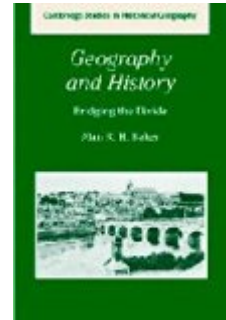


Alan H. R. Baker. *Geography and History: Bridging the Divide*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 296 pp. \$28.99, paper, ISBN 978-0-521-28885-9.



Reviewed by Jonathan Smith

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This is the first book-length account of the connection between history and geography to be made available in English since Lucien Febvre's *Geographical Introduction to History* was translated from the French in 1925. *Geography and History* is not, however, a direct successor to Febvre's famous denunciation of "geographic influences," since it contains no catalogue of present errors and no program for a new and improved geography. Febvre's purpose was to clear the field of the accumulated trash of environmentalist pseudo-science, and thereby open the way for a new empirical science of human-environment relations. Baker's purpose is to catalogue the accumulated wealth of scholarship in historical geography, geographical history, and environmental history, and thereby make possible a renewed appreciation of the scope, variety, and quality of this admirable intellectual heritage.

Simply taken as a bibliographic essay describing more than half a century of scholarship in historical geography, geographical history, and environmental history, this book is hugely impressive and highly valuable. Baker has not only read just

about everything of note in these prolific fields, he has also formed judgments of this work that are almost without exception critical, and yet charitable; discerning, and yet decent. Every graduate student who sits down to write the literature review for a dissertation in historical geography or geographical history must in future have Baker's book at his or her elbow, both as a sensible guide to much of the work they must acknowledge, and as a model of bibliographic style and intellectual poise.

A general argument stands behind the details of the bibliographic discussion. It has two related parts. The first part of the argument, implicit in what I've already written, is that historical geography and history are to be understood as discourses conducted in the printed word, so that discussion of the real and potential connection between them must be a discussion of texts. That is texts, in the plural, not one authoritative text (e.g. *Capital, Being and Time, The Production of Space*), or the restricted, evanescent literature of some narrow ideological or national school. This emphasis on texts and discourses might make Bak-

er's book sound trendy, but it leads, in fact, to some very orthodox conclusions about the nature of geography, historical geography, and history, and it is the orthodoxy of these conclusions that I take to be the second part of Baker's general argument. For instance, he argues quite sensibly that history and geography differ in that history is primarily concerned to understand periods, whereas geography and historical geography are primarily concerned to understand places. How remarkably unremarkable! How refreshing in an era when, at least in geography, some scholars strain to demonstrate their command of the field by defining it in some utterly eccentric way!

Baker is well aware of the centrifugal forces in today's geographic literature, where top prizes go to trend-setters and disciplinary standards are weak, yet he refuses equally to unreservedly celebrate or unsparingly deplore the multiplicity of these "multiple voices," recognizing, it would seem, that the field cannot thrive if its tradition becomes too weak or too strong. The tradition of geography is complex, Baker concedes, but it does exist, and it consists of four discourses. These are the discourse of location (where things are and why they are there), the discourse of environment (how humans adapt and are adapted to their surroundings), the discourse of landscape (the causes and consequences of the visible form of localities), and the discourse of region, or place, which combines and fulfills the preceding three. Again, how remarkably unremarkable. And again, how refreshingly sensible.

The bulk of Baker's book consists of four chapters, each one devoted to a discussion of books and articles in one of these discourses. This topical grouping is not altogether successful, since it makes it difficult for Baker to present orderly ideas on the central question of explanation in historical geography and geographical history, but it may well be the only way he could have organized a book giving such sympathetic notice to so many works originating in such a range of incom-

measurable theories. And it must be allowed that Baker, unlike Febvre, is not advancing any particular explanatory theory of the relation between geographical facts and historical events, but is, rather, encouraging us to be aware of the existing diversity of approaches to understanding of period and place.

One discussion threading through this book that I found especially helpful takes up the distinction between historical geography and geographical history. Baker shows that this division is itself an historical artifact, although no less real for that. Historical geography emerged from the work of geographers like H. C. Darby and Andrew Clark, who labored to devise a distinctly geographical approach to the past. Geographical history, although it too was arguably the creation of a geographer, Vidal de la Blache, took root and prospered among historians such as Fernand Braudel. With characteristic balance, Baker advises us to avoid both exaggerating the resulting difference (as Carville Earle did in his critique of D. W. Meinig) and pretending that it does not exist.

The notes of pluralism and catholicity are maintained in the final chapter of the book, which might be reduced without too much injustice to a mild remonstrance against extreme positions. Do not hanker after final answers, for knowledge is an endless discourse. But at the same time, do not, like some postmodernists, reject the very idea of an answer. Do not make too much of disciplinary boundaries. Build and use the bridges mentioned in the book's subtitle. But at the same time do not, again like some postmodernists, deny the reality of the boundaries that these bridges span. Do not become a slave to some narrow conception of the tradition of your discipline, but at the same time do not imagine that meaningful work can be done without regard for the foundations laid down by one's predecessors. Finally, do not think that the historical scholar's life can be lived entirely in the loneliness of an archive or in the convivial give-and-take of the academic conference (a point Bak-

er conveys with photographs of himself profitably engaged in both settings). Sage advice, all of this.

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