

BETWEEN “IN CAMP” AND “OUT OF BOUNDS”: NOTES ON THE HISTORY OF FIELDWORK IN AMERICAN GEOGRAPHY

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Geography’s recorded fieldwork tradition is as old as Odysseus and predated by much of prior humanity’s recounted and remembered knowledge of places and environments revealed through mobility and interaction with one’s surroundings. The origins of American geography’s fieldwork traditions are not so mythically precise nor deeply diffuse. Nevertheless, the subsequent history has been mythologized in places, while remaining largely uncollected or unevenly recollected.

As Felix Driver recently remarked, “It’s striking how rarely we have reflected on the place of field-work in our collective disciplinary imagination. . . . Surprisingly little attention has been paid to the specifically geographical dimensions of field-work or to its history with the discipline. . . . Field-work has generally not been treated as a subject worthy of historical inquiry in itself” (2000, 267). He points to recent work twinning gender and fieldwork as a partial exception, to which I would add the growing critical literature on fieldwork and colonialism. Both of these terrains offer ideal subjects for “externalist” histories, informed by critical cultural theory. Here, however, my objectives are more “internalist” and less theoretically directed. I offer some notes on, and notions of, topics and issues that a larger history of American geographical fieldwork might delve into and develop more fully. Slightly more elaborate than field jottings but less polished than a research article, these are more essays than a single essay. Like samples to be examined, they point to places where full-scale excavations might profitably be done, for either internalist or externalist ends.

FOREIGN PRECURSORS

Numerous explorers and travelers are claimed as precursors by American geography professionals, but no one figure directly inspired the beginnings of American geographers’ (ad)ventures involving outdoor observations and systematic data collection. If, and then when, this history is written, various nineteenth-century figures, native and non-native, will be recognized as having laid the foundation.

Alexander von Humboldt’s tropical American travels and fieldwork (1799–1804) surely count as a start. These helped direct America’s Enlightenment-republican vision toward national expansion and exploration. If not the “intellectual author” of the Lewis and Clark expedition—Thomas Jefferson clearly was—Humboldt became one of its godfathers after his 1804 visit to the United States. His stature grew over the next half-century, until mythically minded historians would see much of America’s antebellum exploration and early geographical fieldwork as directly at-

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