



Roger Kain

On the history of maps, and mapping the future of the British Academy

Roger Kain is Professor of Humanities at the School of Advanced Study, University of London. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1990, and has been the Academy's Vice-President (Research and Higher Education Policy) since 2014.

Was there anything in your background which would have indicated an interest in geography, and specifically in maps?

I was brought up in Harrow, in north-west London, just on the edge of the greenbelt, and so not far from my house were open woods and fields. One big passion was coarse fishing, and my mates and I used to go off on our bikes to the south-west Hertfordshire canals, lakes and especially to the rivers coming off the Chiltern Hills. So I became interested, probably subliminally, in landscape. At my grammar school in Harrow Weald, I had an inspirational geography teacher, and what really interested me was how geography seemed to explain the form of the rivers, valleys and hills that I liked to spend a lot of time in.

When I read geography at University College London, I had another inspirational teacher, Hugh Prince, who taught a course on English historical geography – all about the way the human landscape had evolved. That opened my eyes to a whole new dimension, and from

being an ardent science geographer, I switched almost overnight to become a human and especially historical geographer.

A major focus of your research was on tithe surveys. Can you explain what that is about?

For my doctorate, I decided that I wanted to do something on computing and historical geography. In the 1970s, a lot of work was being done on computer applications in humanities and social sciences research. This involved huge mainframes that occupied a whole building, yet had far less processing power than a modern smartphone. You used trays of cardboard punch-cards, and the programs ran overnight.

I cast around for a set of source materials which could answer questions impossible using manual methods. I turned to the tithe surveys of the mid-19th century – a series of maps produced on a parish basis for about three-quarters of England and Wales. Tithes were the

notional tenth of a farmer's produce that went to support the established Church of England. In 1836 an Act of Parliament commuted these tithes for a money payment. An army of surveyors was sent out into the parishes of England and Wales to find out what tithe was payable, where it was due, and what was a fair produce of the land. The whole survey was done between 1836 and about 1855. It produced highly detailed maps, showing every field – a fabulous set of data for me as a historical geographer to use. It could tell you who owned the land, who farmed the land, whether it was arable, pasture or woodland, field by field. I chose the county of Kent, because it was virtually all surveyed, and I transcribed data from these maps and the written records that went along with them, on punch-cards for computer processing.

I then thought that it would be good to take the methodology that I had used for one county and extend it to the whole country. With a Small Research Grant from the British Academy of £653 – I remember it exactly – I did some preliminary work to test how to extend the methodology. From that I picked up an Economic and Social Research Council grant, which enabled me to employ assistance, and with improved computer processing we went on to produce a national study – *An Atlas and Index of the Tithe Files of Mid-Nineteenth-Century England and Wales*.

So my interest began with maps as a source of data, and from that I became interested in the maps themselves, their construction and use.

By this time you had moved to the University of Exeter. How did you continue your interest in maps there?

I embarked on a 20-year undertaking to produce studies of all the types of manuscript large-scale maps that pre-dated the printed large-scale maps of the Ordnance Survey which came in at the end of the 19th century. And the University of Exeter was very good in supporting me to do such a long-term project.

In *The Tithe Maps of England and Wales*, we generated a catalogue of all the details of the maps as a tool for future researchers, and added to it a narrative about the cartographic material.

Then we turned to the enclosure maps of England and Wales, which cover approximately that quarter of the commissioners in the 1840s – including quite a lot of midland England. For those we produced an abbreviated catalogue in book form, with the main catalogue held in digital format at the UK Data Archive at the University of Essex.

The final part of this trilogy was the mapping of towns. My project on 'British Town Maps, 1470–1895' was adopted as a British Academy Research Project in 1998, and that helped me to secure large grants from the Arts and Humanities Research Council and from the Leverhulme Trust to do the work. And I wrote an article about the project for the very first issue of the *British Academy Review* in 1999.¹

The town maps work was finished in 2015. We published a popular, highly illustrated narrative history of the evolution of the mapping of towns, from the medieval period through to the end of the 19th century. But the serious research output from the British



The great tithe barn at Abbotsbury in Dorset dates from c. 1400. Barns such as this came to symbolise the antipathy that developed between farmers who paid tithes and the established Church, and which exploded into rural riots in the early 1830s before Parliament enacted the Tithe Commutation Act in 1836.

Photo: Roger Kain.

1 Roger Kain, 'British Town Maps, 1470–1895', *British Academy Review*, [1] (July 1998–July 1999), 25–28.



Academy Research Project is a digital catalogue, curated by the Institute of Historical Research, University of London, which enables researchers to find out what maps there are for a particular town and what they contain. That also serves a conservation function, in that it helps prevent unnecessary consultations of fragile originals in archives.

So that brought to an end a trilogy of studies of large-scale maps – which the British Academy helped make possible.

You have written about the different ways that maps have been used in the past, including in an acclaimed book about the use of the map in the service of the state.

Maps are a valuable resource for modern historians. But in our book, *The Cadastral Map in the Service of the State: A History of Property Mapping*, Elizabeth Baigent and I turned the lens around to look at the role that maps played in the past. How were they used in

contemporary societies, and how did they affect change?

Napoleon I, for example, used maps to eradicate the pre-revolutionary geography of France. The *ancien régime* and all its regions and provinces were swept away and you had the *départements and the communes*, and those were mapped. The map then becomes an instrument for erasing the past.

And you now are involved in an even bigger project on the history of maps.

The History of Cartography is an even longer-term project than anything else that I've been involved in. This project, based at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, was established by Brian Harley and David Woodward. They both died tragically young, but one of David Woodward's PhD students took on the overall directorship of the project.

I came on board to help them complete it, and specifically to direct and edit the volume on the 19th century, a period characterised by the internationalisation of maps and mapping. I go out to Madison several times a year, working with the staff employed there to co-ordinate an army of some 200 contributors from across the world who are writing sections for us. It's going to be about a million words, a thousand images and two big, fat books, and should appear in 2024.

The History of Cartography project has developed an interesting publishing model, which is quite topical in the light of current debates about open access. The latest volume of the project, *Cartography in the 20th Century*, was published for sale as a printed book and a for-purchase e-book by the University of Chicago Press in 2015; but after two years, PDF files of the volume have been made freely available. Without being too presumptuous, we think these big reference books are going to remain relevant for 50 years or more. So, the

Left

An extract of the tithe map of Gittisham, Devon, 1838. Numbers in the fields relate to information about their ownership, occupation and use which is recorded in accompanying written documents known as tithe apportionments.

Photo: Devon Record Office.

Below

Surveyors in the field working on the enclosure map of Henlow, Bedfordshire, c. 1795.

Image: derived from the cartouche on the map held by Bedfordshire and Luton Archives and Record Service.



fact that people have had to wait two years before they can get free access to them is not a big deal in the long perspective of the project. But it has been important for meeting the understandable desire of the project's federal funders that the outputs produced from public funding should be made freely available.

Does *The History of Cartography* serve a missionary function in helping to explain to historians how to use maps – how to understand the context and reasons behind their production?

The historian J.H. Parry said, 'Old maps are slippery witnesses. But where would we be without them?'

Traditionally historians have held the written word as prime, with maps simply illustrative. But conceptual developments in the history of maps and mapping have shown how maps can be read as text in the same way that you can read, for example, a painting as a text – and so can decode its meanings.

So yes, there is a proselytising role for *The History of Cartography*. It inspires a humanistic and interdisciplinary approach to map studies. It is making a statement that the history of maps and mapping is a legitimate sub-discipline of history, with its own set of methods and techniques. It's a history of an artefact – a map. But it's much more than just a history of the artefact. It's the artefact in its society, why it was done, how it was produced, how it was used.

I think the project is already having an effect. Historians who have nothing to do with maps are recognising *The History of Cartography* volumes published to date as making substantial contribution to historical understanding.

In that context, how important is it to judge maps in the past by modern standards of technical accuracy?

Accuracy and the quest for accuracy, a progressivist notion of the history of maps and mapping, has now been debunked. The history of maps is not how maps got more and more accurate until you get to the point now where you can place the table in front of us this afternoon in its exact location on a map of London.

The accuracy of a map has to be related to the question: what is its purpose? I could draw a sketch map of how to get from here in the British Academy to my flat in Bloomsbury, and you'd be able to follow it and get there. It would look totally hopeless as a piece of accurate cartography, but it would have on it all the information that you need.





John Hooker's celebrated map of the city of Exeter, 1587. Photo: The British Library.

And we all get around the London Underground using Harry Beck's wonderful 'Tube map'. It bears no relation at all to topographic accuracy, but it is topologically accurate. It shows how all the lines link to each other,

so that you can travel unerringly through the network.

Historians of cartography in the days before the 1980s got obsessed by accuracy, but it was a cul-de-sac. *The History of Cartography* project was conceived as a way out of that cul-de-sac, to show instead that maps are social constructs, not just technical artefacts.

In 1990 you were elected a Fellow of the British Academy.

I can still remember the frisson with which I opened a very small manila envelope, which looked very unprepossessing on the outside, but which contained a letter from the Secretary of the British Academy telling me that I had been elected a Fellow. This was most amazing, and a huge honour. I still don't understand why I was honoured in that way, but it was humbling to think that my peers at that time felt that I was worthy of it.

When I look back now, I'd probably describe myself up to that point as a somewhat selfish academic, one who had been generously treated by my university at Exeter and given time to pursue personal and collaborative research, and I hadn't involved myself in academic administration or management. Attending British Academy meetings in London provided a fantastic opportunity to network with colleagues – which increasingly I did as I became more familiar with the ways of the Academy. And then in 1997, I received a letter from the President, Sir Tony Wrigley, asking me to serve for two years as a Vice-President. And that's how my involvement in the work of the British Academy began to develop.

In 2002, the British Academy's Centenary year, you became Treasurer of the British Academy.

I might mention, in connection with the Centenary, that the Geography Section published a British Academy centenary monograph which looked back on A Century of British Geography, and Catherine Delano-Smith and I contributed a chapter on 'Geography displayed: maps and mapping'.

In terms of my role as Treasurer, a particular concern was the need, following the British Academy's move to 10–11 Carlton House Terrace in 1998, to rebuild the Academy's Development Fund, the fund that gives the

Academy some measure of financial independence. But that was a gradual process.

As one of the Academy's Officers, what I was aware of at that time was a view from outside that the voice of the British Academy was not as strong as it should have been in championing the humanities and social sciences, and that we needed to 'get our act together'. When Onora O'Neill became President in 2005, she acknowledged and took on that challenge.

In this, Onora worked very well with Sir Martin Rees, the President of the Royal Society, who was a huge supporter of the humanities and social sciences, in explaining the indivisibility of knowledge – at a time when government was taking a much narrower view of what 'science' meant. That unified approach, undertaken in collaboration with the other national academies – the Royal Society, the Royal Academy of Engineering, and the Academy of Medical Sciences – has been pursued vigorously by all the succeeding Presidents of the British Academy, to the great benefit of the humanities and social sciences and the whole UK research base.

Since 2014, you've been Vice-President for Research & Higher Education Policy, so you have become the person responsible for the Academy's voice in higher education policy matters. Does the British Academy have a louder voice now?

Yes, I think we now do speak with more authority and purpose.

The higher education policy aspect of the Academy's activities has become much more significant. We have been developing a strategy that identifies those non-discretionary activities that we absolutely have to address – the things that our community really expects the British Academy to say something about – and then some other discretionary activities that we think are important.

The first category of higher education policy issues on which the Academy has spoken have included the like of the Research Excellence Framework, the Teaching Excellence Framework, and now the Knowledge Exchange Framework. We have put in a submission to the Augar review of university fees, as our community would expect us to. And we have contributed to the current debates about open access – which I made reference to earlier – and here we have also been developing our position as both a research funder and an academic publisher.



Roger Kain is editing the volume on *Cartography in the Nineteenth Century*, in *The History of Cartography series*. Illustrated here is Pedro García Conde, *Carta Geografica General de la Republica Mexicana* (London: James Wyld, 1845).
Image: courtesy of the Trustees of the Boston Public Library/Rare Books.

British Academy Small Research Grants are hugely valued by humanities and social science academics

What are the other higher education policy issues that the British Academy has chosen to engage with?

Given the amount of resource that we've got, we have had to choose those very carefully, and we have had some very grown-up discussions with the community and with the other academies about what these should be.

On the issue of language learning, the British Academy has really made a difference in recent years in drawing attention to the problem. Most recently, we have issued a statement entitled *Languages in the UK: A call for action*, about which there is an article elsewhere in this issue (pp. 12–13).

We have also highlighted the importance of quantitative numeracy skills in the social sciences – working in collaboration with the Nuffield Foundation. More broadly, business needs graduates who are comfortable working with numbers and data as well as having the ability to write and to argue critically. This programme of work has been superbly led for the Academy by Sir Ian Diamond FBA,² and we have produced a number of reports that have, in my view, significantly influenced policy.

Your remit as Vice-President also covers the British Academy's research funding schemes.

In money terms, the British Academy's portfolio of research funding schemes has grown out of all recognition.

Over the time that I've been actively involved in the

work of the British Academy, a major concern has been ensuring that excellent people from each generation can enter academia to sustain our subjects. There have been times – as is the case now – when permanent posts are few and far between, and it's difficult for people to get a step on the ladder. Our flagship British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowships scheme provides a mechanism to help people get from being a PhD student to becoming an academic. It offers three years of funding to enable early career researchers to translate their PhD work into a significant publication, and equally importantly to embark on their next piece of research. There is strong competition for these Postdoctoral Fellowships, and those who get them go on to be very successful in securing posts in the research world. So, we know that the scheme helps sustain the flow of excellent people into the future humanities and social sciences workforce.

What can you say about the new scheme of British Academy / Wolfson Fellowships?

The Wolfson Foundation has generously awarded the British Academy £10 million to support the humanities and social sciences. Part of the money is to enable us to construct a new lecture theatre and other public spaces in the basement of 10–11 Carlton House Terrace.

Another part of their gift is for a new scheme of British Academy / Wolfson Fellowships. These seek to provide support between our Postdoctoral Fellowships for those at the outset of their careers, and our Mid-Career Fellowships for those with a more established career. The Wolfson scheme will enable those who've got a permanent post, but are still early in their careers, to have some time to do a piece of work that will help get them to the next stage in their university or equivalent research institution.

At the time of speaking, the first call for applications is open, and I have to say they are proving extremely popular.

Do British Academy Small Research Grants remain as popular as ever?

'Small Research Grants' sounds a bit pejorative. The maximum award is £10,000, which is a small sum in terms of research funding, but these grants really do have a value beyond the number of pounds. They can start people off on a trail, or can help them finish off something: so they can be pump-priming, or they can help people sunset a project.

They are hugely valued by humanities and social science academics. At the time of the 2010 Spending

2 See Ian Diamond, 'Interview', *British Academy Review*, 31 (Autumn 2017), 11–16.

Review, the then Department for Business, Innovation & Skills took the mistaken view that Small Research Grants were not ‘strategic’ and should not be paid for out of public funding. The Leverhulme Trust stepped in with very generous sums of money to enable us to continue the scheme, and the British Academy’s own Fellows have also contributed to funding Small Research Grants. Happily, the current Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS) has been persuaded of the value of our Small Research Grants, and we are delighted and very grateful that there is now secured public funding for these awards.

with other matters, as a truly shared enterprise between the Academy’s Fellows and its hugely talented and dedicated staff.

We are now approaching a new government Spending Review. How is the British Academy preparing for that?

We will be collaborating with the other national academies to make a powerful statement about the value of continued public funding for academic research. We have been working together to show how the UK’s investment in research and development is distributed, and to collect evidence of how the benefits of research are measured.

What broader hopes do you have for the future of the British Academy?

Perhaps inevitably, we still elect people to become Fellows of the British Academy relatively late in their academic career. I do think that we need to do more for those at the start of their career. And I have a fervent hope that, with a combination of will on our part and some of the Wolfson Foundation funding, we might see the development of a Young Academy.

Very many European countries have Young Academies – indeed the Royal Society of Edinburgh has a Young Academy of Scotland. They provide an opportunity for those earlier in their careers to come together, to network, to do all the kinds of things that we as Fellows of the British Academy do, but in a separate space. We have talked about it for a while, and it would be wonderful if we could now give it a final push to make it happen.

More generally, I would hope to see, in 10 years’ time, a more diverse British Academy than it is currently. We have worked to improve the gender balance, but we still have further to go. We’ve hardly started on ethnicity. And the geographical diversity across the United Kingdom needs to be considered too. We are over-concentrated in some areas, and does that properly reflect where excellence lies? It is good to see that the Academy is now grappling with these issues in a very serious way and, as

Further reading and viewing

Some of Roger Kain’s books etc. mentioned in the interview

1986 book: *An Atlas and Index of the Tithe Files of Mid-Nineteenth-Century England and Wales*.

1992 book, co-authored with Elizabeth Baigent: *The Cadastral Map in the Service of the State: A History of Property Mapping*.

1995 book, co-authored with Richard R. Oliver: *The Tithe Maps of England and Wales: A cartographic analysis and county-by-county catalogue*.

2004 book, co-authored with John Chapman and Richard R. Oliver: *The Enclosure Maps of England and Wales 1595–1918*. Electronic catalogue maintained by UK Data Archive (essex.ac.uk/em/index.html).

2015 book, co-authored with Richard R. Oliver: *British Town Maps: A History*. Electronic Catalogue of British Town Maps (townmaps.data.history.ac.uk/).