and contributed many short notes.

From the RGS, we now turn to the new University of London whose Council, in the summer of 1833, was considering an appointment in Geography.³ In July, the Senate recommended "the institution of professorships of Geography, of the Arts of Design, and of Mineralogy". The Secretary of the University approached Admiral Beaufort to discuss whether the fledgling RGS could help fund the Geography post, but it soon became clear that funds were insufficient. Beaufort, of course, discussed the matter with Maconochie and encouraged him to put himself forward as a candidate should the chair eventually be created. In addition, he wrote an encouraging letter of reference for his friend to the University.

<<Admiralty, Sept 21/ 33

Dear Sir:

Captain Maconochie asks me for a testimonial as to his fitness to fill the geographic chair at the London University – and I do not hesitate on complying with his request, though I cannot but think that the character he has established and the talents he has displayed as Secretary to the Geographical Society, must render any individual recommendation superfluous.

I shall confine myself to two points – the knowledge that he possesses – and his power of imparting it to his pupils.

With respect to the first, I am not acquainted with any person who has acquired a greater stock of accurate geographic information, - or who has larger and sounder views on that widely comprehensive subject – or who can more clearly convey that information, or illustrate those views by apposite and interesting facts.

But the second point – the power and habit of communication – is a far more essential quality in a lecturer, and it is on this ground that I consider him to be peculiarly suited to the vacant chair. – The unwearied zeal with which he pursues every object that he undertakes – the benevolent warmth which he feels towards young people – the pleasure he derives from giving instruction, joined to the experience he has had in education, -- and the fluency with which he can vary his explanations so as to adapt them to the different capacities of the class – all these appear to me to constitute the true characteristics of a public teacher.

I am Dear Sir, Yours very truly,
Beaufort>>⁴

The University duly decided to go ahead and in November 1833 appointed Maconochie to the first chair of Geography in Britain.⁵ The founding fathers, including Jeremy Bentham (personal communication from Fred Rosen) held Geography in some high esteem. In Chrestomathia (1816) – proposing a “new system of instruction to the higher branches of learning, for the use of the middling and higher ranks in life” – Bentham alleged “In this country few ... of the labouring classes ... have seen globes, ... none who can read ... have seen the use of maps”. Teaching the subject would inform the public about “topography ... knowledge of the divisions observable on the earth’s surface; beginning, of course, with the country in which the instruction is administered”. “Geography”, he continued, was closely related to “Statistics: such as that which concerns population; the manner and proportions in which the matter of wealth, the matter of power, and the matter of dignity, are distributed; quantity and quality of military force, &c, &c”.

In Volume I of his Constitutional Code: for the use of all nations and all governments professing liberal opinions (published in 1830), Bentham stressed the utility of geographical knowledge to the “health minister, and his various subordinates” ... “in so far as regards climate and temperature, in countries which the members of the community may have occasion to visit, whether for trade or war”. Geography, indeed, had both commercial and military applications in this age of Empire. The subject was also useful, according to Bentham, to the Foreign Relations Minister and the Finance Minister, and, of course, to “their subordinates”.

The University declared that the object of the “science of Geography” was “to explore the portion of space allotted to man; to portray his habitations therein, diversified as they are in geological structure, in climate, in vegetation, in animal life; to show their connection with his form, his habits, the temper of his mind, his language, his laws, his institutions; and to deduce general principles, by which, under similar circumstances, similar results may be inferred. The study of Geography, in this point of view; is peculiarly adapted to awaken enquiry, and to give liberal and enlarged views to the mind; it affords an [easy and] interesting exercise for the reason and reflection; and without it the study of History can be presented with little advantage” (Report of the Faculty of Arts, Session, 1834-35).

These words are attributed to the Faculty of Arts but the definition may well have been Maconochie’s own. We should note that in addition to the description of places, there was concern for identifying “general principles” – that some would later call “laws”.

Alas, we know little about the content of Maconochie’s teaching in the University. Certainly he presented excellent public lectures to audiences exceeding 350 about recent expeditions to the Arctic and to Central Asia (1834) and to Southern Africa and British Guiana (1835). These lectures were “very well delivered,... illustrated by maps,[and] gave the greatest satisfaction to all present” (The Times, 15 January 1835). By contrast with this public appeal, Maconochie attracted few students for his regular classes. In 1835,

only 5 of 136 students in the Faculty of Arts were enrolled for Geography: this was the smallest number for any discipline, but German (with 6 students) and political economy (with 7) fared scarcely better. Letters held at UCL reveal that Maconochie made strenuous efforts to equip his teaching room with appropriate maps and globes.

After less than three years in post, Maconochie's career changed dramatically in 1836. His friend, Sir John Franklin, was offered the post of Lieutenant-Governor of Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania) and encouraged Maconochie to join his administration. This he agreed to do, submitting his resignation as secretary of the RGS in May 1836, and as professor of geography in August.

<<London 22nd August/ 36

Sir:

Having accepted an appointment under Government in Van Diemen's Land, and being consequently about to reside in that Colony I have to request that you will convey to the Council my resignation of the Professorship of Geography in the University of London.

I shall always look back with much pleasure to the time in which I have been connected with this Institution, and always regard its future progress with interest. In retiring from it I beg to offer the Council my best thanks for the personal attention which I have universally received from it.

I have the Honour to be,

Sir,

Your most Obedient Servant,

A. Maconochie>>

At this time, Maconochie was nominated Knight of the Royal Hanoverian Guelphic Order, doubtless for his services to the Navy and the RGS.

The University advertised the vacancy, but failed to attract an appropriate candidate. The Annual Meeting of Proprietors, held on 22 February 1837, recorded:

“The professorship of geography is still vacant ... This branch of learning, important as it is, and though recently become an object of public interest, seems yet to be considered as a part of general education. Not even the acknowledged distinction of the late Professor could obtain a numerous class, and it may perhaps be a consequence of this circumstance that no person whose eminence would justify the appointment has yet offered to fill the Chair”(quoted by Mill 1933, 537-38).

In 1837, the Maconochie family, by now comprising six children (2 girls and 4 boys, brought up in a notably liberal way) travelled to Australia. Aboard ship, Maconochie père delivered a series of lectures to fellow passengers on “The natural history of man”, and reflected on a task that the Society for the Improvement of Prison Discipline had entrusted to him. At this time, he began to formulate an attack on the existing punishment regime which he found demoralizing. In an initial, and rather sketchy, way he proposed to replace it with the direct control of prisoners by official superintendents who would be trained to develop a reformatory and social system of discipline.

As a God-fearing man with a profound sense of the dignity of Man, Maconochie was appalled at the treatment of convicts at Hobart penal colony on Van Diemen’s Land and submitted a highly critical account of conditions to the Society for the Improvement of Prison Discipline. This ‘Essay on Convict Discipline’ was published, without his knowledge, as a Parliamentary Paper (1837-38). In the ensuing furore, Franklin had little choice but to dismiss him. Alexander Maconochie would devote the rest of his life to the cause of prison reform.

Building on his earlier ideas, he devised the ‘Mark System of Prison Discipline’ in which he enunciated the principle that criminals should be punished for their past, and trained for the future. Back in London, the Colonial Office appears to have been impressed by his approach and in 1839 Maconochie was offered the position of commandant of the remote Norfolk Island penal colony, located 900 miles ENE of Sydney. He accepted the job but pointed out that Norfolk Island was not particularly suitable for trialling his

methods. He was not permitted to apply his principles to the 1,200 hardened twice- and thrice-sentenced convicts, but only to 600 newcomers sent from Britain. He was allocated no extra staff, no more buildings, or new facilities for separating the 'old hands' from the new, who were supposed to be managed under the innovative regime (Clay 2001). Nonetheless, he did what he could between 1840 and 1844. He had considerable success in reforming prisoners, with "less than 3 per cent of the convicts who had been under [his] control being reconvicted in the first year after discharge, compared with 9 per cent of those who had served their sentences in Van Diemen's Land" – and 30 per cent in Britain (Ward 1960, 465). Despite these results, the Colonial Secretary, Lord Stanley, responded to various criticisms of his approach and relieved him of his duties; the family returned to Britain.

In 1846, Maconochie published a 74-page pamphlet entitled "Crime and Punishment. The Mark System", which described his experiment on Norfolk Island. As we have seen, this system was based on the conviction that the state had the duty to reform criminals, and that positive encouragement was more effective than mere punishment. Maconochie believed that prisoners should have every opportunity to earn 'marks' and hence achieve early release by good behaviour.

The mark system depended on "three revolutionary principles: the first making the prisoner's release conditional on earning a certain number of marks, varying in accordance with the severity of the crime; the second, making marks, which were now the currency of freedom, the sole medium of exchange within the prison. Under the mark system all free issues to prisoners were abolished – all except bread and water, a roof over his head, and the clothes he stood up in. If a man wanted more than the bare necessities of life it was up to him to earn the marks which alone would buy them" (Maconochie 1956, 238). Marks were not allocated automatically, and the third principle was the act of earning them. "Positive endeavour was what counted – not a mere passive acceptance of conditions ... The mark system ... was designed to take note of, and reward, any and every positive

effort ... At the same time, it was a disciplinary instrument of great power” (Ibid).⁶

Nonetheless, Maconochie and his whole approach were criticized by traditionalists for being insufficiently punitive. A range of other pamphlets on similar themes accompanied his active campaigning for prison reform.

With the assistance of Matthew Davenport Hill, Maconochie was appointed Governor of the new Birmingham Gaol (Winson Green) in 1849. When he retired two years later, he was presented with a purse containing £250, to mark “the respect of the subscribers for his character, and to express their sympathy with the humane and benevolent principles which he had so assiduously laboured to introduce into the reformatory management of prisons” (Michael Wise, letter to R.G. Ward dated 28 April 1959). But during the next few years there was considerable unrest at Winson Green that came to a head in 1853. The troubles were ascribed mainly to the activities of the then governor, Lieutenant Austin, but a royal commission of enquiry implicated Maconochie in its criticism of the prison’s management.

By this time, Maconochie’s health was poor, because of liver disease, but he devoted the remaining nine years of his life to campaigning for prison reform, counting Charles Dickens and Angela Burdett-Coutts among his like-minded friends. Maconochie’s later books included Principles of Punishment (1850) and The Mark System of Prison Discipline (1855). If truth be told, his ideas had little impact during his lifetime, but they would be embodied in the declaration of principles at the National Prison Association meeting in the USA (Cincinnati) in 1870 and were later extended to the management of prisons in many parts of the world.

Alexander Maconochie died at Morden (Surrey) on 25 October 1860 and was buried six days later in the churchyard of Morden parish church. His widow, Mary, who died nine years later, was buried alongside him – just to the right inside the porch gate.

The Dictionary of Australian National Biography (1949) concludes:

“Maconochie was a thoroughly earnest and sincere man in advance of his time. He believed that prisoners should be treated with humanity, that their education should be extended, and that many of them could be persuaded to live honest lives if given a fair opportunity<> He would probably have been more successful at Norfolk Island if he could have been content to bring in his innovations gradually”.

And what about the teaching of Geography in the University of London after Maconochie? The post at UCL was not filled for almost 70 years, however some aspects of the subject were taught in the Civil Service and Military Departments of King’s College from the 1840s onwards; and lecturers in geography were appointed at the LSE (the famous Halford Mackinder) and at Birkbeck College in the mid-1890s (personal communication, Michael Wise 2003). At UCL, two members of staff – Wilhelm Wittich and George Long – published books with “Geography” in the title, but not until the arrival of Lionel Lyde (1863–1947) in 1903 was the Chair of Geography filled.⁷ At the same time, the teaching of physical geography was entrusted to the Professor of Geology, Edward Garwood whose official title was “professor of geology and physical geography”. Thereafter, first-year physical geography would be taught by geologists until 1961!

Lionel Lyde’s background was in the classics and history, and he taught English at various schools including Merchiston Castle School outside Edinburgh. As well as being a captivating speaker, he was a highly successful author of textbooks in history and, from the 1890s, in geography. His textbook, Man on Earth (1st edition 1895) was a best seller and it is on record that “his publishers gave a small dinner to mark the sale of 2 million copies of his books” when he was still quite a young man (Stamp 1947, 155).

Frankly, Lyde’s impact was on training future teachers rather than as developing Geography as a discipline. His works – and his name – are now forgotten, but the continuous teaching of Geography at UCL certainly began with his appointment 106 years ago. When Charles Bungay Fawcett

succeeded him in 1928, the subject was set on a modern, scholarly footing at UCL.

Unlike Lyde, who is shrouded in oblivion, the reputation of Maconochie the prison reformer lives on. Walter C. Reckless, distinguished sociologist and criminologist who belonged to the famous 'Chicago School' of social sciences, described him as the "father of modern penology" (quoted by Maconochie 1956, 235). Others have seen him as the "father of parole". In 2001, John Clay published a new 270-page biography entitled Maconochie's Experiment which complemented the Honourable Mr. Justice Barry's book of 1958, and in 2008 the Australian Capital Territory named its new correctional facility outside Canberra after Maconochie. Sadly, the 60-line Wikipedia entry devoted to him confines his activities at UCL and the RGS to a single sentence; no pun intended.

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¹ For the early years of Maconochie's life and his career as a geographer, this paper draws on Ward (1960), whilst discussion of his time on Norfolk Island and his activities as a penal reformer is largely based on Maconochie (1956), McCulloch (1957), and Clay (2001). Professor Fred Rosen supplied references to Jeremy Bentham's views on the utility of Geography, and Professor Michael Rosen identified information on the early teaching of Geography at King's College London and on the gift given to Maconochie when he retired as governor of Birmingham Gaol in 1851. The work of Maconochie's geographical successors at UCL is traced in Clout (2003).

² The full title was A Summary View of the Statistics and Existing Commerce of the Principal Shores of the Pacific Ocean. With a Sketch of the Advantages, political and commercial, which would result from the establishment of a Central Free Port within its Limits, and also of one in the Southern Atlantic viz. within the territory of the Cape of Good Hope, conferring upon the latter in particular, the same privilege of direct trade with India and the Northern Atlantic, bestowed lately upon Malta and Gibraltar.

³ It is not inconceivable that Thomas Campbell, one of the founders of the University of London, was impressed with the teaching of Geography in military academies and establishments of higher learning in the Germanic Lands following his visit to the University of Bonn in 1820. In addition, the subject was in the national gaze by virtue of the founding of the Royal Geographical Society and the vital importance of world knowledge to the Navy and to the trading community.

⁴ The College Collection at UCL contains twelve letters from Maconochie dealing with his appointment to the Chair of Geography (5), College and University matters (5), and his resignation (2).

⁵ There were three other applicants: Mr Jean Chretien, Mr George Pinnock and the Rev N.S. Smith.

⁶ The author, Kenneth J. Maconochie, was Alexander's great grandson.

⁷ Wilhelm Wittich was teacher, later professor of German at UCL (1834–35, 1836–48). His geographical works included Curiosities of Physical Geography (1845, 1846, 1855, 1869) and A Visit to the Western Coast of Norway (1848, with a notice on the author by G. Long). Gorge Long had been recruited from Trinity College, Cambridge to be founding Professor of Ancient Languages at the University of Virginia. He returned to England in 1828 to occupy the Chair of Greek Language, Literature and Antiquities at UCL, and in 1830 was one of the founding members of the RGS – along with Maconochie. Long's first wife was an American and he retained an affection for America throughout his life. His geographical works included On the Study of Geography (1836), The Geography of America and the West Indies (1841), and The Geography of Great Britain (1850, with George Richardson Porter). In 1831 he resigned from UCL to work full time for the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge as editor of the Quarterly Journal of Education and then of the 29-volume Penny Cyclopaedia. He returned to UCL as Professor of Latin in 1842, before moving to Brighton in 1846 as a schoolteacher, writer and editor.