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David Lowenthal on geography and its past

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ABSTRACT

Of the many hats David Lowenthal wore during his long life perhaps the most important was as a geographer. All his permanent academic positions were within institutions of geography. Undoubtedly, he could have moved to another discipline, but he remained a geographer. This paper aims to understand why geography was so alluring for him. It is divided into three parts. The first identifies four broad intellectual themes or interests that course through much of his substantive work: his polymathic inclinations; the centrality of history; the influence of the humanities; and a curiosity about the material environment and landscape. The second is about Lowenthal's conception of the discipline of geography and why despite being pulled towards other disciplinary concerns he stayed loyal, notwithstanding significant reservations. And the last is about how he understood the discipline's history which, while he rarely wrote about, he knew well, and partly explaining his more-or-less faithful attachment.

KEYWORDS

Carl Sauer; David Lowenthal; landscape; history; humanities; polymath

Introduction

Likely David Lowenthal would not have approved of this paper, its focus on a single discipline and its history, even though it is his discipline, geography. In an interview a year before he died, he told the archaeologist Hamilakis (2017, p. 2): 'I hate disciplines'.

As a student, Lowenthal had at best an on-off relationship with geography. He graduated with a B.S. degree in History from Harvard (1940–44).[1] When he studied there he didn't know that the Geography Department even existed—it was joined with Geology but closed four years after Lowenthal graduated (Smith, 1987). Serving in the US Army during the War, Lowenthal toyed with entering medicine once demobbed, But Jean Gottmann, the French geographer, and a distant family relation, instead persuaded him to go to graduate school at the Berkeley Geography Department to study under Carl Sauer (on Gottmann's extraordinary life, see Clout & Hall, 2003). The Berkeley MA was Lowenthal's only formal geography degree (1947–1949). His Ph.D. was completed at the History Department, the University of Wisconsin, Madison, supervised by Merle Curti. Defended in 1953, his thesis was a biography of the nineteenth-century polymath and embryonic environmentalist, the American Congressman, diplomat, farmer, linguist and educator, George Perkins Marsh (1801–1882). Marsh was at best only a 'kind-of' geographer, concerned with the relation between humans and their physical environment. He thought of himself as an amateur, but his interests and competencies were enormous. Lowenthal was also a 'kind-of' geographer. Like Marsh he was a polymath. And like Marsh he followed topical interests wherever they led, trampling over as many academic fences as were required: environmental psychology, urban design, architecture, history, political science, philosophy, environmental studies, heritage and museum studies.

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While Lowenthal's formal record of studying geography was spotty, his history of permanent academic appointments within the field was consistent and continuous: four years in the Geography Department at the then all-female-student Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, New York (1952–1956); 16 years as a Research Associate at the American Geographical Society (AGS), New York (1956–1972); and 14 years as Professor of Geography at University College London (UCL) (1972–1986). When his contract finished at UCL he took the title 'Emeritus Professor of Geography', using it throughout on his subsequent unstinting stream of publications over the following 33 years. In the last paragraph of the back-jacket blurb of his final publication, *Quest for the unity of knowledge* (2019), the proofs for which he was planning to correct the morning of his death, he continued to list himself as, 'Emeritus Professor of Geography'.

So, while recognising that Lowenthal was no pure-bred geographer and that he may well have preferred other disciplines, or at least students in other disciplines,[2] he maintained throughout his professional life a steadfast institutional allegiance to geography. Clear also from his large corpus of writing is that he had definite ideas about how the discipline of geography should be conceived and how its history should be interpreted. By interlacing Lowenthal's biographical details with ideas he formulated especially about history, the role of the humanities and the physical environment, the purpose of my paper is to set out his understanding of geography as a discipline and how its history should be understood. Neither of these concerns were central to Lowenthal's work. Occasionally he addressed them directly in his writings, but mostly he did so only indirectly. His views must be reconstructed from various asides, footnotes, off-hand remarks made when he was writing about something else, interviews, unpublished writings, forewords and afterwords.

The paper is divided into three substantive sections. The first is about the kind of intellectual that Lowenthal was: a polymath deeply interested in history, drawing on the perspective of the humanities, but also fundamentally interested in the physical environment and landscape. The second is on Lowenthal's conception of geography and why despite being pulled towards other disciplinary concerns he remained loyal to it, notwithstanding some significant reservations. And the last is on how he understood the discipline's history which, while he rarely wrote about, he knew deeply, and partly explaining his more-or-less faithful attachment.[3]

The talented professor Lowenthal

Marking David Lowenthal as an intellectual were his erudition and his omnivorous reading.[4] Shuttleworth and Olwig (2018, p. 8) called him 'a kind of modern Renaissance man' and Olwig (2019) 'a consummate scholar'. His catholic scholarly expertise ranged from soft humanities like art history to hard social sciences like psychology. At an Oration (Oration, 2008) at the Memorial University of Newfoundland Lowenthal was alliteratively dubbed the 'most protean of professors'. His restless intellect that as Watt (2019, p. 2) put it, could 'quot[e] a Roman philosopher in one breath and discuss skateboarders or some recent film in the next'. His impeccable memory. His ability to vacuum up large chunks of disparate detailed knowledge from the most scattered sources—the Bible, the London *Times*' letters page, an Alan Jay Lerner song, a line from the movie, *The Great Escape*—and organise and deploy them brilliantly. His insatiable inquisitiveness. His disciplined work ethic—he neither watched television nor listened to recorded music. His originality, refusing always 'to be boxed in by narrow disciplinary boundaries' (Olwig, 2019, p. 112). His wry and witty stories. His remarkable 'talent [as a] writer, endowed with an extraordinary lexical precision', and an avowed enemy of 'useless verbosity and damaging imprecision' (Muscarà, 2019, p. 107). A polymath.

His intellectual restlessness began early. Growing up in New York City, Lowenthal attended two experimental schools: the Walden School, and later the Lincoln School of Teachers' College, Columbia University (inspired by the pedagogical theories of John Dewey). Both afforded unconventional, student-directed, non-disciplinary-based curricula. Perhaps as a result, when Lowenthal started at Harvard he said, 'I didn't really like most of the formal curriculum … I didn't want to specialise in anything. I simply became fascinated by all kinds of things' (Hamilakis, 2017, p. 2). That

included 'work on Irish language and literature', history, courses in geology (in the same building as geography, not that Lowenthal noticed!), and assisting the director of the university's meteorological institute, Charles F. Brookes (Hamilakis, 2017, p. 2).

Drafted into the Army in 1943, his interests and expertise necessarily became more constrained, but it did not arrest his continuing education. His facility in foreign languages improved. In late September 1944, after his Infantry Division landed in Cherbourg, France, one of his duties was teaching conversational French to American troops. Further, because he had taken enhanced, that is, compressed and sped-up, language instruction in German during his infantry training, he was also assigned to interrogate young, often terrified, sometimes wounded, German prisoners captured by American forward patrols.[5] In December 1944, his education took another turn when he was transferred from the infantry to military intelligence (unbeknown to Lowenthal, engineered by Jean Gottmann). Joining the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), he was assigned to the Intelligence Photographic Documentation Project (IPDP), 'a grand and never completed mission to survey and catalogue the whole of western Europe's terrain and built environment' in preparation for any future military conflict (D. Lowenthal, 2018, p. 2). Travelling often by jeep, he received on-the-job training in landscape interpretation, terrain analysis, field survey techniques, architectural history, photography, air photo interpretation, and geographical report writing (D. Lowenthal, 2018, p. 2). He later said that experience was 'formative and hugely important. Through military intelligence work I became a geographer' (Hamilakis, 2017, p. 2)

Discharged from the military in 1946, the next year Lowenthal entered the Geography graduate programme at Berkeley where he completed a Masters degree, writing a thesis on the 'Historical geography of Guiana' (D. Lowenthal, 1950). It was a programme made for him, designed to expose students to maximum intellectual breadth. Its architect was Sauer, who, like Lowenthal, was deeply suspicious of disciplines, acutely worried by academic Balkanisation. In his Foreword to Sauer's biography, Lowenthal (2014a, p.vii, p.ix) reflected on the range of training given to Berkeley geography graduate students:

> Uniquely among American geography departments at the time, Berkeley embraced both scientific and humanistic insights …. Sauer took all knowledge as his province, and he propelled his students into every imaginable realm of thought and terrain. To broaden our intellectual horizons was the first imperative. 'Oh, Lowenthal, I see you did history; you'd better get some understanding of soils and plants and animals.' So I was shoved into Hans Jenny's marvelous soil science course, and into another on the ecology of flora and fauna. Similarly, students whose background was in natural science would be pitchforked into anthropology and history. … In so doing, Sauerians uniquely brought to bear insights from anthropology and history, geology and soil science, and agriculture and architecture, thereby promoting collaborative inquiry among scholars and sojourners of every stripe.

It was the polymathic Sauer who suggested Lowenthal make his doctoral thesis about the 19th century polymath, George Perkins Marsh. This speaks to the first of the general characteristics that stamped Lowenthal as an intellectual. He wanted to know everything, to be a polymath like Sauer and Marsh. All Lowenthal's major pieces of writing, and many of the minor ones too, brought his enormously wide-ranging, deep, transdisciplinary capacious knowledge to whatever problem preoccupied him. Lowenthal's formative 1961 paper, 'Geography, experience, and imagination: Towards a geographical epistemology' was a perfect illustration. It convened in 20 thickly laden pages, including 94 often longish footnotes, anthropology, linguistics, analytical philosophy, urban planning, perceptual psychology, theories of art, historiography, assorted literati from Henry James to William Blake, physical and human geography, and much more. It should not have worked. But it worked dazzlingly well. Despite its dizzying range of sources, it was poised and integrated. But it was also propulsive, producing a new approach to geography, environmental perception or behavioural geography, which continues 60 years later.

Lowenthal's doctoral thesis was completed at the History Department, University of Wisconsin, Madison. Originally, he intended to enter Geography, but for reasons unknown he changed his mind and instead went into History.[6] His decision, though, was emblematic of his subsequent lifetime

emphasis on, and commitment to, history, a second general characteristic of Lowenthal's work. Of course, that historical sensibility was present in his biography of Marsh, found throughout his varied studies of landscape, and central to his work on conservation and heritage. He believed we had no choice. History was inescapable. As Lowenthal (2000a, p. 73) put it: 'History is never dead, not even sleeping, at worst napping. We can never entirely let go of the ongoing past, for it never lets go of us. Historical involvement is not only essential but inevitable'. And this holds not only for studying human worlds but non-human ones too. By the end of his life Lowenthal (2019, p. 32) realised that 'more and more of nature—plants, animals, continents, planets, stars, galaxies—gets historicized. The episodic flows and frictions of the earth's crust are as contingent as—though slower moving than—the migratory flows and frictions of human history: there are no reliable precursors and nothing ever precisely repeats'.

Not that doing history is easy. 'To fathom history demands sustained effort' Lowenthal (2000a, p. 64) affirmed. Nor will studying history provide iron-clad answers. In a short memoir, he says that what he learned from being a doctoral student at Wisconsin's History Department, especially from the historiographer, William Best Hesseltine, was the 'frailty of historical truth' (Lowenthal, 2013a).

> It is salutary to be reminded that we are perforce fallible not only epistemically but also personally, subjugated not only to our slippery subject matter but to our slippery selves. To the genre's own insuperable limitations–data that are always selective and never complete; the unbridgeable gulf between actual pasts and any accounts of them; bias stemming from temporal distance, from hindsight, and from narrative needs–we must add, and keep in mind, human frailty. Hence we rightly accede to perpetual revision of our work. Continual correction is mandatory … because we … never wholly live up to the demanding tenets of our trade. (Lowenthal, 2013a, p. 26)

Third, although there were one or two wobbles along the way, Lowenthal conceived his larger intellectual project within the tradition of the humanities rather than within social science. Admittedly during the mid-to-late 1960s there were moments when he seemingly pursued a social scientific form of environmental perception and behavioural geography with terms like 'analysis' and 'research hypotheses' appearing in his published titles (Lowenthal, 1967, 1968). That did not last, however. Denis Cosgrove (2011) in an edited volume about *Geography and the humanities*, in which Lowenthal (2011) also contributed, outlined some of the primary characteristics of humanities scholarship: the use of 'hermeneutic, interpretative methods … [that] work through cycles of commentary and criticism rather than the establishment of theory and law' (p. xxii); the employment of 'the discursive footnote or endnote rather than the author citation system … [and] reflecting "conversation" rather than progressive and cumulative advance of knowledge, … foreground[ing] the active role of the author in the construction of knowledge and understanding' (p.xxii); a recognition that 'learning is lifelong and becomes a signature of "authority" in the broadest sense of legitimacy to adjudicate and exercise power' (p. xxiii); and writing that is 'individualistic, reflective and pedagogical …, distinct from the collectivist, interventionist and scientific research concerns of Social Science' (p.xxv).

Lowenthal met all Cosgrove's benchmarks of the humanities scholar. He was suspicious of timeless laws even in the natural world. As Lowenthal (2014b, p. 183) wrote, 'laws of nature once thought eternal and universal turn out to be time-bound [and] contingent'. And he had no truck with the idea that laws are found in the social world, believing such an assertion reflected only 'ahistorical scientistic assumptions of social scientists … ignorant of the fundamentals of natural science' (Lowenthal, 2014a, p.viii). He was an inveterate writer of footnotes (over 3,000 in *The past as a foreign country—revisited*). He was acutely aware even as a graduate student of his own role 185 through source selection and personal bias in shaping the history he wrote (Lowenthal, 2015a). His almost 70-year career as a publishing academic certainly suggests a belief that 'learning islifelong'. And although he occasionally collaborated with co-authors his principal works were hisalone, meditative not prescriptive, never merely another incremental piece of Kuhnian normal socialscience research. As his friend Powell (1994, p. 212) summed up: Lowenthal's 'grounding in the 190 humanities provided the invisible sinew of . . . [his] robust writings'.

Finally, while Lowenthal was imbedded within the humanities, that didn't mean he ignored science or the physical environment or material landscapes, natural and human-made. They were often at the very heart of what he did, albeit from the perspective of the humanities and especially history. Cosgrove (2011), in fact, suggested that the physical landscape is some of the most fecund source material for the humanities. It embodies 'one of the richest records of human achievement that we possess' (Cosgrove, 2011, p.xxiii). To reap those riches usually requires scientific knowledge and technical training. Lowenthal had both. As already noted, at Harvard he studied geology and meteorology and as an OSS field officer interpreting Western European landscapes, he learned a raft of scientific and technical skills that he joined with the interpretive and historical dispositions of the humanities.

Material environments and landscapes were key motifs of Lowenthal's subsequent scholarship. They were there in his MA research at Berkeley that examined how Dutch, French and British imperial regimes shaped their respective material colonial landscapes in the three Guianas (Lowenthal, 1950). They also defined his 1953 doctoral dissertation (revised for publication in Lowenthal, 1958 then further revamped in 2000) on George Perkins Marsh. The thesis focussed especially on Marsh's *Man and nature* (1965), a book written radically against the current of 19th century American attitudes to the environment, highlighting the damage and destruction humans wrought on nature. Previously, 'the conventional Western wisdom [was] that human influence was benign or negligible' (Lowenthal, 2000b, p. 294). Lowenthal's biography, followed by his definitively edited version of Marsh's *Man and nature* (Marsh, 1965, 2003), demonstrated Marsh as one of America's earliest and keenest environmentalists. In turn, publicising Marsh, who by the 1950s was 'relatively forgotten', became from the mid-1960s an important contribution to the revitalisation of the American conservation movement (Lowenthal, 2013b, p. 409). Along with the publication of Rachel Carson's (1962) *Silent spring* and the rediscovery of Aldo Leopold's (1949) *A Sand County almanac*, Lowenthal's works on Marsh 'spurred the environmental crusade [that] launched in 1970 … Earth Day' (Lowenthal, 2000b, p. xv; see also Cronon, 2000, who recognises Lowenthal's role in renewing American environmentalism).

The larger point is that to describe Lowenthal as a humanities scholar is not to typecast him as somehow anti-science (consigning him to only one half of C. P. Snow's 'Two Cultures'; Lowenthal, 2019, pp. 6–8). He was a polymath in the tradition of his two intellectual mentors, Sauer and Marsh, with science always part of his intellectual bailiwick. Neither is it to contend that for the same reason he could never be interested in an inanimate physical environment. For him, the physical environment was not inanimate. It heaved with life, with human endeavour, grist for his considerable mill.

Undoubtedly, there were also other characteristics important to Lowenthal. My suggestion, though, is that the four I discussed most help us to understand why Lowenthal remained a geographer and to which I now turn.

David Lowenthal on geography

Given Lowenthal could have been successful in many disciplines, indeed, was successful in many disciplines as a teacher, author and catalyst, why did he remain committed institutionally to geography?[7]

One reason was that geography as a discipline had no essential definition. Of course, some geographers tried to impose one such as Hartshorne (1939) (endnote, p. 7). But none permanently stuck. In this sense, geography was a kind of anti-discipline; a discipline that did not discipline. Given Lowenthal's general loathing of disciplines, geography therefore was perhaps the only discipline that he could join. Groucho Marx joked that he could never join any club that would have him as a member. Geography was a non-club, welcoming non-members. In his Foreword to Sauer's biography, Lowenthal (2014a, pp.viii–ix) writes about his relief in finding that such a (non-)discipline existed:

> Like many other youngsters in the aftermath of the Second World War who had never studied geography before, I was intrigued by the eclectic and innovative work, ranging from the history of plant and animal domestication to the environmental and ecological attitudes of societies past and present the world over, carried on at Berkeley under Sauer's aegis.

Geography, as Lowenthal (2014a, p.ix) continued, was 'a bridging perspective rather than a field with some core terrain uniquely its own'. It allowed its practitioners to pursue knowledge wherever it led, 'giving them leeway to follow their own bent' (D. Lowenthal, 2014b, p. 183). This made geography different from other disciplines that confined and restricted, that defined themselves precisely by claiming a core terrain: the economy for economics, society for sociology, culture for anthropology. Moreover, unlike these other disciplines, geography did not privilege a core method either; there was nothing equivalent to the fixation on mathematical modelling in economics; or *sine qua non* training in statistical methods in sociology; or the obligation to use ethnographic methods in anthropology. As D. Lowenthal (1961, pp. 241–242) wrote:

> whatever methodologists think geography ought to be, the temperament of its practitioners makes it catholic and many-sided. In their range of interests and capacities–concrete and abstract, academic and practical, analytic and synthetic, indoor and outdoor, historical and contemporary, physical and social–geographers reflect man generally. 'This treating of cabbages and kings, cathedrals and linguistics, trade in oil, or commerce in ideas,' as Peattie wrote, 'makes a congress of geographers more or less a Committee on the Universe'.

To say geography has no essential core does not imply amoeba-like formlessness. As Lowenthal (2000a; 2019, ch.6) acutely realised, history always matters. Faulkner (1951, p. 73) said, 'the past is not dead, it is not even past'. One of the pasts of geography not dead is its tradition of humanism. It was there from the start of institutionalised academic geography in the work of the German geographer Alexander von Humboldt and his compendious volumes of *Cosmos—A sketch of a physical description of the universe* (1845–1862) (it was one of the books that Lowenthal raised his hand to indicate he had read; endnote 4). Humanism never defined the discipline, never imbued it with an essential core, but it endured as one of the intellectual traditions on which geographers could avail themselves, waxing and waning in importance. Admittedly now a minority pursuit, it is most associated with those working within historical and cultural geography (Daniels et al., 2011). David Livingstone (1994) argues that Lowenthal first aligned himself with humanism in his 1961 paper 'Geography, experience and imagination'. There:

> Lowenthal may be read as representing and advancing a minority tradition within the geographical enterprise—a humanist (or, perhaps better, humane) tradition the work of whose precursors are, I would judge, less visible today than they might be. It is in the lineage of figures like J.K. Wright (whose very words provided the jumping-off point for Lowenthal's project), Eva Taylor, Clarence Glacken, Paul Wheatley and Yi-Fu Tuan that Lowenthal is geographically domiciled (Livingstone, 1994, pp. 209-210).

J. K. Wright especially was a critical influence. A long-time employee of the American Geographical Society (1920–1956), beginning as a librarian and ending as Director, Wright was a mentor to Lowenthal after he began working there. Like his other mentor, Sauer, Wright was also a polymath, cleaving to the scholarly tradition of the humanities (Lowenthal, 1969a; Lowenthal & Bowden, 1975).

That Lowenthal (1992a, 1992b) thought the maintenance of geography's humanities tradition was important was clear in an ill-tempered debate he had with Andrew Bodman (1992) and Jeremy Whitehand (1992) around citation analysis within the discipline. He believed that both Bodman's (1992) and Whitehand's (1992) calculations of citations incorrectly 'assess[ed] human geography as a solely scientific enterprise, and not likewise an art and a humanity' (Lowenthal, 1992a, p. 158). Lowenthal (1992a) recalculated the citations, and claimed that his favourite humanists in geography like Sauer, Tuan, Glacken and Wright all raised their rankings. Geography as a humanity seemingly was still a going concern. Unfortunately, Lowenthal miscalculated as Bodman and especially Whitehand gleefully demonstrated. The humanities really were a minority pursuit. But even on Whitehand's and Bodman's calculations it was a pursuit carried out by some of America's most

renowned human geographers—Sauer, Tuan, and of course Lowenthal—even though they were not, to use Whitehand's and Bodman's respective lexicon, 'centurions' or 'master weavers'.

From Lowenthal's perspective a third strength of geography was its enduring interest in landscape. The term, as Olwig (2019, p. 16) argues, originated in medieval Europe denoting 'polity and places that ideally form a nexus of community, justice, nature and environment'. Re-conceived during the European Enlightenment, it was given a scenic or visual connotation—that part of the world seen by the naked eye. During the nineteenth century, it was incorporated within German academic geography as *Landschaft* (Hartshorne, 1939, p. 149), later diffusing elsewhere including to early geographers in the United States. Famously, it was developed by Sauer (1925) in his 'Morphology of landscape'. He meant by it how culture worked with and on the natural landscape to create distinct geographical forms of life including associated material cultures.

It is unknown if Lowenthal used the term landscape analytically before he arrived at Berkeley to work with Sauer. But as already noted, his work at OSS on the IPDP would have given him a keen sense of what landscape meant in practice and its methods of interpretation. Becoming a student of Sauer's would have only amplified the significance of landscape for him. In so much of his subsequent research, landscape became the tie that bound his work. As Shuttleworth and Olwig (2018, p. 9) wrote in their memorial, in all Lowenthal's various 'areas of study … landscape was the common denominator. These ranged from heritage studies, Caribbean Studies and island studies, to landscape perception and the history of environmental conservation'.

In a 1990 paper provocatively titled, 'Historic landscapes: Indispensable hub, interdisciplinary orphan', Lowenthal (1990) reflected on the larger significance of landscape as an idea. It was a perfect foil for his intellectual inclinations. 'Landscape' for him 'includes everything around us … both natural and manmade' (Lowenthal, 1990, p. 27). Understanding therefore requires that one 'must command an awesome sweep of subjects: art, architecture, engineering, sociology, politics—perhaps alchemy and magic as well' (Lowenthal, 1990, p. 27). In short, landscape was made for Lowenthal. At the same time, there is no 'unified perspective' on landscape, no essential definition, no single method (Lowenthal, 1990, p. 27). You follow the clues often from field observation, going where ever they lead, flattening disciplinary fences if necessary. While there is no definitive definition, 'all landscapes are historic' In fact, they are 'trebly historic' (Lowenthal, 1990, p. 27). They are initially shaped by those who create them at a given historical moment; they are later described by others using historical images; and then those images are deployed to reshape future landscapes 'like those Arcadian parks modelled on the paintings of Claude and Poussin' (Lowenthal, 1990, p. 27). Landscapes drip with human meaning, both 'in our lives [a]nd in our hearts' (Lowenthal, 1990, p. 29).

While Lowenthal thought geography had much to offer, he felt it needed always to be on guard against forces undermining it. Early on he believed that would come from Cold War American social science bent on promoting a button-down professionalisation, foisting single methods and epistemologies, fatally narrowing the discipline, and sacrificing reflection and thinking for knee-jerk immediate social action. Lowenthal (1994, p. 213) later said that his classic 1961 paper was a 'reaction to the occult positivism' that Cold War social science had fashioned within human geography in the form of 'spatial science'. Also called geography's 'quantitative revolution', that movement, according to Lowenthal (1994, p. 213), had 'made the laws of physics a spatial religion enshrined in mathematical mystique'.[8] It substituted a thin gruel of mathematical equations and serried numerical data for the rich array of phenomena that historically had been standard fare for geography. In contrast, his paper was deliberately constructed to show the intellectual voluminosity of the discipline, illustrating the teeming and multiplicitous ways humans conceived and represented geography.

More recently, Lowenthal was concerned with potentially pernicious effects originating from within the humanities themselves; that is, their turn in some quarters to various kinds of post-prefixed theory: post-structuralism, post-modernism, and post-colonialism. Sometime during the 1990s, post-prefixed theory entered human geography producing for Lowenthal two troubling effects. The first was the prose: 'jargon-laden limbo, … crammed with esoteric mystique that passed for profundity, … remote from lay comprehension' (Lowenthal, 2019, p. 21). The second,

and more serious, post-prefixed theory brought with it epistemological relativism, the notion that 'all knowledge is in doubt' because it is 'socially constructed' (Lowenthal, 2019, p. 21). Here Lowenthal tried to walk a thin line. Ever since his 1961 paper, he recognised that geographical knowledge was contextually situated, never universal. While at the same time he was loathe to accept that all facts are made up, with one fact as good or as bad as any other. Rather, for Lowenthal some facts are truer than others. They may not be the absolute truth, but they are not deliberate lies either (Edwards & Wilson, 2014, p. 113). While all facts might be equal, he believed some facts are more equal than others. His distinction has been particularly controversial in heritage studies, however, a discipline that he helped to found. Those who work under the post-structural influenced 'critical heritage studies' argue that the contrast he tries to draw between the always falseness of heritage and the true facts of history cannot be sustained (Edwards & Wilson, 2014, p.113; Gentry & Smith, 2019).

David Lowenthal on geography's past

Compared to other topics he pursued, Lowenthal wrote far less about the history of geography. He made contributions, though, albeit often mixed in with works seemingly about other subjects. Moreover, those contributions were used strategically: first, to exemplify and to provide justification for the kind of discipline he wanted geography to be; and second, to show-off the lives and practices of specific geographers who inspired him, who were models of the kind of geographer he wanted to emulate and to populate the field.[9]

His doctoral thesis on Marsh, and the two later published versions (Lowenthal 1958; 2000b), fulfilled both ends. The dissertation had other purposes, of course, particularly meeting an environmentalist agenda. But he used the biography also to set out both the kind of geography to which he hoped the discipline would conform and its justification. The idea for the thesis came from Sauer's 1941 Association of American Geographer Presidential speech. There, as Olwig (2003, p. 871) writes, 'Sauer suggested that an ideal way of educating oneself as a geographer was to make a "full-length biographical inquiry"' into a historical figure such as Marsh.

For Lowenthal (1960, p. 413), Marsh's *Man and nature* was 'the most important American geographical work of the nineteenth century'. It offered a disciplinary template by emphasising fine-grained field observation, synthesis, a focus on the interaction between humans and their material environment, a lack of 'forbidding nomenclature', a bridge to 'various branches of material research', 'a lucid method and exposition', and 'popularization' given its 'practical importance' (Lowenthal, 1960, pp. 413–415). Lowenthal compared *Man and nature* to works by Charles Darwin and Karl Marx: As 'Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* transformed notions of natural change; Marx's *Kapital* showed new light on economic and social change; Marsh's *Man and Nature* exposed their profound and menacing interactions' (Lowenthal, 2015b, p. 227). Lowenthal further suggested Marsh's volume was so successful because he stood on the shoulders of giants, especially von Humboldt's, whose *Cosmos* said Marsh bequeathed to geography 'an organic form and a human interest … at once a poetry and a philosophy' (Marsh as cited in Lowenthal, 1953, p. 212). The discipline couldn't go wrong.

And then there was Marsh himself. For Lowenthal he was the embodiment of the ideal geographer, a prototype. Lowenthal said in the Preface to his 2000 revised edition, 'I relished to become re-immersed in [Marsh's] manifold concerns' (Lowenthal, 2000b, p. xvi). He was 'the broadest scholar of his day', a 'polymath' who believed '"an encyclopaedic training" was needed by all' (Lowenthal, 2000b, p.xv, p. xvi, p. 400). But he was also an amateur, not disciplined by any discipline, enabling him effortlessly 'to breach … the walls between academic disciplines' (Lowenthal, 2000b, p. 448). Further, he crossed the 'boundaries that segregated academe from active life', becoming a public intellectual, 'not only observing the world but trying to change it' (Lowenthal, 2000b, p. 448). Marsh was a model for Lowenthal.

Lowenthal also participated in writing the biography of Sauer. In this case, though, the main text was completed by the Oxford geographer, Michael Williams. Williams died before the manuscript, essentially completed, was submitted to the publisher. So, Lowenthal along with William Denevan

from the University of Wisconsin finalised the text, with Lowenthal (2014a & b) contributing a Foreword and Afterword. Each of those pieces, although only a few pages long, made the case both for Sauerian geography writ large—historical, intellectually expansive, field-based, landscape-focused, environmental—and for Sauer as an exemplary geographer.

Lowenthal's other main contribution to the history of geography was critical, aimed mainly at the post-war period and the rise of social science and professionalisation. He thought neither movements served the discipline well. That critique was found implicitly in the 1961 paper, in his dyspeptic exchange with Bodman and Whitehand, and in parts of the first chapter of *Quest for the unity of knowledge*, which is withering about the mathematisation of post-War social sciences including in geography (Lowenthal, 2019, pp. 16–19). The same themes were also in Lowenthal's (2005) essay on the relation between the Association of the American Geographers (AAG)—the professional academic association founded in 1904—and the American Geographical Association (AGS)—started for amateurs and the lay-public in 1851. Ironically perhaps, Lowenthal was hired in 1956 as an AGS Research Associate because it had received a large gob of Cold War money from the Ford Foundation. And a double irony, the same money was also used by the AGS to hire geography's most devoted mathematiser and ardent cheerleader of physics in human geography, William Warntz (Barnes & Farish, 2006).

Lowenthal (2005) contended that the AAG generally, but not always, sought a narrow, turf-defended definition of geography, one in line with other social sciences. Further, it sought to define the discipline by exclusive subject matter and techniques that were the preserve of a small group of professional experts. In contrast, Directors of the AGS from the 'the entrepreneurial Isaiah Bowman' to 'the imaginative John K. Wright' eschewed any narrow, definitive definition of the field (Lowenthal, 2005, p. 470). Wright especially, according to Lowenthal (2005, p. 470), was not concerned with geography's 'metes and bounds', believing that its most creative work occurred in 'the dynamic peripheries of geography' rather than 'its static core'. Further, for Wright geography was never the preserve of only professionals but practised by everyone including in his famous phrase, 'farmers and fishermen, novelists and painters, Bedouins and Hottentots' (Wright, 1947, p. 12).

Lowenthal believed early geography with its open definition allowed polymaths like Humboldt, Marsh and Sauer their own space, charging the discipline with energy and vitality. That was still there, he thought, but post-War the discipline had become increasingly constrained because of an overweening professionalisation joined with the often-stultifying question, 'Is it geography?' Summarising his life-long position borne from his own contributions to the history of geography, Lowenthal (2005, p. 471) wrote:

> Geography has suffered more than most branches of learning by being ossified as an academic discipline, because the disciplinary straitjacket suits it least. Our eclectic range of subject matter, our melange of training, our potpourri of subdisciplines allied with other fields belie claims for any integrated realm of concern, short of the world as a whole.

Consequently, to assure geography's future we must go back to its past.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to use Lowenthal's relation to the discipline of geography to reflect on his wider intellectual sensibility and inclinations. The focus on geography meant that there was little or no discussion of many of his substantive interests such as heritage and conservation, or islands, or landscape evaluation, or landscape tastes. Some of those topics are covered by other papers in this special issue. Even so, given Lowenthal's prodigality over roughly seventy years of academic publishing only a fraction of what he wrote can be covered even in a special journal issue. It seemed he couldn't help himself. He couldn't not write, write about a multitude of subjects, and write until literally the end.

I've suggested that partly what enabled him, gave him freedom and elbow room, was that he was a geographer. As a discipline, it never exerted special demands on him, tied his hands. Rather, it

encouraged him to be wayward. It allowed him to follow his interests wherever they led. It permitted him to remain that Harvard undergraduate, 'fascinated by all kinds of things'.

Fatefully, it was David Lowenthal who interviewed me as a prospective undergraduate for my own university admission at University College London in early 1975. I remember going to his top-floor office in the Geography Building at Foster Court on an unusually bright London winter afternoon. He was the first Professor I ever met in my life. I didn't know what to expect. He had closed all the venetian blinds on his windows, with no overhead lighting. There was a small reading lamp on his desk, throwing an intense beam of light revealing a pile stacked-to-tipping-point of books, papers, and boxes of slides. He jumped straight in. 'What's your interest?', he asked. I said, 'everything'. 'Me as well', he said. I knew then I had come to the right place, and as I've suggested, Lowenthal knew that was true for him too.

Notes

1. While Lowenthal officially graduated from Harvard in 1944, he managed to complete all his degree course work including an undergraduate thesis in only three years, finishing in May 1943. Within a week of completion be went from Harvard Yard to 'hot, dry, dusty Camp Phillips, Kansas'. There he began training for the US military initially serving as a rifleman in General Omar Bradley's First Army deployed in Northern France (Lowenthal, 2018, p. 1).
2. In the interview with Hamilakis (2017, p. 5) Lowenthal said that when he taught at UCL his 'best students' were architects and planners 'because they really wanted to know and were articulate, much more articulate than the geographers'. I was one of those inarticulate geographers. As a UCL third-year undergraduate I took his Environmental Perception course he co-taught with Jacquelin Burgess, 1977–78.
3. As an illustration of Lowenthal's command of the literature on the history of geography I remember as a third-year student sneaking into a UCL Department of Geography colloquium normally reserved for staff and post-graduate students. The speaker that day went down a long list of 'classic' works in the history of geography that began with Humboldt's *Cosmos* and Ritter's *Die Erdkunde* asking who had read them. Lowenthal, albeit sometimes sheepishly, raised his hand for every title.
4. According to Kenneth Olwig, Lowenthal 'read all the time. When flying he would sit on the aisle and he would carry with him a bag of books that he would read one after the next—no chit-chat, movies or anything', email to Trevor Barnes from Kenneth Olwig, 3 May 2020.
5. Lowenthal (2018, p. 2) in a memoir written shortly before he died admitted that he was still troubled by events from that period: 'Twice I promised dying boys … I would send word back to their families … although I knew I could not. Those young lives ebbing away for some remote insane cause haunt me to this day.'
6. That Lowenthal intended to attend the Geography Department in Wisconsin was odd given that its most well-known faculty member was Richard Hartshorne (1939), author of the revered *The Nature of Geography* that sought to define, justify and preserve geography as a separate and distinct discipline. Sauer fundamentally disapproved. It ran against the grain of his polymathic instinct that no knowledge was off limit. Sauer would not have recommended Lowenthal study with Hartshorne who he criticised, mocked but mostly ignored (Hartshorne reciprocated).
7. Throughout his career Lowenthal taught invited courses in a long list of different academic departments including history, philosophy, architecture, landscape design, political science, environmental psychology, and heritage studies. He published in a wide range of disciplinary journals including history, archaeology, anthropology, economics, politics, business, forestry, heritage and conservation, and architecture. And when he was interviewed for publication it was by non-geographers—a museum curator, lecturers in a business school, an archaeologist, and a forest historian.
8. It was not only geographers who were beguiled by physics. D. Lowenthal (2019, p. 17) later recognised that during the immediate post-War period 'prestige and promised certainty led all social scientists to adopt the terms and trappings of physics. The American Psychological Society became the American Association for Psychological Science, political philosophy got renamed political science, geographers fancied "spatial science". Scholarly survival depended on seeming scientific. National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation grants required social scientists to shift from qualitative to quantitative and statistical analysis'.
9. An exception was his very brief biography of the larger-than-life early American geographer Ephraim Ketchall, a seeming parody of later modern quantitative geographers (Lowenthal, 1969b). Ketchall reputedly proposed to measure 'the aggregate weights and volumes' of edifices across the globe as an index of 'the relative advancement and significance of the world's nations' (D. Lowenthal, 1969b, p. 6)..

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