

A SHORT HISTORY OF GEONEWS

This year marks the 75th anniversary of the Geographical Society of Ireland. The early history of the Society, including mention of its senior publication *Irish Geography*, was documented in the ‘Jubilee Volume’ published for the 50th anniversary in 1984 (Herries Davies, 1984). The Society’s minor publication, *GeoNews*, was still in its infancy in 1984, so now may be an appropriate occasion to document its early history. As someone old enough (and probably just about young enough) to remember the early days of *GeoNews*, this is my minor contribution to posterity.

GeoNews began life in September 1977 as the *Irish Geographical Newsletter*, under the editorship of John Andrews (Trinity College Dublin). John edited the first four issues of the newsletter, which were published biannually in an A4 format. Each issue was typically about 12 pages long and contained a mix of news about the activities of the Society, news from various Geography Departments, and an occasional contribution on issues of the day. Issue number 2, for example, contained an impassioned piece by Anngret Simms about the impending destruction of the archaeological site at Wood Quay to build the Dublin Corporation Civic Office block. Issue 1 contained a short piece by ‘Askew Corrie’ reporting an ‘overhead conversation’ on a fieldtrip between the renowned Professor Hamilton, Mr. Byrne (a retired bank manager) and Peggy O’Day (a schoolteacher). Amongst the issues touched upon were: a perceived scarcity of contributions by senior academics to *Irish Geography*; the negative impact of growing administrative workloads; the shortage of female academics (or even female applicants for academic positions); an over-emphasis on the geography of Ireland (at the expense of the outside world); an unhealthy obsession with historical geography; and a lack of relevance to the issues confronting broader society. The greybeards among us often assume that things have changed beyond recognition over the past 30 years, but some things seem to have remained much the same.

Issues 5 to 20 were edited by either Tony Parker (University College Dublin) or Joe Brady (University College Dublin) after John resigned to take up the editorship of *Irish Geography*. Tony was editor for issues 5 to 13, and 18 to 19, while Joe edited issues 14-17 (when Tony was GSI President) and also stood in as an interim editor for issue 20 after Tony resigned.

Issue 5 was published in the same format as the previous 4, but Tony switched to an A5 format for issue 6. There was also a change in title to *Geographical Society of Ireland Newsletter*. This format, with a white paper cover somewhat similar to the present format, was retained through to issue 20. Issues naturally varied in length, but typically extended to 32 pages. Issues 6 to 9 look as if they were typed onto stencils, but it would appear that UCD must have become computerised sometime around 1982 because the text in issues 10 onwards was justified suggesting the use of a word processor (or a typist with a very good eye for spacing!).

Issue 6 was something of a ‘classic’. In addition to the usual reports on the activities of the society, reports on conferences attended (an innovation under the new editor), and a 3-page commentary by a certain D.G. Pringle on ‘urban transportation’ (a topic which I had not realised I ever made any claim to know anything about), issue 6 was a mine of information on the staff and their research interests in each of the third level Departments, including a 24 page pull-out supplement on current research projects and publications in 1978-79. The issue also contained an update on the list of publications received by the Society in exchange for *Irish Geography*. These lists were updated from time to time in subsequent issues.

There were many notable ‘feature’ articles in addition to the normal news reports. Issue 8, for example, contained an article by Paul Doherty on potential sources of software for those new-fangled microcomputers. One of the options mentioned for the acquisition of software was to steal it (although the author did point out that this was illegal with somewhat more conviction than some of us at that time might have been able to muster). Issue 13 included a lengthy article on curriculum planning in third level Geography by Jim Walsh, illustrated by a full-page ‘trademark’ Walsh diagram containing no fewer than 33 boxes with connecting arrows. Issue 18 contained possibly the longest article ever published in *GeoNews*: a verbatim report of a paper given by Proinnsias Breathnach to the 1986 Conference of Irish Geographers in Cork on ‘Geography and Public Policy’. Proinnsias noted in his concluding remarks that he regarded the decision to start the Conference that year on a Thursday to be a retrogressive step because it prevented public service decision makers (who worked during the week) from attending. By coincidence I recently attended a (non-Geography) conference where it was successfully argued that a weekend conference should be moved to mid-week because public service workers (who could get paid time off during the week) were no longer willing to give up their weekends to attend. So, maybe some things do change!

I took over the editorship of the *Newsletter* for issues 21 (1987) to 36 (1995). I retained many of the features established by predecessors, including the A5 format and the custom of publishing Departmental reports in the November issue and Society reports (including reports read at the AGM - then held in February) in the May issue. This ensured that there was a certain amount of 'bulk' in each issue without having to depend too much on begging, pleading, blackmail, intimidation and the other devices to which editors have to resort to squeeze something out of contributors. However, I also decided to put my own mark on the publication in various ways. One was to change the name from *Geographical Society of Ireland Newsletter* to *GeoNews*. A second was to use a green coloured cover made out of card (to be compatible with *Irish Geography*), with a design by Jim Keenan (the Maynooth cartographer) consisting of a map of Africa, Europe and Asia on the front and the Pacific and Americas on the back. Conscious of printings costs, I discovered that by using a much smaller sans serif font I could squeeze a lot more words in per page, without reducing readability. Despite this, *GeoNews* increased in size to an average of 40 to 48 pages (plus supplements on several occasions).

One of the reasons for this expansion in content was that my tenure as editor corresponded with the diffusion of machine readable technologies which reduced the need to retype everything - an important consideration in the absence of secretarial support. However, linking the various technologies presented a challenge, as I proudly explained in issue 23, complete with a Jim Walsh-like flow diagram to illustrate the various steps involved. The problem was that the material submitted for *GeoNews* could come in numerous different formats. Some arrived typed or handwritten and had to be retyped, some arrived as plain text email messages, and other arrived in a variety of word processor formats saved on floppy discs. Before I could typeset the contents, I had to convert the material from these different sources into a common format, find some way to move them onto the same computer, organise the contents, edit them for spelling mistakes and other typos, and then finally typeset the final assemblage. The Geography Department did not at that time have a computer capable of typesetting documents (nor a laser printer to print them), but I discovered that our Mathematics Department had a Macintosh connected to a laser printer, so I used to sneak in there on a Friday afternoon when there were no students to complete the final stages. I was able to complete the earlier stages on a BBC Micro in my office. Transferring the files from different media (email, Macintosh discs, PC discs, etc.) presented a few challenges, but the main problem was converting the different word processor formats into a common format. After a few experiments, I decided the simplest solution was to write an assembly language program which stripped out all hidden formatting characters except end of paragraph markers which were standardised to ASCII 10 plus 13. The pure ASCII files could then be read into the Maths Department's MacWrite to be formatted. This worked very successfully, but meant that all other formatting (e.g. underlines, italics, etc.) had to be reinserted manually at the typesetting stage.

It was only when the articles had been formatted on the Macintosh that I knew where I stood in terms of length. In fact it was only when the contents were actually printed that I actually knew for certain - what you saw was not always what you got. The objective was to gauge the content so the number of pages was a multiple of 4. Being a page or so short was not a problem as it was usually possible to add in some sort of filler, although I did have to resort on at least one occasion to printing the word 'Notes' at the top of an otherwise blank final page (as if anyone would actually want to make notes on the contents of *GeoNews*). One filler I never actually got a chance to use was a fictitious report on the court appearance of a 'well-known Geography Professor' on a charge of gross indecency involving wet rhubarb. The report would have been padded out with salacious details to fill the required space, but just when it was about to name and shame the unfortunate Professor there would be a note saying 'continued on page x', where x of course would be the page after the last one in that particular issue. The worst case scenario was when the length was a multiple of 4 pages plus a few lines more than could be reduced through editing and changes to spacing. It was amazing how frequently this seemed to happen - a bit like toast always falling on the floor buttered side down.

The MacWrite software did not enable one to print two A5 pages on A4 paper in the correct sequence (or, if it did, I never discovered how to do it). The A5 text would therefore be printed on the left side of an A4 landscape page, the odd numbered pages would then be guillotined and pasted on the right of the even numbered pages so that their combined page numbers was n+1 (where n was the total number of pages in that issue), xeroxed, and then put in the correct sequence to be printed back to back. Sounds simple, but guillotining the odd numbered pages so that all the margins were the correct width took some figuring out.

It is interesting to reflect on the speed of technological change in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Even sending an email in the 1980s was not the simple task it is today. Indeed issue 21 actually contained a short tutorial on how to send an email message (in the hope that it would reduce the amount of stuff I received as hard copy). It also explained what to do if someone sent an email back. Although the university networks were connected into the Internet, sending an email required you to know on which particular network within the Internet your

intended destination was located. Such was the pace of change that issue 22 contained an update on the instructions provided in issue 21. By the end of my tenure, however, everyone was using email to send attachments in word processor formats that could be easily read by other word processors. Also, by that stage the Maynooth Geography Department even had a few ‘real’ computers of its own that allowed me to typeset without having to sneak into the Maths Department (although I think I still had to sneak in to use their printer). Producing *GeoNews* had become infinitely easier.

One of my unfulfilled ambitions was to evolve *GeoNews* into a medium for short research articles, similar to *Area* or *The Professional Geographer*. Issue 28 contained a short report on each of the talks given to the Society in the winter programme that year who, incidentally, were a very salubrious bunch (Frank Convery, Fred Boal, Tim Robinson, John Sweeney, Seamus Smyth and Des Gillmor). However, the practice does not seem to have been repeated, presumably because it was a big enough imposition to ask someone to speak to the Society without also asking them to write up what they said. Many issues of *GeoNews* during this period contained 4 or 5 ‘feature’ articles, but there was never quite the critical mass to justify moving to refereed short articles. However, in those days people wrote for journals because they felt they had something interesting to say; perhaps now that we are driven to be clock up publications to satisfy the bean-counters there may be more scope for an *Area* type of publication.

Ray O’Connor (University College Cork) was appointed editor as my successor. However, due to ill health, issue 37 (1995) was edited by Mark McCarthy (University College Cork) while issues 38 (1996) to 46 (2000) were jointly edited by Ray O’Connor and Almar Barry (University College Cork). The *GeoNews* title and the green card cover were retained for these issues. Issue 37 was the first, as far as I am aware, to include a photograph. The photo was taken by Kevin Griffin at the presentation of the first J.A.K. Grahame Awards for undergraduate theses. *GeoNews* does not report if there was a second round of J.A.K. Grahame Awards.

Issue 38 saw a flirtation with an even smaller font, before returning to a more legible font for two bumper issues. Issues 39 and 40 ran to 68 and 78 pages respectively, necessitating what I believe is called Perfect binding rather than the staple binding normally used. A large part of issues 38 and 40 were taken up by a list of ongoing postgraduate research theses in 1995-6 and 1996-9, but issue 39 seems to have been an inexplicably jumbo-sized edition of the traditional contents. However, the subsequent issues reverted to a ‘more respectable’ length of around 40 pages.

One change I noticed in these later issues was the demise of the ‘feature’ article. *GeoNews* became almost solely a vehicle for reporting news from Departments and events such as conferences, with very few articles on broader issues. I think it can safely be assumed that this was not the result of a deliberate editorial policy. Rather I suspect it was more a reflection of the changing times. The mid-1990s saw the advent of the Celtic Tiger, with many associated advantages such as increased funding opportunities. However, it also saw the intrusion of a neo-liberal business ethos into academia. Academia became more functional and competitive as one’s worth increasingly came to be valued by the number of refereed publications one produced and the amount of research money one attracted. The idea of putting time and effort into something for the general good became a outmoded luxury as a ‘survival of the fittest’ mindset began to took root. Writing articles for *GeoNews* did not score any brownie points, so people turned their attention to more ‘rewarding’ uses of their time.

GeoNews itself became a victim of the new ethos. When the editorial team of Almar Barry and Ray O’Connor stepped down after issue 46 in 2000, no-one volunteered to take their place. This was despite the fact that the number of third-level geographers at that time was probably greater than at any point previously. This situation persisted until Adrian Kavanagh agreed to oversee the re-birth of *GeoNews* on a ‘once-only interim’ basis in 2005. The fact that he is still doing it speaks volumes for his character. However, Adrian is in many ways an idiosyncratic throwback to a gentler and less competitive age, so I would fear for the future of *GeoNews* if he ever decided to step down. But, then again, given that there are now alternative means for disseminating news, maybe the idea of a printed newsletter is an outmoded concept.

It would be a shame if *GeoNews* did became a victim of the changing times. As many people have commented down the years, it provides a remarkable record of the social history of our discipline over the past 30 years.

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Reference

G.L. Herries Davies ed. (1984) *Irish Geography. The Geographical Society of Ireland Golden Jubilee 1934-1984.* Geographical Society Of Ireland, Dublin.