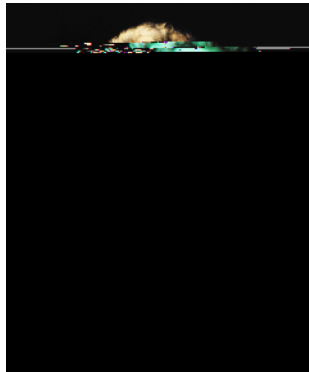


Alexander Maconochie: Britain's First Professor of Geography

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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

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

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”.

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

“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

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

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

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 publish

