

A TRIBUTE TO DONALD MEINIG

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Donald Meinig's probing mind, clear prose, and sweeping geographical perspective have enlivened American historical and cultural geography for more than fifty years. His contributions to the discipline span many scales: His ideas on the evolution and meaning of landscape have enriched our regional appreciation for localities across North America; his geopolitical assessments of colonization, imperialism, and globalization still resonate today; and his continental-scale analysis of more than 500 years of North American historical geography marks a piece of scholarship and illustrates a point of view that has in fundamental ways influenced ideas both within and beyond the bounds of academic geography. As two of Don's former doctoral students, we are delighted to offer this special issue of the *Geographical Review* in recognition of Don's impact on the field. The contributors, including other former students, friends, and kindred geographical spirits, reflect both Don's depth and breadth, his insatiable curiosity about the world, and his fascination with the links between geography, history, culture, and landscape.

"A LIFE OF LEARNING"—THE MAKING OF A GEOGRAPHER

Don was born in 1924 and raised in the Palouse country of eastern Washington State. Indeed, a splendid autobiographical account of his life, entitled *A Life of Learning*, was published in 1992 as part of the Charles Homer Haskins Lecture Series at the University of Chicago. In that account Don recalls his early fascination with maps, railroads, and the unfolding global events of the 1930s. Those years revealed his geographical bent and prefigured a post-World War II decision to enroll in Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. Nourished by some fine professors—including Carroll Quigley and Ernst Feilchenfeld—but chastened by Washington, D.C.'s stifling political environment, Don decided to return west after Georgetown and enter graduate school in geography at the University of Washington. The Australian geographer Graham Lawton proved pivotal in guiding Don's graduate work in geography. With Lawton's encouragement, Don turned toward a reconnaissance of his own backyard. The product was a dissertation on the historical geography of the interior Pacific Northwest that resulted in the publication of *The Great Columbia Plain* (1968).

Don's long academic career began in 1950 with a position in a small geography department at the University of Utah. While along the Wasatch Front, Don and his wife, Lee, raised a family, and Don settled into a busy new career of teaching and research that even included a pioneering foray into television as the host of a locally broadcast lecture series in geography. In 1958 a Fulbright award took Don to the

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University of Adelaide, where he completed research on the historical geography of the South Australian wheat frontier. *On the Margins of the Good Earth* was published four years later.

New opportunities at Syracuse University prompted Don and his family to make the permanent move east in 1959. Settling into upstate New York, Don's work in historical geography continued to reflect western American interests, including pathbreaking regional studies on the Mormon culture region (1965), Texas (1969), and the Southwest (1971b), as well as three chapters on New York State's historical geography in a volume edited by John Thompson (Meinig 1966a, 1966b, 1966c). Don took the helm as chair of the Geography Department between 1968 and 1973 and assumed an active role in shaping the university's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs (becoming a Maxwell Professor of Geography in 1973). He also served as chair for more than twenty doctoral students during the Syracuse years, while teaching an array of popular graduate and undergraduate courses.

Don's pen was particularly productive between 1976 and 2004. He authored more than two dozen research articles and book chapters, served as editor for the enduring *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes* (1979), a rich collection of essays that became a classic in the field, and completed his sweeping four-volume interpretation of historical geography entitled *The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of History* (1986, 1993, 1998, 2004). During these years Don continued to receive special professional recognition, including the Charles P. Daly Medal from the American Geographical Society (1986), the Master Teacher Award from the National Council for Geographic Education (1986), and an appointment as Maxwell Research Professor of Geography at Syracuse University (1990). In 2005, as he retired from the academic world, Don also received from the Association of American Geographers both the John Brinckerhoff Jackson Award for the final volume of *The Shaping of America* series and the organization's highest honor, the Presidential Achievement Award. Even richer rewards have followed with time spent in Syracuse with family, friends, books, and the backyard garden.

ENDURING GEOGRAPHICAL THEMES

All of our authors, including longtime colleague Wilbur Zelinsky, offer their own views of Don's contribution to the field of geography and beyond. In addition, the Canadian historical geographer Graeme Wynn has written a splendid essay summarizing Don's role in the shaping of North American historical geography (2005). From our vantage point, several enduring contributions are particularly worthy of mention.

First, and most sweeping in scale, are Don's conceptualizations of global geopolitics and processes of imperial expansion. Don's interest in political geography, the spatial expression of imperial expansion and colonialism, and the larger connections between geopolitics and cultural history informed his work and his teaching from the earliest years of his career to its conclusion. Don's geopolitical ken, always steeped in history, illustrated wonderfully his belief that geography's appeal was its particular "point of view, a way of looking at things" (1992, 18).

Second, Don's many examples of regional historical geography established a standard of excellence that remains a scholarly model today. What were its key elements? Don combined wide reading, a careful use of archival documents, an evocative flair—including those memorable arrows!—for map design in order to display spatial processes, an ability to connect regional particulars with larger-scale settings and concerns, and a stellar prose style that proved both graceful and penetrating. Most important, Don always avoided the pitfall of privileging a narrow, parochial view in his regional encounters. His journeys to eastern Washington, South Australia, the Southwest, Texas, Mormon Country, and elsewhere were wide-ranging historical geographical studies of “ecology and strategy” as well as of regional structure and character, and they revealed a broad appreciation for how matters of environment, politics, culture, and economy intersected over time in particular places.

Third, Don's most palpable and singular contribution remains the four-volume *The Shaping of America* series, reflecting the culmination of decades of reading and research on the larger sweep of North American historical geography. In his review Wynn notes that these books are “one of modern geography's most substantial achievements,” one that “encourages all of us to think big and aim high” (2005, 610, 630). Many of the geographical themes Don explored in the project—particularly his emphases on spatial expansion, regional and national integration, the transformative role of technology, and the spatial expression of culture—grew from earlier work on the American West that was subsequently transferred to a continental stage (1972). Other aspects of the project—especially his focus on historical landscapes and social geographies—emerged more fully as he turned his attention to the larger effort in the late 1970s (1978). The project yielded rewards far beyond our disciplinary boundaries: The books were widely and favorably reviewed outside the field, including balanced assessments from such scholars as William Cronon (1986) and Alfred Crosby (1987–1988).

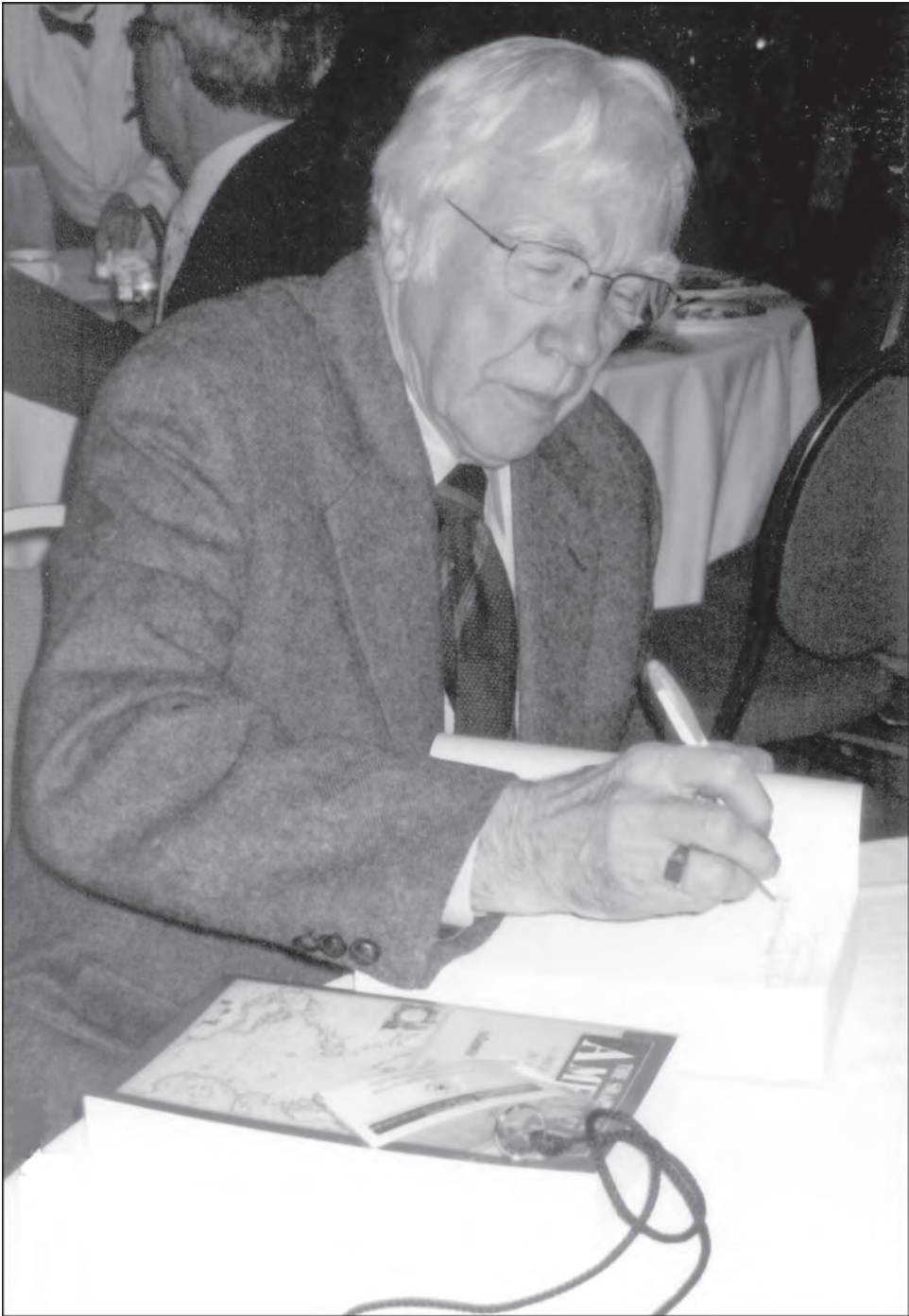
The genesis of the project may well have been two overseas teaching assignments in the early 1970s. In 1973 Don was asked to give a ten-lecture overview of American history and geography at the University of Saint Andrews in Scotland, followed by a similar lecture series at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He recalls that the assignment offered him an opportunity to ponder the sweep and scope of the larger story of North American settlement (1992, 11–12). During the 1980s Don's role as chief editorial consultant for the *National Geographic Magazine* offered added opportunities to work out some of the major regional details of the project. He designed dozens of maps in the magazine's “The Making of America” series that chronicled the historical geographical evolution of seventeen different North American regions. Each map was reproduced more than 10 million times and inserted into every monthly issue, thus representing what must surely be one of the discipline's greatest success stories in creating accessible historical geography.

Fourth, Don explored new ideas on the making and meaning of the American landscape. Most familiar to geographers is a collection of essays entitled *The Inter-*

pretation of Ordinary Landscapes, of which Don served as editor (1979b). The book was the culmination of an earlier lecture series at Syracuse University and included several essays by Don that offered enduring interpretations of the multiple meanings of landscape (“The Beholding Eye: Ten Versions of the Same Scene” [1979a]), the role that landscape has played in fashioning notions about American community (“Symbolic Landscapes: Models of American Community” [1979d]), and the very special contributions to the field made by W. G. Hoskins and J. B. Jackson (“Reading the Landscape: An Appreciation of W. G. Hoskins and J. B. Jackson” [1979c]). Don’s interest in landscape was fashioned from varied roots, including personal acquaintances with both Hoskins and Jackson, but it was no doubt leavened further with time spent in the field with Peirce Lewis and Wilbur Zelinsky. Don’s affinity for landscape also grew from an intimate early familiarity with its particulars, the gift of boyhood years spent watching train locomotives, working on the farm, and pondering the details of small-town architecture. His thoughtful musing on the constructed, many-sided meanings of the built environment, always written in clear, jargon-free prose, helped spark a generation of landscape studies that continue to assess the larger significance of the visible scene.

Fifth, and certainly related to his eye for landscape, was Don’s larger understanding of geography as a humanistic enterprise. Don consistently recognized the discipline’s long ties to the humanities, and he argued the case for those connections at many points in his career. In the early 1970s his published remarks on the blossoming environmental movement suggested that geographers could do a great deal to promote the notion of “localities as a humane art” by producing books and other educational materials that celebrated the history and particularity of ordinary American places (1971a). That call was repeated twelve years later, when Don appeared before the Institute of British Geographers in Edinburgh. He argued that geographers could serve as creative artists by producing “highly personal, deeply emotional works” that explored the special bonds between people and place (1983). Don’s many years of service on the New York State Council for the Humanities (1980–1986) echoed this commitment to a broader conception of the field. Ultimately his view was best reflected in his own highly original, accessible, and imaginative interpretations of cultural and historical geography.

Finally, we can acknowledge Don’s professional and personal presence within the discipline. As two former students, we saw Don in his daily routine in the midst of creating *The Shaping of America* series. We saw the important role he played in mentoring students and in enhancing and enriching the role of the geography program at Syracuse University. These were tiny snapshots of a much larger and longer commitment to the field that included important work within the Association of American Geographers, the American Geographical Society, the National Geographic Society, and many other professional associations both within and beyond the discipline. It also included quiet advice given to colleagues, thoughtful questions posed in seminars and at professional meetings, and friendly conversations across the dinner table or along the highway. Most important, Don’s commitment



Donald Meinig signs copies of *The Shaping of America* at the April 2005 meeting of the Association of American Geographers in Denver, Colorado. Although it may have been, as Don put it, “the ‘final’ action of his career,” his influence lives on. (Reproduced courtesy of the photographer, Unryu Saganuma)

to geography has always been an integral part of his broader “life of learning,” a journey that in a small way is reflected and celebrated in this special issue of the *Geographical Review*.

ENCOMIA

As Don Meinig’s students, we knew for many years that some day, in some way, we would be involved with a tribute to our gentlemanly mentor. In assembling the roster of contributors, we found no shortage of willing participants. We hoped to include former students along with a selection of colleagues from Syracuse University and from the wider field of historical geography. Undoubtedly, many others would have been willing and capable of adding magnificent essays to this collection. The final assemblage includes only a modest number that, we hope, reflects the range of influences Don has had on his peers and the profession.

Wilbur Zelinsky opens the special issue with a sketch of Don’s career, told in his singular manner. To highlight his teaching prowess, John Western compiles observations by undergraduate students, and Cynthia Miller offers insight from the perspective of a graduate student. Together, their commentaries underscore the importance of Don’s considerable talent as a teacher—something most of us haplessly emulate. He left an unquestionable impression on thousands of students between 1950 and his retirement from the classroom in 1989. Bruce Bigelow turns the tables and surveys the diverse set of scholars that Don acknowledged as influential to his thinking. Noting that Don was very much his own scholar, Bigelow exposes the subtle but long-lasting effects these writers had on him.

Several original scholarly essays touch on two key themes in Meinig’s work: landscape and geopolitics. These contributions emphasize the expansive scope of Meinig’s intellect—from the local scale of landscape to the global scale of international geopolitics. Paul Starrs opens this section and builds on Meinig’s classic work on the Mormon Culture Region (Meinig 1965). Starrs details deliberate attempts to create a systematic religious landscape through pattern-book meeting-houses and also illuminates the imperial intent of the church hierarchy. In effect, he hints at a process that strives toward a distinctive Mormon landscape that became less recognizable as it expanded geographically. Harvey Flad considers the creation of a fourth national symbolic landscape: wilderness. By tracing the attraction of the Arcadian wilderness of upstate New York and the literary, artistic, and landscape creations that flourished in this setting, he makes a compelling argument that the rustic scenery found in the Catskill and Adirondack mountains was just as important in the creation of a national identity as were the New England village, the Main Street town, and the California suburb (Meinig 1979b). Richard Schein offers a methodological framework for examining and interpreting landscapes. By focusing on the contrasting and highly racialized views of the Courthouse Square in Lexington, Kentucky, he takes inspiration from Don while prodding us to consider often neglected and sometimes painful elements of landscape history.

Peter Hugill reveals new dimensions of the United States' rise as a geopolitical competitor to Great Britain beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. Hugill's reassessment of economic and naval developments in the United States exposes a protracted hegemonic struggle. John Agnew revisits two Meinig themes that, he argues, are central to contemporary "critical geopolitics," once again underscoring the enduring impact of Don's scholarship.

Together these essays reveal Don Meinig's fundamental yet subtle influence. Never a strident proponent of a particular brand of geography, Don's literate prose penetrated many areas of the profession and kindred disciplines. Even his most impassioned plea for the "historical geography imperative" had no tinges of shrill advocacy (1989). It was through his devoted, persistent, and insightful prose that he reached the authors of these essays and the countless others who have responded to his writings.

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