

REVIEW ESSAY: BRINGING GEOGRAPHY TO BOOK:

Ellen Semple and the Reception of Geographical Knowledge

Innes M. Keighren

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For years now, Ellen Semple has been the piñata for critics of the earlier history of Anglo-American geography. Her *Influences of Geographic Environment* is repeatedly characterized as the epitome of hard-core “environmental determinism” by geographers who apparently have not read it. Two biographies that might have given us a more comprehensive and balanced picture of her life and work have been undertaken, but neither has yet been completed. The absence of any published comprehensive biography, situating Semple in the intellectual context of her time, has resulted in gaps in our understanding, to be filled in by the superior knowledge of whatever the critic sees as the one true path to geographic enlightenment. To no other figure in Anglo-American geography does the opening section of E. G. W. Bill and J. F. A. Mason’s diatribe apply so strongly: “It is frequently a prior condition of reform that it should, not necessarily with a pious regard for the truth, discredit the system which it seeks to replace...” (Bill and Mason, 1970, 2). That statement needs to be tattooed on the forehead of anyone writing on the history of geography.

A number of shorter articles have appeared on special aspects of Semple’s work, mostly in smaller regional journals, as well as a dissertation and at least one master’s thesis. There is a longer, thought-provoking essay on Semple by James, Bladen and Karan (1983). But these and other worthy sources are frequently available only in larger libraries. The most easily accessible study in print (and also through JSTOR), until now, has been Charles Colby’s *Annals* obituary (Colby 1933), now nearly eighty years old, but grounded in lengthy personal acquaintance. Probably most geography students today, if they have any knowledge of her work at all, get it from condensed and general textbook summaries.

Innes Keighren is Lecturer in Human Geography at Royal Holloway College, the University of London. Following completion of his doctoral dissertation at the University of Edinburgh under Charles W. J. Withers, he served as Research Associate both at the Institute of Geography and the Centre for the History of the Book there. Although in the United States the field of the history of the book has emerged in recent years among a few scholars, to my knowledge they have not as yet crossed paths with the history of geography here. In Britain, however, there have been a handful of papers that have attempted to bring the concerns of the newer field to the older one. Keighren has contributed two of them, “Bringing Geography to the Book: Charting

the Reception of *Influences of Geographic Environment*” and “Reading the Messy Reception of *Influences of Geographic Environment* (1911),” which summarize his argument (Keighren 2006, 2010). Keighren’s fuller treatment, a somewhat revised version of his dissertation, is the fourth in the recently established Tauris Historical Geography series. In it, Keighren combines his dual interests in the history of geography and the history of the book in an attempt to treat the reception of *Influences* in Britain and the United States in more extended form. *Bringing Geography to Book* is not only the author’s own first book, but it appears to be the first by a single author to combine the methods of the recently developed field of the history of the book with an attempt to define a geography of the book’s reception.

Let me first make clear that this is not a life of Semple herself (though it contains much useful biographical material) but the life and particularly the putative influence of the book itself that is Keighren’s focus of interest. The work is divided into six chapters, book-ended, as it were (I couldn’t resist that) by short methodological chapters on “Geography, the book and the reception of knowledge” and “Reflections on the geography of reception.” The first is an introduction to recent scholarship on the history of the book and an invitation to explore what the Germans call *rezeptionsgeschichte*, or reception history. This is a field adopted some time ago by classicists, such as those American scholars who have studied the adoption of classical ideas and forms in architecture, political thought, literature, education and other subjects in the early Republic.

Keighren’s central four chapters attempt a reception study of a single book, Ellen Churchill Semple’s *Influences of Geographic Environment* (1911), now just past its centennial, and assess its influence on geography in Britain and the United States. A chapter entitled “Anthropogeography: a biography” examines both Semple’s early life and the beginnings of her career, and sets its intellectual context within a somewhat undifferentiated “environmentalism.” A chapter surveying the reviews of the book in both popular and scholarly periodicals follows the first. Many of us have examined reviews selectively, as a device to bolster a more general argument. But other than Carolyn Baker Lewis’s excellent master’s thesis on Semple’s third book, *The Geography of the Mediterranean Region* (1931), written under Allen Bushong at the University of South Carolina (Lewis 1979), I know of no work by a geographer that examines reviews as carefully as Keighren has done. Furthermore, Keighren goes beyond the content of the review itself to try to establish what, either in the mind of the reviewer or the editor, may have influenced the conclusions. For earlier works in geography this remains a useful method. Since there were so few professional geographers and we know a good deal about many of them, as well as some of the non-professional reviewers, it is possible to trace their reflections in (or not in) their later work.

Chapters 4 and 5 are the heart of the book. The first traces Semple’s own efforts to validate her theories in the field and to describe and defend her findings in the lecture hall. The second attempts to trace the book’s use as a text in geography courses and programs in the two countries. Keighren’s book takes us part way toward a more rounded picture of Semple and her book, though (for reasons to be explained) in my view not far enough. His chapter on the history of anthropogeography has conceptual flaws, but Keighren provides a careful and rewarding analysis of Semple’s own background and the tasks she defined and largely accomplished for herself in a time when geography was seen as strongly linked to the exploratory tradition (particularly in

Britain, but also through Davis in the United States), and therefore seen as male turf. Women could, of course, fulfill their nurturing role as geographic educators (though in schools, teacher training colleges, and colleges for women, but rarely universities). Much of Semple's earlier work reflects this role, such as the essays she wrote originally for the *Journal of Geography*, later combined into her first book, *American History and its Geographic Conditions* (Semple 1903). Indeed she was a highly effective teacher; as Keighren points out. Having honed her teaching skills in her sister's elite private school, she retained them throughout her life.

The next step was harder: breaking through the pervasive sexism of the discipline, which persisted into the 1960s. (In my day as a graduate student at Clark in the late 1950s, it was an axiom that there were geographers, and then there were "women geographers." The term was not complimentary.) One of the original contributions of Keighren's book is the author's analysis of the ways in which Semple broke the glass ceiling, becoming recognized as a professional among other professional geographers, without having to legitimize herself as a "real" geographer by climbing remote mountains, as Halford Mackinder felt obliged to do on Mt. Kenya. It is well known, of course, that she went twice to Leipzig to study with Friedrich Ratzel, the foremost German human geographer of his day. But Keighren documents how she read exhaustively on her own, worked out a field-based method of anthropogeographical study, tested it in a systematic (but not always value-free) way in Eastern Kentucky, and published the results as "The Anglo-Saxons of the Kentucky Mountains" in the Royal Geographical Society's respected *Geographical Journal* (Semple 1901). Keighren presents new material in his discussion of Semple's reception among both geographers and women's groups in America and Britain, making good use of her correspondence with John Scott Keltie in the Royal Geographical Society's archives. He also analyzes the relevance of her acceptance in Britain to the changing mind-set of Royal Geographical Society officers and members toward the hotly contested proposal to admit women to membership.

Keighren's analysis of Semple's use of the lecture theater, in the next chapter, is a major piece of new knowledge. Semple had a double strategy, aided by her excellent photo-illustrations and her well-honed method of oral presentation. One was her appeal to popular audiences, who filled the halls in the various towns in which she spoke under the auspices of the local geographical societies. The other was the way she cultivated the movers and shakers of British professional geography, both at the Royal Geographical Society and to fellow scholars and teachers through Andrew and Dorothy Herbertson's Summer School of Geography at Oxford. Semple knew her audiences, and skillfully assessed their interests and needs.

I find the fifth (and last substantive) chapter, on the use of *Influences* as a text in universities, more problematic. This of course is one key to tracking the geography of the book's reception. But I was left with the impression that every time somebody uses the words "geographical influences" it seems presumptively to stem from an encounter with Semple or with her book. This is partly due to what I see as *Bringing Geography to Book's* major flaw; Keighren's use of the term "environmentalism" to cover all sorts of different and sometimes contradictory meanings of the term under the same blanket. Yet, to use George Perkins Marsh's phrasing, there is a difference between those who think the earth made man and those who think man made the earth. Both are environmentalist statements, but only the first is deterministic.

Keighren's blurring of such lines reminded me of the use of the term by scholars during the 1940s and 1950s as a portmanteau term, to cover and reject everything from human modification of the earth to pure environmental determinism, in the interest of replacing older views of geography with the newer insights of spatial analysis. George Tatham saw the field as binary (Tatham 1951): there was "environmentalism" (bad) and the vacuous term "possibilism" (good). In a series of articles, O. H. K. Spate (who thought Semple's text a "vulgarization" of Ratzel) elevated the confusion of "environmentalism" with "determinism" into an art form (Spate 1968 and references). Robert Platt famously found "environmental determinists" behind every bush (Platt 1948a, 1948b, 1952). Most notoriously, this repudiation is expressed in Edward Ullman's testimony to the committee examining the possible future of geography at Harvard in 1949 (Glick 1988): "I object to stressing the relations of man to his environment as a way of getting across the nature of geography... The emphasis on man and his environment has led in the past to the types of determinism of Semple, Ratzel and others – to which we American geographers today object strenuously." Again, as the Committee report notes, "the study of the relationship between man and his environment. [Ullman] says this definition is no longer acceptable." In other words, disciplinary politics is at work here. Since geography was now to be a science of distribution and spatial relations, "environmental geography" was rejected as being always and everywhere deterministic.

By not parsing the differing meanings of "environment" in geography even in the heyday of *Influences*, Keighren occasionally slips into the trap of using "environmentalism" virtually as a synonym for "environmental determinism." Semple herself differentiates various forms of environmentalism in *Influences*, (Semple 1911, Preface, p. vii): "For this reason the writer speaks of geographic factors and influences, shuns the word geographic determinant, and speaks with extreme caution of geographic control." Though I agree with Keighren that she sometimes overstepped her own boundaries, the fact that such distinctions are a plain statement of authorial intent seems to me worthy of notice. Even Robert Platt allowed for various forms of environmentalism ("extreme" and "mild" forms). J. K. Wright's pioneering essay on Semple's *Influences* (Wright 1962, 1966), which Keighren knows well, quotes Platt's distinctions among environmentalisms, and also cites Harold and Margaret Sprout's taxonomy of man-milieu hypotheses (H. and M. Sprout, 1956, 1965; not cited in Keighren's book) as well. Even in what might be called Wright's "cartographic spoofery" (by analogy with his "statistico-spoofery"), in which Semple is placed on a metaphorical map, allows also for cartographic placement of different degrees and forms of environmentalism in other locations. Gordon Lewthwaite sorted out the distinctions definitively for geography (Lewthwaite 1966; not cited in *Bringing Geography to Book*). There is, then, a long chain of texts in the geographic literature, beginning with *Influences* itself, telling us that in discussing "environmentalism" we need to make more precise definitions and distinctions.

Historians of geography, especially, need to be precise about what the term "environmentalism" means and has meant in different times and places, given the sorry record (which is also part of our history) of the postwar generation's misrepresentation of the term for its own political ends. (Curiously enough, we seem now to have come full circle. It is now safe to use the word "environment" in geographical circles, and we even see geography courses and programs

in “Earth Systems Science” and “The Human Dimensions of Environmental Change.”) And, of course, there is that other interesting question, why Semple is regularly criticized in the literature for what are seen as her slips into “environmental determinism,” while male geographers of the same period with even more extreme versions are not. Paul Goode, the intellectual architect of the University of Chicago program, in Keighren’s analysis appears largely to have been less deterministic than Semple (p. 120), and Andrew Herbertson had a more “nuanced proto-possibilist perspective” (p. 98).

Count me among the dissenters on that point. Goode, whose dissertation in the University of Pennsylvania’s economics department was entitled “The Influence of Physiographic Factors upon the Occupations and Economic Development in the United States,” published an article in 1901 including these statements: “More and more the principles of geography are seen to be fundamental, and ever present factors in historic, academic, and social development” and that, under the guidance of the new professional geographers, “history will cease to be a mere narrative of events, and under every event we will carefully look for *directive causes* [italics mine] in the physiographic and economic environment” (Goode 1901). Herbertson, who had imbibed a tad too freely of the short-lived and now forgotten philosophy known as Vitalism, claimed in his late “Regional Environment, Heredity and Consciousness” (Herbertson 1915) that the environment was “alive, active, not merely letting man act on it, but vigorously reacting on man.” I would not consider such a statement to be a “proto-possibilist” observation. Yet it was made in one of Herbertson’s last papers and presumably reflects his mature views.

Keighren’s final chapter is entitled “Reflections on the geography of reception.” I agree in principle that, to use Kant-like terms, “if there is a history of the book, there must be a geography of the book.” But getting at it, and establishing reception from it, is another matter. The following comments are directed not so much at *Bringing Geography to Book* as to the methodological problems it raises. For one thing, we cannot simply use phrases from a book as evidence of its influence. Surely Semple was not the inventor of the term “environmental influences.” As Keighren points out, the term saturated the early issues of the *Journal of Geography*, and many other writers were using the term long before *Influences of Geographic Environment* was published. Yet Keighren sometimes uses any mention of “environmental influences” as evidence of the influence of *Influences*. For example, he finds two courses with those words in their titles, and part of the description of a third, taught by Ruliff Holway in the pre-Sauer University of California. Yet Holway was a Stanford-trained geologist who had been “converted” to geography in a summer class at Harvard taught by William Morris Davis (who is nearly invisible in *Bringing Geography to Book*). Holway’s summer with Davis is not dated, but must have been in the 1890s, or at any rate before 1904, the year Holway, a physiographer, began teaching at Berkeley. At that time Semple had not begun, or had barely begun, her research for the 1911 book.

Holway is referred to in the literature as “a Davisian.” Why might not Holway have gotten the idea of environmental influence from his courses from Davis and his double-gaited physiography/ontography schema? Or from another early Davisian, Albert Perry Brigham, whose book *Geographic Influences in American History* had been published in 1903, the year before Holway began university teaching? Or, since Holway had a background as a secondary school teacher

and principal, from the numerous articles in the *Journal of Geography*? Yet *Bringing Geography to Book* is about the geography of reception of a particular book. It seems to me that to establish the geography of a book, one must demonstrate its presence at particular sites. But Keighren presents no hard evidence of such a direct link either with Semple or with *Influences* in Holway's Berkeley.

Furthermore, by focusing on Semple's ideas of environmental influence, Keighren ignores other parts of a complex book. Let me offer two examples here. J. K. Wright's seminal essay "Miss Semple's *Influences of Geographic Environment*: Notes Toward a Bibliobiography" (Wright 1962, 1966), was originally given, along with Ruth Baugh's paper on "Ellen Churchill Semple: The Great Lady of American Geography" (Baugh 1961), at a special session of four papers commemorating the 50th anniversary of *Influences* during the Association of American Geographers' East Lansing meeting in 1961. (I heard both papers; it was my first AAG meeting.) Wright's paper was subsequently published in the *Geographical Review*.

In a footnote, Wright noted that in *Influences* Semple had twice referenced Marsh's *The Earth as Modified by Human Action* (Marsh, 1877 edition, which I also own). Wright quotes Semple as writing (on p. 120 of *Influences*) "The earth as modified by human action is a conspicuous fact of historical development." This is certainly environmentalist, but it is the reverse of environmental determinist. In the republished version in his *Human Nature in Geography*, Wright elevated the footnote into the main text. You can't possibly miss it. Given Keighren's thorough knowledge of Wright's work (e.g., Keighren 2005), I'm surprised that footnote/paragraph didn't raise a red flag.

A related problem arises in the discussion of Elmer Ekblaw's use of *Influences* at Clark University. Here there is no question of the presence of *Influences* at this particular site. Semple used it as a text for her Principles of Anthropogeography course, and her student Ekblaw used it as a text in his Human and Cultural Geography course, which succeeded and continued it until the late 1940s. I agree with Keighren that Ekblaw "was rigid in his reference to Semple's work." Long-ago conversations with some of my emeritus colleagues in history and other departments, and with some returning geography graduate students who had taken Ekblaw's courses at Clark, suggest that he was rigid about everything else as well.

The Ekblaw papers at Clark, beside a number of scrapbooks containing his "Wake Robin" newspaper columns, are largely note cards for his course lectures. So we have a rare record of exactly what Ekblaw actually said in his classroom. Before he left for his American research, I had suggested that Keighren look at the Ekblaw papers while at Clark. Had he done so, he would have been as surprised as I when I discovered these and added them to the Clark University Archives 35 years ago. As I remember it, in addition to the environmental sections of Semple's book, Ekblaw not only covered the locational sections, but mentioned the names of location theorists relatively unknown to American geographers until the 1950s. But that's apparently not a part of the course the former Clark graduate students, whose 1961 letters to Wright Keighren uses as his evidence, had remembered. Anyone who has ever graded student papers will not be surprised to learn that there is often a significant gap between what we say and what our students hear and/or remember. Again, this raises a matter of methodology. As a general principle, in those few cases where the instructor's own notes have been preserved, are these not

to be taken as more authoritative than student reminiscences written down after fifteen years of condemnation of all forms of “environmentalism”?

Furthermore, although Keighren cites Fred Lukermann’s 1961 letter to Wright, he does not quote the section in which Lukermann refers to Semple’s chapter 5, “Geographical Location.” Lukermann, who had one of the most astute minds of the last generation of American geographers, contended that those earlier chapters, on relative location (Semple called it “vicinal” location), are what make Semple (and Ratzel) still worth the geographer’s reading. Lukermann even assigned Semple’s Chapter 5 as student reading (in 1961!) in his course on economic location (Lukermann 1961, quoted in James, Bladen and Karan 1983). This is of course a minority, if not a unique, instance. But it points to an understudied aspect of Semple’s book: not her environmental theory, which I concede most readers picked up on, but her location theory. It would also have been interesting to learn if the reports Semple wrote for the *Inquiry* (now in the Papers of the American Peace Commission to Versailles, 1917-1919, in the Library of Congress), the group of experts Isaiah Bowman assembled at the American Geographical Society to provide background research for the American delegation to the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, reflected or differed from the theses of her book.

In those early chapters of *Influences*, much more attention is paid to “man” as what Semple calls “an active agent” (p. 41). The book is not all environmental determinism, by a long chalk. I find a certain wry amusement in pairing Semple’s image of man as “an active agent” with the title of Sauer’s famous opening address to the “Marsh Festival,” the Princeton conference on “Man’s Role in Changing the Face of the Earth” in 1955; it was “The Agency of Man on the Earth” (Sauer 1956). It may be that Kathy Braden’s structuration theory approach, examining Semple’s use of “structure” and “agency” in relation to her last book, *The Geography of the Mediterranean* (Braden 1992; also not cited by Keighren), if applied to her second, might bring out aspects of *Influences* that would surprise us all. Is it not significant that in *Influences* Semple uses the concept of human agency many years before it came into common use in geography? Having reread *Influences* in preparation for this essay, I am persuaded that it remains a more complex book (even if sometimes self-contradictory) than both geographers and historians of geography have represented it to be.

Finally, I have some reservations directly concerning the relevance of the history of the book to attempts to create a geography of the book. Keighren reminds us of the use by students of the history of the book of marginal notes added by readers. He even cites some juicy comments from scribblers in the margins. But the total number of copies he was able to examine seems to be the nine listed at the end. (He mentions two copies at Oxford in the text, but only one appears in the list.) Further complicating the matter, he gives a marginal quote from a book identified as from Cambridge in the text, but the footnote reference leads one to the copy in the library of Oxford’s School of Geography. The text contains the scribbled word “Poxford.” I am left, then, uncertain as to whether it was made by a disgruntled Oxonian or an envious Cantabrigian!

The total number of *Influences* examined is six (or possibly seven) from British libraries and three from American. But the copy at Northwestern was from Franz Boas’ library, and Keighren notes that many of its pages were uncut, so it is not likely they contain marginal comments.

Probably the American Geographical Society's copy, used most often by established professionals and staff members, lacks marginal notes as well. That leaves copy 4 of the University of Chicago's holdings as the only one with marginal notes. Do the other three copies still exist, unmarked? And how representative of reception is the graffiti in one copy of one book in one American university library? My point here is that marginal notes may be interesting, and for some purposes in the history of the book they may be useful. But this seems to be one of the methods having little carryover value in any attempt to determine the geography of a book.

Robert Mayhew, in a study of the reception of Varenius, has pointed to the importance of studying and specifying which edition of Varenius was used, as well as where (Mayhew 2010). There was no second edition of *Influences*, so all copies have the publication date of 1911. But my copy (which has no marginal markings) bears a printing date of 1930, the name of the owner, and what is evidently a purchase date of 1937. Yet, except in the copy he examined at the University of Sheffield, Keighren does not give us the dates of printing of the copies of *Influences* he examined. (The University of Sheffield's copy has a printing date of 1947, which suggests it may have been a replacement copy.) The only dating one can reliably prove is that the marginal comments cannot antedate the printing date. So the printing date is important to know in evaluating the marginal comments. This is especially so now that libraries have removed the old charge cards from the backs of books and no longer keep records of who charged them out, and when.

This leads to the broader question of the number of books printed and (in this instance) the geography of their distribution. Though Keighren searched the publisher's (Holt) archive at Princeton University, he gives us no sales numbers or even sizes of print runs. But copies must have run into the thousands over the various printings of the book. Not having looked at the Holt archives, I have no idea whether it retains sales data. But what one ideally would like to know, as a part of the *geography* of the book, is how many copies of the book were printed at each date of printing, and where each printing was distributed. For the nineteenth century, books (especially textbooks) often have printers in several cities listed on the title page, so one can get some idea of the "where" of things. Do Holt's publishing data indicate where copies of each printing were shipped, even if only to distribution centers? Do the records of Constable, Holt's London distributor, survive, and did Constable distribute the book elsewhere in the English-speaking world? Keighren does tell us about shipments from Holt to Constable, but, given that the geography of the book necessarily involves its distribution, the general question of method is then how we can access or estimate that distribution.

We are still in a time when, to cite Keighren's quotation from Leah Price, "the geography of the book is still making up its rules." So we cannot expect perfection here. While I do find some important and under-addressed methodological issues within and beyond *Bringing Geography to Book*, my intent has been simply to engage with its argument, and certainly not to disparage the effort. I do not think this book obviates the need for a full biography of Semple (nor do I believe Keighren would claim that it does). But I learned a number of new things, particularly in its British sections, about her path toward professional recognition and achievement. I see this book, then, as providing an impetus toward expanding studies in the history of geography to include studies of the geography of reception. Keighren shows us not only how much more we

have to learn about Semple, but also how much we yet need to learn about the various reception communities for her work. Clearly, a close reading of *Influences* suggests that there were other directions in which reception might have gone, but did not because of the intellectual predispositions of readers at the time of its publication.

Though the author missed some obvious clues, and the book lacks precision in the use of its principal descriptive term, it is still a worthy effort. Keighren's use of manuscript collections both in Britain and the United States has been admirably extensive. The methods of book history and geography, though certainly still in their infancy, suggest possible new tools for the kit-bag of historians of geography. The book's transatlantic focus is a refreshing departure from the purely national histories most of us have been writing. All in all, it is a promising venture by an author from whose research we can expect to see further innovative contributions in the years to come.

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