Journal of Historical Geography 49 (2015) 31–38

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Historical Geography

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jhg

To read or not to read? The politics of overlooking gender in the geographical canon

Avril Maddrell

Department of Geography and Environmental Management, University of the West of England, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol, BS16 1QY, UK

Abstract

Wherever there is an established 'canon' within an established scholarly arena, this is near universally dominated by texts written by men. Whilst historical contextual reasons may account for the gendering of such knowledge production in relation to publications dating from the nineteenth and preceding centuries, one has to ask why this has persisted in an era of equal access to education and academia in the twentieth century. Why is women's work, highly influential in its day, overlooked in subsequent histories of the discipline and therefore marginalised in discussions of key works? These questions are particularly pertinent to any notion of a geographical canon, given the subject's relatively late arrival as a degree award in the UK from 1917 onwards. This paper draws on an analysis of the significance of lineage, reviewing, reputation and genre in the contextualised production and reception of selected work to explore the merits and demerits of a geographical canon – and the implications for gendered geographical knowledge. It goes on to suggest i) a more inclusive and dialogic relational approach to understanding past and present geographical work based on Kilcup's notion of the 'soft canon'; ii) a broadening of the cast and range of outputs considered 'influential'; and iii) encourages greater critical reflection on contemporary practices of canonization within sub-disciplines.

Keywords: Gender; Reception; Engagement; Legacy; Dialogue

Writing a history of women's geographical work in the UK 1850–1970 prompted me to conclude that there was a rich cast of influential female physical and human geographers who were absent from, or marginalised in, geography's histories, but whose work merited recognition. Furthermore, 'Linked to this [need for a] broadening of the cast within the geographical canon is the ongoing need for epistemological and ontological shifts to extend both the definition of what constitutes 'geographical knowledge' and 'geographical work.'[1] In a subsequent short intervention,[2] I highlighted four key points in relation to debates on canonical geographies. The first is a preference for the nomenclature of the 'classic' rather than 'canonical'. The second is the, by definition, selective and therefore exclusionary nature of any canon, notably, the under-representation of women's work in anything that might be described as a geographical canon. Thirdly, the need for *engagement* with geographical work deemed significant for whatever reason; and finally a call to appreciate but also to look beyond key texts when framing the historical legacy of the discipline. In this paper these points provide the foundation for a more detailed analysis of canon formation in the UK and gives particular attention to i) the practices and implications of 'genre' preference, ii) degrees of engagement and iii) overlooking gender. To overlook has multiple meanings: to look over and survey or to 'have a view over'; to superintend; to ignore, fail to see, neglect; and to close one's eyes to, excuse, condone. Each of these meanings is pertinent to the following discussion.

A significant question to begin with is to ask why is there such interest in a geographical canon at this point in time? Influenced by Benedict Anderson's thesis on the formation of nation states as 'imagined communities',[3] Kramnick suggests that the impetus to canon formation within a particular field may be in response to external stress or duress.[4] Is this current interest in a geographical canon an assertion of internal strength or a defensive reaction to external threats? As the collected papers in this special issue testify,

E-mail address: avril.maddrell@uwe.ac.uk

[1] A. Maddrell, *Women's Geographical Work in the UK 1850–1970*, Chichester, 2009, 338.
[2] A. Maddrell, Treasuring classic texts, engagement and the gender gap in the geographical canon, *Dialogues in Human Geography* 2 (2012) 324–327.
[3] B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London, 1983.
[4] J.B. Kramnick, The making of the English canon, *PMLA* 112 (1997) 1087–1101.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2015.04.013
0305-7488/

interests and motivations vary, but it is worth noting that, in the UK context at least, the 2013 International Benchmarking Review of UK Human Geography reported a decline in the *teaching* of the history and philosophy of geography, despite research excellence in the field.[5] This has implications for current faculty and postgraduate recruitment to this sub-discipline and its future in the longer term. So one question we might reflect on is whether a stronger sense of canonical or classic texts could strengthen the raison d'être for the history and philosophy of geography in the undergraduate curriculum? If that premise were accepted, there arises – visible to some, invisible to others – the spectre of the politics of inclusion and exclusion. Before returning to these strategic questions it is necessary to consider the nature of what constitutes a 'canon', the reiterative nature of any heroic Whiggish canon and the possibilities of a more open, dialogic and relational 'soft canon'.

Lessons from literature I: canon formation, lineage and genre

> The literature we criticize and theorize about is never the whole. At most we talk about sizable subsets of the writers and workers of the past. This limited field is the current literary canon.[6]

Academic discussion of the notion of the canon has been much debated within the field of English literature, indeed, so hotly debated that the last twenty to thirty years have been dubbed as the 'canon wars'[7]. Consequently, the cut and thrust of these debates, as well as those undertaken in other disciplines, offer considerable insight to the nature of what is deemed canonical, the processes at play, and the implications of maintaining or challenging a discipline's canon. Key points from these debates are highlighted below.

Most discussions of any 'canon' explore the etymology of the term, including, variously, its origins as: a Greek Semitic word for a measuring rod or model; the authorised books which make up the Bible; Christian church law; and those recognised as saints within the church. Thus, canonical status has been associated not only with accolade but also with normative authority,[8] albeit an authority which, according to Frank Kermode, shifted in modern Western society from religion to a secular literary canon.[9] This shift endowed the literary canon with a secular-sacred quality, with the associated attributes of moral and aesthetic authority. Each of these meanings associated with the canon has potential implications for our understanding of what constitutes the canon and the processes and impact of 'canonization'. Not surprisingly, it is the connotations of the term that make any 'canon' so contested.[10]

Within literature, the canon has been variously defined as 'a body of literary works traditionally regarded as the most important, significant, and worthy of study; those works… considered to be established as being the highest quality and most enduring value, the classics'[11]; the literary 'Art of Memory… what has been preserved out of what has been written', based on what is considered 'authoritative' and 'crucial'[12]; an authoritative narrative that embodies and perpetuates the institutional transmission of orthodox values which underpin the cultural power of an elite.[13]

In turn, the Canon is frequently associated with *tradition* and lineage, exemplified by F.R. Leavis' 'line of tradition' stretching from John Donne to T.S. Eliot,[14] whereby the mantle is passed across the generations, via an 'invisible hand' mechanism, whereby 'Greatness recognizes greatness and is shadowed by it'.[15]

Canonicity is thus often explicitly or implicitly grounded in the notion of 'greatness', and herein lie many pitfalls. Indeed Harold Bloom made the self-fulfilling claim that 'All strong literary originality becomes canonical.'[16] Emphasising originality, he argued that canonical status can often be attributed to 'strangeness, a mode of originality that cannot be assimilated, or that so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange.'[17] Such discussions of greatness and originality echo contemporaneous debates about 'firstness': what constitutes a first class degree in the humanities and social sciences, which frequently privileges something which is different and apparently innovative over careful scholarship.

Precisely who determines canonical status has been much debated. Bloom concluded that 'The deepest truth about secular canon-formation is that it is performed neither by critics nor academies, let alone politicians. Writers, artists, composers themselves determine canons, by bridging between strong precursors and strong successors.'[18] A.S. Byatt echoes this view when she argues that 'A canon is… what other writers have wanted to keep alive, to go on reading, over time.'[19] For others, university teachers who determine curricula are vital gatekeepers of the canon; thus Jan Gorak summarises these multiple forms of canon into three key modes: i) a teaching guide; ii) a norm or rule; iii) a list of basic authorities.[20] Nick Turner provides a useful sense of the canon-in-practice in his description of it as 'the choices and value judgements which writers, readers and teachers make.'[21]

In an influential paper, Alastair Fowler identified a number of potentially overlapping canons: firstly, the official canon that literature 'institutionalised' courtesy of its place in educational curricula and journalism, as well as attracting public patronage; secondly, an individual's personal canon, 'works [s]he happens to know and value'; thirdly, the potential canon of literature in its entirety; and fourthly, the accessible canon that is available and attainable .[22] Of course, the technological revolution of the last

[5] ESRC-AHRC/RGS-IBG, *International Benchmarking Review of UK Human Geography*, 2013.
[6] A. Fowler, Genre and the literary canon, *New Literary History* 11 (1979) 97–119 [97].
[7] N. Turner, *Post-war British Women Novelists and the Canon*, London and New York, 2010 [11].
[8] H. Bloom, *The Western Canon the Books and School of the Ages*, London, 1994.
[9] F. Kermode, *Forms of Attention*, Chicago, 1985; J. Gorak, *The Making of the Modern Canon: Genesis and Crisis of a Literary Idea*, London, 1991.
[10] Turner, *Post-war British Women* (note 7).
[11] Turner, *Post-war British Women* (note 7), 13.
[12] Bloom, *Western Cannon* (note 8), 17.
[13] Gorak, *Modern Cannon* (note 9).
[14] Gorak, *Modern Cannon* (note 9).
[15] Bloom, *Western Cannon* (note 8), 10.
[16] Bloom, *Western Cannon* (note 8), 22, 25.
[17] Bloom, *Western Cannon* (note 8), 3.
[18] Bloom, *Western Cannon* (note 8), 522.
[19] A.S. Byatt, 2001, 2 cited by Turner, *Post-war British Women* (note 7), 21.
[20] Gorak, *Modern Cannon* (note 9).
[21] Turner, *Post-war British Women* (note 7), 1.
[22] Fowler, *Genre* (note 6), 98.