

## **The Origins of the Teaching of Geography at University College London**

**Alexander Maconochie (1787-1860)**

**Professor of Geography and Pioneering Prison Reformer**

by Hugh Clout

Geography was taught in the early days of the University of London (UCL), indeed Jeremy Bentham believed that it was one of the sciences that should be taught to schoolchildren, together with botany, zoology, mineralogy and astronomy.<sup>i</sup> He also argued that prospective government ministers should be trained in geography, especially those with responsibility for foreign relations, finance or health. The extent to which these views were reflected in the decision to appoint a professor of geography at the College is not known since Bentham died in 1832, but his writings suggest that he would have been very much in favour. A Report to the Council, dated 26 February 1834, noted:

“The Senate, considering that the University would acquire increased reputation and usefulness by extending the subjects of study, recommended to the Council the institution of Professorships, the Arts of Design, and Mineralogy; and the Council have the satisfaction of announcing the appointment to the first of these Chairs of Captain Maconochie, R.N., Secretary to the Royal Geographical Society”<sup>ii</sup>.

The new professor had been born in Edinburgh on 11 February 1787. His father died in 1796 and the young Alexander Maconochie was entrusted to his guardian, Allan Maconochie, Lord Meadowbank, in whose scholarly and intellectually inquisitive household he grew up. The intention was to prepare him for a career in the law but in 1803 he joined the Royal Navy, subsequently rising to the rank of Lieutenant in 1810 and to that of Commander five years later. As was the custom of the time, he referred to himself as Captain. During the Napoleonic Wars he had spent time in prison, an experience that deeply marked his subsequent career. Throughout his years in the navy Maconochie maintained his studies, especially in modern languages, mathematics and law. He was paid off in 1815 at the age of 28 and moved to Edinburgh, remaining on half-pay for forty years until formal retirement from the Navy in 1855. In Scotland, he applied himself to research and writing, with his first

pamphlet being published in 1816. This presented ‘Considerations on the Propriety of Establishing a Colony in one of the Sandwich Islands’, and two years later his longest single work appeared under the title ‘A Summary View of the Statistics and Existing Commerce of the Principal Shores of the Pacific Ocean’.<sup>iii</sup> A section of this text dealt with the need for penal reform, especially in the context of New South Wales.



Alexander Maconochie

By kind permission of  
Michael Maconochie

In April 1822 Maconochie married Mary Hutton Browne and the couple moved to a farm at North Queensferry in Fife.<sup>iv</sup> Whilst there, Maconochie built a school and taught the local children. Farming proved unprofitable and in 1828 the family moved to London where Maconochie encountered many old naval friends, including Sir John Barrow, Sir John Franklin and Admiral Beaufort who would become founding members of the Royal Geographical Society in July 1830. Maconochie served as an energetic Secretary to the new Society until May 1836, editing its journal, purchasing books and maps, finding premises and dealing with financial matters. With considerable success to his credit, he joined the University in November 1833.

Beaufort had provided an enthusiastic testimonial:

“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 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”.<sup>v</sup>

Maconochie’s appointment to a Chair of Geography was certainly the first in the British Isles but had been preceded by the University of Paris (1809) and the University of Berlin, which appointed Carl Ritter in 1820.<sup>vi</sup> The three unsuccessful candidates for the Chair were Jean Chretien, George Pinnock and the Rev. N.S. Smith.

A Report of the Faculty of Arts, session 1834-35, reveals that the infant University had high expectations of Geography, stating:  
“Previous to the commencement of the present session no Chair of Geography existed in this country. General ignorance in consequence prevails respecting this science, and instead of maintaining its rank among the branches of intellectual education, it is not infrequently considered a mere task for the memory of schoolboys. But those who assign the Science of Geography this ignoble position can never have contemplated the grand field which it opens to the labour of the Professor; can never have contemplated that its object is to explore the portion of space allotted to man, to pourtray 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 inquiry, and to give liberal and enlarged views to the mind; it affords an easy and interesting exercise for the reason and the reflection, and without it the study of History can be prosecuted with little advantage. On these accounts it seems well fitted to occupy an early place in the series of studies which belong to general education”.<sup>vii</sup>

Maconochie probably started to teach at UCL in 1834 but enrolments for his classes were small. Only five candidates were listed as studying geography in 1835, the professor having acquired appropriate globes and maps to assist his teaching.<sup>viii</sup> The details of his course are not known but Maconochie delivered at least two public lectures, which presented fascinating information on recent expeditions in central Asia, southern Africa and Latin America, and managed to attract large and distinguished audiences on those occasions. A total of 350 was recorded for his public

lecture in January 1834. A year later *The Times* reported that a subsequent public lecture, which “was very well delivered, and illustrated by maps etc., gave the greatest satisfaction to all present”.<sup>ix</sup> By contrast, Maconochie’s lectures to undergraduates at UCL were a failure with Geography being mentioned in the Report of the Faculty of Arts (session 1835-36) as a subject for which “classes... have not been opened”, along with Italian, Oriental languages and Political Economy.<sup>x</sup>

He resigned from his Chair at UCL in August 1836 to take up an appointment in Van Diemen’s Land (Tasmania) as secretary to his friend Sir John Franklin who had been made Lieutenant-Governor. On the strength of his services to the nation, Maconochie he had been nominated Knight of the Royal Hanoverian Guelphic Order (K.H.) three months earlier. Following his move to Australasia, he sent several papers to the Royal Geographical Society, including one ‘On the soil and on the natives of Port Philip in Australia’, which was read at a meeting of the Society, and another which included a thorough account of the geography of Norfolk Island, however his main interest moved from geography to prison reform.<sup>xi</sup> In 1840 he had become governor of the penal colony of Norfolk Island one thousand miles out in the Pacific Ocean, almost mid way between the eastern coast of Australia and the North Island of New Zealand.<sup>xii</sup>

Maconochie was appalled by the brutality he found when he arrived at Norfolk Island and introduced a ‘mark system of prison discipline’ whereby prisoners could reduce their sentences by good behaviour and hard work. He built chapels for Protestants and Roman Catholics, improved accommodation for prisoners, and introduced opportunities for gardening, reading and general education. This humanitarian approach was not appreciated by all but one of his most vociferous opponents, Sir George Gipps, was impressed by the results when he visited Norfolk Island in 1843. An official enquiry was launched and despite the subsequent report being highly supportive of Maconochie’s pioneering work, a new Colonial Secretary removed him from his post as governor, thereby bringing the experiment to an end. Of the 920 prisoners Maconochie had released from Norfolk Island fewer than 3 per cent were later reconvicted. After he left in 1844, conditions deteriorated rapidly in the penal colony. Five years later he was appointed governor of Birmingham Gaol, a position he held for two years. Despite failing health, Maconochie continued to campaign for prison reform. He died on 25 October 1860, at the age of 73, and was buried in the graveyard of Morden Church in south London, his grave being found

just inside the church gate. His name has been virtually forgotten in geographical circles but continues to command respect in the world of penal reform with the new prison completed in the Australian Capital Territory (Canberra) in 2008 being named the 'Alexander Maconochie Centre'.

Following the departure of Maconochie to the Antipodes, the College Council advertised the vacant Chair of Geography and at least five applications were received. Nonetheless, a report dated 22 February 1837 stated: "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 not 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"<sup>xiii</sup> It would remain unfilled until the dawn of the new century. Nonetheless, two other early members of UCL, Wilhelm Wittich and George Long, published on geography but there is no record that they professed other than their specialist subjects.<sup>xiv</sup> Wittich taught German language but authored books on curiosities of physical geography and travels along the west coast of Norway. Long had been one of the founder members of the Royal Geographical Society in 1830 and held the Chair of Greek at UCL (1828-31). He used his family connections with the West Indies and North America to author a book on these regions, writing another on Great Britain (with George Richardson Porter) and a third on the study of geography. These appeared in a series entitled the 'Library of Useful Knowledge' published by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge to which he devoted his talents prior to returning to UCL as Professor of Latin (1842-46).

During the latter years of the nineteenth century the Royal Geographical Society had been instrumental in supporting the teaching of geography at Oxford and Cambridge, with Halford Mackinder being appointed at Oxford in 1887 and the first lectureship at Cambridge being filled in the following year.<sup>xv</sup> There was an initiative to establish an Institute of Geography in London in 1895 but it foundered on financial grounds. Geography was, of course, taught at King's College in Victorian times. Mackinder was appointed at the London School of Economics in 1895 and George Chisholm began extension lecturing in the capital in the same year, being appointed at Birkbeck College in 1896.<sup>xvi</sup> At UCL members of the Department of Geology gave courses on physical geography in the final decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; indeed, the

Chair holder had the title of ‘Professor of Geology and Physical Geography’, with such remaining in place until the early 1960s. The Minutes of the Council of UCL for 1 December 1902 recorded the content of a report from the Senate of the University of London that stated that the Professor of Geology proposed to extend the teaching of geography from the physical point of view.<sup>xvii</sup> This was Edward Garwood who was well received by the RGS.<sup>xviii</sup> The Senate further recommended the institution of a new Chair of Economic Geography and, were the advice to be approved by the Council of UCL, advised that the position be offered to Mr. Lionel Lyde MA without recourse to any formal advertisement. In this way, the teaching of human geography was re-established in 1903, and this time on a firm footing.<sup>xix</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Bentham’s comments about Geography are found in: *Chrestomathia* (1816); and *Constitutional Code: for the use of all nations and all governments professing liberal opinions* (1830).

<sup>ii</sup> Cited in Mill, H.R. (1933) ‘The First London Professor of Geography’, *Geographical Journal*, 81, 536-538, 537.

<sup>iii</sup> M’Konochie, A. (1818) *A Summary View of the Statistics and Existing Commerce of the Principal Shores of the Pacific Ocean* (London & Edinburgh).

<sup>iv</sup> Ward, R.G. (1960) ‘Captain Alexander Maconochie, RN, KH, 1787-1860’, *Geographical Journal*, 126, 459-68, 462.

<sup>v</sup> Beaufort to Thomas Coates, Secretary of the University, 21 September 1833, cited in Ward, R.G. (1960) ‘Captain Alexander Maconochie’, 463-64.

<sup>vi</sup> Dickinson, R.E. (1969) *The Makers of Modern Geography* (London), 34, 190. Professor Michael Wise reminds me that Kings College London had courses on geography in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. From the early years of that College the subject had been taught in the Civil Service and Military departments. Then the Rev. C.G. Nicolay (or Nicholay) became the first lecturer 1854-58. William Hughes was professor from 1863 to 1876. He was a real geographer who was highly regarded as having anticipated many of the ideas later presented by Mackinder. H.G. Seely who followed Hughes was more of a geologist and natural scientist. In short, there was geography teaching in London in the Victorian era at Kings College, and also at Queen’s College (which never attained university status) and in some teacher training colleges.

<sup>vii</sup> UCL, *Distribution of Prizes, Session 1834-35*, Report of the Faculty of Arts, cited by Ward, (1960) ‘Captain Alexander Maconochie’, 464.

<sup>viii</sup> Ward, R.G. (1960) ‘Captain Alexander Maconochie’, 464; Mill, H.R. (1933) ‘The First London Professor of Geography’, *Geographical Journal*, 81, 536-538.

<sup>ix</sup> *The Times*, 15 January 1835, 6 f.

<sup>x</sup> See Mill, H.R. (1933) ‘The First London Professor of Geography’, 537.

<sup>xi</sup> Details are given in Ward, R.G. (1960) ‘Captain Alexander Maconochie’, 465, 468.

<sup>xii</sup> Maconochie’s career as a prison governor and reformer is discussed by: Barry, J.V. (1958) *Alexander Maconochie of Norfolk Island* (Melbourne); and Clay, J. (2001) *Maconochie’s Experiment* (London). Maconochie had, of course, already written about the Pacific: M’Konochie, A. (1818) *A Summary View*.

<sup>xiii</sup> See Mill, H.R. (1933) ‘The First London Professor of Geography’, 537-38.

<sup>xiv</sup> Bellot, H.H. (1929) *University College London, 1826-1926* (London), 118.

<sup>xv</sup> Dickinson, R.E. (1976) *Regional Concept: the Anglo-American Leaders* (London), 13-14, 103.

<sup>xvi</sup> Personal communication from Professor Michael Wise, citing Cantor, L. (1962) ‘The Royal Geographical Society and the projected London Institute of Geography, 1892-1899’, *Geographical Journal*, 128, 30-35.

<sup>xvii</sup> UCL, *Minutes of Council*, 1 December 1902.

<sup>xviii</sup> Stoddart, D.R. (1986) *On Geography and its History* (London), 73.

<sup>xix</sup> Clout, H. (2003) *Geography at University College London: a brief history* (London).