J. B. JACKSON AND GEOGRAPHY

John Brinckerhoff Jackson was like a kaleidoscope. To each person who knew him, he presented a slightly different image, a different piece of his life story, a different glimpse of how his ideas fit together. Each of the pieces may have been true, but seeing the whole picture has always been a challenge: reason enough for the Geographical Review to present this special issue. Five of the articles—those by Helen Horowitz, Gwendolyn Wright, Patricia Limerick, Paul Starrs, and Peirce Lewis—confront the problems and opportunities of Jackson's intellectual legacy and spring from an interdisciplinary conference on "J. B. Jackson and American Landscape," sponsored by the School of Architecture and Planning at the University of New Mexico. Larry Ford's essay was also presented at the Jackson conference and, in the company of pieces by Steven Hoelscher and Richard Symanski, illustrates another practice, addressing subjects with approaches that Jackson helped to make part of American geography.

Only five of the eight articles in this issue come from geographers. Indeed, readers should be warned that during his lifetime (1909–1996) Jackson was claimed by several academic disciplines, including literature, architecture, landscape architecture, American studies, history, and historical archaeology, as well as geography. Jackson relished and actively fostered this disciplinary heterogeneity. If the visitors in Jackson's university office (or around his kitchen table) were architects, he talked insightfully about architecture—or rather, he politely but systematically probed his guests with knowledgeable questions about their field. If the visitors had different professional moorings, he could respond to those equally well. Jackson's secret was that he was a speed reader, and he read constantly and widely. He would typically begin a public lecture, say, in history, by declaring, "Now, I am no historian." He would then deliver a learned and brilliant address, using abstruse sources, probably selected from several centuries of discourse in the field, and in several languages.

Thus, Jackson would have introduced this collection by saying that he was certainly not a geographer. Yet, in most significant ways, geography was a central thread that ran throughout Jackson's life. At several significant junctures of his life and work, he did forthrightly claim geography as his turf; to my knowledge, he did that with no other discipline. Indeed, geography was a perfect choice for Jackson, who by temperament was always an outsider looking in. Geographical methods, along with those of a good novelist and nonfiction writer, made him the ultimate expert at looking in. The traffic of Jackson and geography was on a two-way street. From one direction, Jackson consciously sought out a geographical way of learning and writing. From the other direction, geographers saw their common interests with Jackson and were drawn to him and to his work.

Jackson's path to a geographical method was largely self-paved out of many converging routes. His childhood of travel and schooling in Europe included having to learn (particularly by close observation, one assumes) the dress, manners, and speech of people far wealthier than himself. According to conversations he had with Chris Wilson, a cultural landscape historian in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Jackson's shift from European cultures to North American ones seems to have begun in the summer of his junior year in prep school, in the mid-1920s. He spent the summer in Santa Fe and in the Yucatán Peninsula, accompanying his New York uncle, who was a Harvard University...
graduate and an archaeology buff. During that time Harvard archaeologists were uncovering major Mayan ruins; Jackson watched the artifacts of this mystical culture emerge from the jungle and, as he tells it, was at the dinner table with the archaeologists as they speculated about the interpretation of those artifacts. He also had a month of traveling essentially on his own in the Yucatán, visiting other sites and sampling Mexico’s multiple cultures.

His visits with the elite of Santa Fe were plunges into a cultural pool of outsiders literally inventing a new narrative for the city and its region. In that summer were key parts of a traditional cultural geographer’s work: learning and speaking the local language; material culture fieldwork that demanded selecting significant, telling details from a mass of information; regional exploration; and, everywhere, creative speculation about meaning and interpretation.

Jackson’s formal education in geography was also highly unusual. Helen Horowitz’s research has brought to light the central influence of Jackson’s one abortive year at the Experimental College of the University of Wisconsin. Each year the program was devoted to the study of one place, for one century. Students were encouraged to examine their surroundings with their own eyes. The visits of Lewis Mumford encouraged several students to study architecture, and one of the professors emphasized the importance of religion in understanding culture. These approaches, all very geographical notions, would stay with Jackson throughout his life. Drawing on site, as a way to see and understand, had already become part of Jackson’s field methods.

At Harvard, to satisfy science requirements, Jackson took two geography courses (one on manufacturing and transportation, the other on agriculture and extractive industries), both taught by Derwent Whittlesey, an eclectic scholar and spellbinding lecturer. Jackson had found his interests in architecture much on his own; Whittlesey obviously expanded what Jackson saw in the landscape. Jackson’s later teaching at the University of California, Berkeley, and at Harvard emphasized all of Whittlesey’s subjects as axiomatic. Jackson’s substitute for graduate school was his experience in the army during World War II. He essentially read his way across Normandy with immersions, wherever he was stationed, in maps, guidebooks, and local geographical literature.

In 1951 Jackson launched his magazine, Landscape: Human Geography of the Southwest. The word “geography” remained in the title for several years. Although his editorial selections included city and regional planning, anthropology, environmental psychology, and political science, geography and architecture were the most common subjects. “If we cannot flatter ourselves that we are exploring a totally new region of knowledge,” Jackson wrote in the summer 1953 issue, “we can at least feel that we are venturing into a deserted one” (p. 25). In the first year of the journal (in which Jackson, using several pseudonyms, wrote every article) he quoted French geographers and anthropologists often.

The first American geographer he cited approvingly was Carl Sauer (A Geographic Sketch of Early Man in America, Geographical Review 34 [1944]: 529–573). Jackson met Sauer through circuitous circumstances. Jackson sent the first 200 copies of his magazine to prospective subscribers. An initial subscriber, the ethnobotanist Edgar Anderson, began to mail Landscape on to Carl Sauer, then chair of geography at Berkeley. Sauer sent an appreciative letter to Jackson, and in 1956, when Jackson was in the Bay Area, he telephoned Sauer and asked to meet him. Sauer invited Jackson to a party that same
night, at which Jackson met the entire Berkeley geography faculty. "He flourished at Berkeley, no doubt about that; the faculty and the graduate students were all smitten with him," James Parsons remembered in a 1989 interview with television producer Bob Calo. Jackson was not just socializing; he was on a crusade to help Americans understand their cultural environments, and he needed a steady stream of quality articles for his magazine. After 1956, many Berkeley geographers suddenly appeared in the pages of *Landscape*. They were joined by cultural geographers from the University of Chicago and the University of Minnesota.

More important to Jackson’s continuing independent education, after 1956 he was welcomed to stay in Berkeley and to sit in on classes. He attended Sauer’s seminars and, probably, James E. Vance’s courses on transportation and the city; and he met Jean Gottmann in the years before he published the seminal *Megalopolis* (1961). Jackson was soon asked to give informal talks, which became lectures and, finally, courses. By the mid-1960s he was regularly teaching geography seminars, one of which was on factory and industrial landscapes, at Berkeley and at the University of Minnesota.

In 1962 Jackson commenced teaching a course in landscape architecture at Berkeley, and the next year at Harvard, again in landscape architecture. These classes became his famous surveys of the history of the American cultural landscape, courses with a yearly enrollment of several hundred students. Although at each winter sojourn on campus he gave at least one geography department lecture, Jackson stopped giving courses in geography. By then he had also dropped the word “geography” from the subtitle of *Landscape* magazine. Had he left the discipline and moved on to some new field? The answer is a clear “no.” Jackson had essentially, and quietly, stepped up his one-person crusade to take his geography to the design disciplines. His course syllabi remained genuinely geographical, prominently featuring the subjects he had studied with Whittlesey, but now with Jackson’s own twist. In 1977 Jackson gave an entire, fairly Sauerian, lecture on soil, which is hardly what one would expect in a design history course. Design schools, he confessed, needed cultural landscape studies, but as a basis for the field, he once said to me, “only geography presented respectable intellectual ferment.”

While Jackson sought out geography, geographers in varying numbers were being drawn to him. In the early 1950s, interest in rural landscape subjects was far more common than it is today. Although Jackson’s essays rarely had a direct, practical application, his subjects fit into the several geographical niches in which rural and extractive industry subjects were at hand. Initially calling his magazine a journal of “human geography” also piqued the attention of cultural geographers. Parsons reported to Calo that, in the early years of the magazine, he had received a letter from a noted eastern geographer asking, “Who the hell is J. B. Jackson?” The steady supply of articles by geographers in *Landscape* suggests that they appreciated the outlet and audience the journal presented.

The match of cultural geographers with Jackson was, of course, a natural. But other types of geographers in the 1950s and 1960s also sought him out. Jackson’s interests were not only rural but also urban, suburban, and regional. Although few of the urban articles in *Landscape* were written by geographers, a subset of urban geographers had intellectual valences open for someone like Jackson. These urbanists were on the fringe themselves, because they were interested less in the abstract Christallerian models and retail gravitation slopes that possessed much of urban geography at the time than in the
changing spatial organization and form of the city—that is, in the history of street grids and building types and what they represented about human relations over time. Two of the leading abstract theoreticians of the 1960s, Brian Berry and William Garrison, published an essay on interstate highways in *Landscape*. Because Jackson personally solicited most of the articles and reviews in *Landscape*, we can guess that it was he who sought out many of these urbanists, yet many of them remained as friends and repeat contributors.

Geographers of a social-theoretical stripe also found an ear (and a place to publish) with Jackson. Phenomenology and environmental perception, early critiques of the positivism that was rampant in the immediate post–World War II era, were two of the several sets of theory that intrigued Jackson and that he published frequently in the mid-1960s. As Jackson began to spend more time on teaching and gave up personally editing his journal, the paper trail of people who sought him out, and vice versa, became less clear. Jackson rarely was interested in an economic explanation or interpretation of the landscape, although he clearly kept up with those literatures. The Berkeley city planning professor Roger Montgomery reports that in any given year, several faculty members could be found auditing Jackson’s lectures. They would be impressed that he was referring knowledgeably to the new radical social and economic works, such as on structuralism and poststructuralism, and to the likes of Michel Foucault, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Louis Althusser. When asked about these new -isms, Jackson would, as usual, profess no special knowledge, although in his lectures he had made it obvious that he had read the European theorists—and probably in their native language.

A high point of geographers’ interest in Jackson came in the mid-1970s, when Donald W. Meinig put together a year-long series of “landscape lectures” at Syracuse University. Those lectures became the basis of Meinig’s *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes* (1979). As with all edited collections, the range of geographical contributors and their topics say as much about Meinig as they do about Jackson. None of the authors was a direct student of Jackson; each came from a different subfield of geography, but all found landscape a fitting and challenging subject. In 1990 the first conference on cultural landscape studies was cosponsored by the geography and landscape architecture departments at Berkeley. (Many of the talks are collected in Paul Groth and Todd Bressi, eds., *Understanding Ordinary Landscapes* [1997].) Almost 40 percent of the 300 people registered were from geography departments. In 1998 a similar number of people attended the New Mexico conference that launched this special issue of *Geographical Review*.

In retrospect, Jackson’s greatest work as a geographer was probably his bringing of geography to people in other disciplines. In both architecture and landscape architecture, his influence was quantitatively greater than it was in geography. It must also be admitted the geographers drawn to Jackson, and to whom he was drawn, were at the fringes, a small minority—not even the majority of cultural geographers, and even smaller numbers from other walks of geography. Jackson probably liked it that way. He mistrusted any intellectual passion, even his own ideas, that became too fashionable. This new collection of articles about landscape suggests that there is still a place in geography, perhaps at a nonfashionable but creative edge, for the ideas and perspectives of an independent, maverick, scholarly writer like John Brinckerhoff Jackson.

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