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# *Geography in Belgium*

Henri Nicolai

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## The geographic societies preceded the geographers

- 1 Geography came to the forefront in Belgium only through the creation of the geographical societies of Brussels and Antwerp. These appeared in 1876, some weeks after a meeting called in the royal palace of Brussels by the then King Léopold II. This geographical conference launched the exploration of Central Africa.
- 2 At that time geography in Belgium did not fail to refer to its glorious ancestors, contemporaries of the first major discoveries, the cartographers and the authors of Atlases of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Gerard Mercator, the inventor of the map projection which solved the needs of navigators, and Abraham Ortelius. It was precisely on the occasion of projects for commemorative monuments in their honour, which incidentally were never fully completed, that various Belgian dignitaries decided to organize an international geographical conference in Antwerp. This conference, held in 1871, was the first of a long series of geographical events which took place regularly and which were organized by the International Geographical Union after World War 1.
- 3 At the time when there were still no geographers in the Universities, the founders of Societies were, for instance, in the case of the Belgian Society of Geography (Brussels), members of parliament, members of the middle classes and bourgeoisie and army officers who were primarily concentrating on geodesy and cartography. The latter were at that time completing a cartographic coverage of Belgium on a 1/20 000 scale. It is therefore not surprising that one of the first concerns of the Society was to support proposals in favour of a universal prime meridian.
- 4 The members of the Society consisted in a number of teachers and an important part of junior officers who were mainly convinced about the absolute necessity for geography in the art of the war. They were of the opinion that the Germans had won the 1870 war because, unlike the French, “they knew Geography”.

## The geographical societies' interest in participating towards the shaping of the nation

- 5 The members of these societies have shown interest in participating towards shaping the destiny of their country. Their proclaimed major concern was to advance scientific knowledge of the World. This stood out in their requests for travel accounts from explorers and through conferences mainly of the documentary type, similar to those offered to us today by the audio-visual media or by specialized magazines like National Geographic (USA) or GEO (France). Another major concern was to propagate the knowledge of foreign resources to the Belgian business community as shown by numerous articles compiling information about primary resources and commercial outlets.
- 6 These geographers also helped in disseminating the idea of Belgian presence in the projects for colonial expansion, in a country that until then had not shown any interest in the matter. In the beginning, this was done by encouraging and honouring participants in scientific explorations and humanitarian work in central Africa (for example, the fight against the slave trade). Later on, this was continued by regular chronicles on the progress of the explorations and also through the publication of many ethnographic reports.
- 7 But geographers also tried to carry out other tasks of a more national character. They contributed, modestly but with a certain amount of perseverance, towards the construction and development of the national Belgian identity. In a newly-formed state, or at least in a country which had only recently become fully independent and therefore did not have a strongly established historical identity, politicians and historians were trying to present the Belgian state as the logical result, or rather the necessary outcome, of an evolution with its origins far back in the past. They made it appear as the consequence of the politics of the Dukes of Burgundy, for instance, and in any case of the separation during the religious wars of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, between the Northern (majority of Protestants) and Southern Netherlands (essentially Catholics). But to ascertain that Belgium also had a real geographical identity was difficult, mostly due to its natural and linguistic diversity.
- 8 Geographers almost certainly thought that national identity could be reinforced through a deeper knowledge of the country. They principally insisted on the complementary nature of the natural spaces and their interrelationships, and on integration through means of communication, in particular railways. The geographical societies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century encouraged the deepening of localized knowledge. They urged their members and especially local teachers to write monographs on their local communities and very often included these in their bulletins.
- 9 However, certain initiatives at a national level could have resulted in a less integrating approach. For instance, one of the first achievements of the Belgian Society of Geography was to support and publish a national survey conceived by the historian L. Vanderkindere. The survey, like one of the many being conducted in Germany in its kind, studied the eye and hair colour of children in all Belgian primary schools. Over 600,000 questionnaires were filled out by all the teachers in the Kingdom. In a scientific vision very typical of this era, the expectation was to obtain a precise idea of the ethnical

components of the Belgian population and of their geographical locations. The survey confirmed that the “blonde” type, to which the author attributed a Germanic origin, was largely the majority in the Flemish-speaking districts, whilst the “brown” type, for which the author could not define a precise ethnic origin, was the dominant in the other districts. One could possibly consider that this survey had the purpose of outlining the geographical differences in the Belgian nation rather than its common aspects, but it was not at all received in this way. The official line of the era was that Flemish and Walloon were merely first names, whilst Belgian was the family name.

- 10 It was, however, slightly paradoxical to underline both the diversity and the unity of the Belgian nation in school books. Belgium was pictured as a small area consisting of samples of all the natural regions of Western Europe (with the exclusion of the Alpine mountainous regions). It included polders and coastal dunes, maritime plains, sedimentary bas-plateaux covered with sand or with loess, hercynian medium and high plateaux, with splendid examples of miniaturised Appalachian relief, and small chunks of an inner sedimentary basin (Paris basin). The rapid change of landscapes within such short distances was lauded. Some famous artists were even asked to produce prints of several landscapes to be hung on the walls of the classrooms. At the same time, it was underlined that this polyphony, this patchwork, overlapped a unified nation where everybody marched to the same beat, albeit in different languages, towards the same radiant future. However, numerous maps of atlases and handbooks could have been interpreted as a clear indication of different regional inequalities, both social and economic in nature, and therefore presenting a potential source of tension.
- 11 Belgian geographers followed up and even encouraged the progress of “L’oeuvre du Congo” (the Work of Congo in the sense of “good works”), a pompous expression of the times, which denoted the Belgian colonial occupation of Central Africa. But they contributed little on the ground. National sentiment was also fired by the expedition of the Belgica, one of the first scientific expeditions with an international team, led by Adrien de Gerlache, who carried out the world’s first wintering on the Antarctic ice pack (1898-1899). It was indeed the Royal Belgian Society that launched a public call for financial support of its organization.
- 12 We know that the national Belgian feeling was at its culminating point before the war of 1914-1918. After that, the disintegration of national cohesion led geographers to primarily emphasize the territorial differences, rather than the similarities. During the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the tendency even turned towards studying the “fractures” dividing the national territory and to point out that the social fractures could correspond to its regional demarcation lines. In fact, right after World War II, the maps which had been drawn up in the framework of the National Survey were already bringing out most of these contrasts.
- 13 The social function of the geographical societies has greatly diminished. The societies no longer hold conferences for the general public. The Royal Belgian Society of Geography was forced to abandon the premises of the Palais d’Egmont for financial reasons. These premises were taken over by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to hold international meetings. After a short stay in the “Hôtel des Sociétés Scientifiques”, a former Solvay mansion, the library was deposited in the Laboratory of Human Geography at the University of Brussels. The majority of the Society’s members today have graduated from this university. The geographical societies of today favour academic geography. The Society of Antwerp, which did not follow the university path, has all but disappeared

today. The Royal Society of Geography, however, has not forgotten its intermediary role which it always wanted to play between geography at the universities and the general public. It has launched a series of itinerary-guidebooks “Hommes et paysages” (Humans and landscapes, 32 titles today), which offer an enriching means of discovering Belgium. The publication of various economic atlases and of atlases on electoral geography, including those of the European elections, also shows its concern in reaching a wider public.

- 14 Another expression of the interaction between academic geography and civil society outside any structural framework came into being through “Cafés Géographiques” (Coffee discussions on geography) that have been held monthly for over three years in Brussels, in a part of the town which is now moving towards gentrification.

## The late arrival of geography at university level

- 15 Another task of the traditional geographical societies had been the promotion of geography in education and, more precisely, the leading of a campaign for the creation of specific education at university level. Indeed, towards the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, following a number of vicissitudes, courses in geography had all but disappeared. A law established in 1890 instituted or confirmed the existence of courses in general geography and history of geography at the Faculties of Philosophy and Literature, courses of physical geography and of animal and plant geography at the Faculties of Sciences, industrial and commercial geography at the technical Faculties. But there was no full curriculum course in geography. It was only in 1900 that a Royal Decree established a graduate and doctoral degree in geography at the State Universities of Liège and Ghent. The Catholic University of Leuven followed in 1920. Not many students enrolled in the faculty since graduation did not give official access to a teaching position in secondary schools. A short while before, in 1898, an Institute of Geography had been created, following the initiative of the French geographer Elisée Reclus, at the “Université Nouvelle”, a dissidence from the “Université Libre de Bruxelles”, in the context of an institutional and pedagogical reform movement. The curriculum comprised preparatory studies in the Faculty of Sciences followed by a three-year study programme. This programme included courses, exercises, excursions and more specifically practical lessons of cartography, making of relief maps and world globes. This was in fact the first full geography curriculum in Belgium. This programme acquired a good international reputation, even though the students were not very numerous and, in accordance with Reclus’ principles, no official graduate degree was delivered (only proof of attendance). In Spain, that curriculum was referred to as an example when, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they in turn started discussions for a full graduate course in geography at their universities. But the Université Nouvelle only lasted until 1918 and with its disappearance the Institute of Geography also ceased to exist. Its library was even sold to a Japanese university and was subsequently destroyed along with other collections, on the quays of Yokohama in September 1923, during the fire that broke out following the Great Earthquake.
- 16 It was in 1929, finally, that a law reorganising university education raised geography to an equal rank as that of other Science Studies. As soon as this occurred, the faculty members of the new sections of geography founded a new Society, the Société Belge d’Etudes Géographiques (Belgian Society for Geographical Studies) with an exclusively

scientific orientation, of inter-university nature and bilingual. They created a bulletin intended to publish the results of scientific research carried out in the different universities without further concern for contacts with the general public. At more or less the same time, another Society grouped the recent graduates from the University of Liège and published their works. This Cercle des Géographes Liégeois (Circle of Liège Geographers) later on developed into the Geographical Society of Liège.

- 17 Since the year 2000, the Royal Belgian Society of Geography and the Belgian Society for Geographical Studies have merged their respective bulletins into one journal under the title BELGEO, *Revue Belge de Géographie*, *Belgian Journal of Geography*, which is published in French, Dutch, English and German. With a strict refereeing system, it wants to establish itself as one of the leading international geographical magazines.
- 18 The evolution of this bulletin, however, gave rise to some debate within the two Societies. The publication is well appreciated by researchers who are interested in international recognition of their work. But the increasing use of the English language - for instance, there are hardly any publications in the Dutch language any more - has given rise to some discontentment of its basic members who do not pertain to the academic career group within the universities. These are, more specifically, teachers at secondary level who would like to use some of the articles in their course-work and extract the material directly from the publications, preferably in their own language. Others feel that this evolution also risks moving the general public of educated individuals even further away from their general interest in geography, and thereby weakening the traditional bond between geographers and civil society. The update of a web-site of the Royal Belgian Society of Geography, together with the continuation of the publication "Hommes et paysages" referred to above, should facilitate and further develop their intermediary role in the society at large.
- 19 On the other hand, after the Second World War, the teachers of geography in secondary schools formed a professional association, initially on a national level, but which was later divided into a Dutch-speaking association and a French-speaking one. The aim of these associations is to defend the position of geography instruction at secondary level. They want to assist their members in pedagogical tasks through the provision of didactic materials in the form of statistics, iconographic material, model lessons, information about the various forms of recycling and the organisation of excursions. In this domain, the geographers who graduated from the university of Liège have formed their own professional association.

## Geography at the crossroads of multiple influences

- 20 The international ambitions of the BELGEO journal could be interpreted as a reflection of the multiple influences that have marked the Belgian history of geography. From the start, Belgian geographers have been searching for models from their two neighbouring countries, France and Germany, where geography already had a recognised position at university level. Placing the graduate programme in geography under the Faculty of Sciences clearly followed the German influence where geography formed part of the natural sciences curriculum. Likewise, in the domain of human geography, research themes were taken from the German example, for instance in studies on agrarian structures and on rural landscapes. The first faculty members of geography in the universities were influenced by Germany, as was the case, for instance, with Alfred

Hegenscheidt in Brussels, who had a natural sciences background, Joseph Halkin in Liège, originally a historian, who introduced the German method of seminars on geography issues and who also developed its ethnographic aspect, and Paul Michotte, who graduated as an economist in Leuven. However, it was the French influence that dominated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century on aspects such as regional geography, geography of rural settlement and urban geography. Omer Tulippe (Liège) and Marguerite Lefèvre (Leuven), who graduated respectively under J. Halkin and P. Michotte, defended their theses at the Sorbonne. When A. Hegenscheidt retired, the University of Brussels called upon the French geographer Pierre Gourou, who subsequently became a professor at the Collège de France and who oriented a number of his students towards research on tropical geography. Of the same generation, Maurice-E. Dumont in Ghent combined both French and German influences. Various Belgian geographers were attracted by Anglo-Saxon geography. Before the last war, attention turned more towards the United States, both in the fields of Davisian geomorphology, as can be noted in the first part of the work of Paul Macar in Liège, and in the field of economic geography, with G. Polspoel in Leuven. After the last war, Belgian geographers became attentive to innovations from all over the world of geography. This was especially true in the case of quantitative methods devised in Scandinavia and the United States and more recently in the technical application of remote sensing. As for geomorphology and pedology, links have been established with Dutch research centres, more specifically with relation to periglacial phenomena and, in a still more recent timeframe, oceanographic research in the North Sea. British radical geography and the sociological tendencies of Dutch human geographers, almost totally detached of any spatial support, have also resounded considerably with mostly the Flemish geographers. This becomes apparent in the BELGEO journal, through the increasing number of articles devoid of any cartographic support.

- 21 Research carried out by Belgian geographers is very varied in nature. This can be noted, for instance, in the three following studies carried out under the patronage of the National Committee for Geography: 1) *Geography in Belgium*, in 1984, 2) *Belgian Geographical Reviews*, a group of three special bulletins in English in 1988, one of them by the Royal Belgian Society of Geography which deals with the epistemology of human geography in Belgium, the second by the Belgian Society for Geographical Studies which deals with research in physical geography and the third, by the Geographical Society of Liège, which outlines a regional picture of the country, 3) in 1996, *Geographical Research in Belgium*. This shows that practically all fields are covered. It could seem surprising that research in glaciology is carried out in a country that does not have a single glacier. This is the lasting consequence of the Antarctic expedition under the patronage of the Royal Belgian Society of Geography carried out a little over a hundred years ago. A second expedition, in the framework of the International Year of Geophysics, was organised in 1957 and brought Belgium back into the limelight of scientific expeditions on the Antarctic continent. Belgian geomorphologists worked on the Antarctic base and, after its closure, continued to work on the bases belonging to other countries. Some of them today are associated in the European programmes carried out in the Arctic as well as in the Antarctic.
- 22 It is not surprising, however, to find tropical research in the Belgian programmes, a remnant of its colonial past. But this field appeared rather late, after the Second World War, when the universities set up interdisciplinary centres in central Africa and when, at the end of the 1950s, the first two universities were established in Congo. After that,

research was most often carried out through the channel of development cooperation, sometimes on the occasion of educational missions, with a modest extension to other developing countries. The participation of geomorphologists in pedology studies in the Mediterranean and subtropics should also be noted here, and more recently in archaeological studies (Egypt, Maghreb, Middle East) in order to specify the characteristic features of the excavation sites and the conditions of their paleo-environment.

- 23 The complexity of the institutional structures of the Belgian State has probably contributed to the diversity in the fields of interest and the dispersion of research topics. The university establishments in Belgium are divided over three networks which in turn are split linguistically. There is a public network (formerly of the State, nowadays of the language-based Communities), a private catholic network and a free-thinking network. All this hampers research cooperation. The common programmes, which until recently were conducted under the framework of the commissions of the National Fund for Scientific Research, ceased to exist after the separation of this Fund into two community entities. The individual choices have also contributed to the fragmentation and do not generally permit the formation of major research groups. Within the field of environment, for instance, which should have grouped geographers around the common general problems for the whole of the country, the institutional reforms have entailed different structures in North and South, sometimes in parallel but with few links between them, and with different identifications of problems and priorities. It is, however, in this domain and also in town and country planning that research groups have reached the biggest sizes but within the framework of multidisciplinary programmes where the geographers have played a non negligible role but of varying importance. This is in any case a domain where Belgian geographers should find ways to assert themselves.

## A tradition of application in spite of the obstacles

- 24 Belgian geographers have for a long time been concerned with the discipline of town and country planning and the development of their country. A public figure like Omer Tulippe has played a major role in this respect. This professor at the University of Liège, appointed as Commissioner to the National Survey in 1945, at the time when post-war reconstruction of the Belgian economy was initiated, played an important part in paving the way for graduates in geography to pursue a career in the urban planning public services. He also played a major role in the launching of town and country planning. Geographers were also associated in the studies executed by town planning groups for the setting up of surveys concerning territorial space of varying scale (Liège region, the south of the province of Luxembourg, etc.) Some of them also worked on the establishment of regional sectoral plans.
- 25 In response to concern expressed by the International Geographical Union (IGU) during its congress in 1960, a commission of applied geography was created within the National Committee of Geography. Its work led to the drafting of a leaflet "*The applications of geography in Belgium*" which, at its presentation at the Congress of London (1964), certainly contributed to the establishment of the IGU Commission on Applied Geography, of which O. Tulippe was the first president. A second leaflet in 1968 focussed on "*The geographers in the service of the society*".
- 26 During the same period, geographers also participated in the preliminary studies for agricultural land consolidation. Not directly in the operational field (apart from those

who had acquired a specialisation in pedology and participated in the classification of soils) but in providing their knowledge gained from studies on agrarian structures. They, for instance, proposed priority criteria. They also introduced concern for the respect of landscapes and later for the respect of ecological aspects.

- 27 Geographers have for a long time also participated in the study of demographic differentiation in the national territory, both with respect to pure demographic indicators and to migratory flows. A number of them have shown interest in the repartition of the immigration population and the process of segregation in the metropolis.
- 28 The successive stages of the federalisation of the State, as from the 1970s, slowed down or interrupted studies relating to national development planning. But as the new government structures became operational, geographers again joined in the preparation of development or structural planning in Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels. The departments of geography of the French-speaking universities, for instance, are associated with the activities of the Standing Committee for the Regional Development of the Walloon Region. The contracts are executed by the departments themselves or by new research groups, often multi-disciplinary. Certain universities are closely associated with the studies of local development in the agglomeration where they are located. This is the case, in particular, for Liège, Brussels and Leuven.
- 29 During the last decades, new dimensions of problems to be studied have arisen, in particular those in relationship to environmental quality, management of the environment and the necessity for sustainable development. Geographers who were few and mainly concentrated in education, did not play the significant role their specialisation could have represented in these fields. They had too often left the initiative to others but through their specialisation in cartographic representation which used computing technology, they managed to penetrate the organisations and research consultancies in charge of regional planning and environmental impacts of private and public projects (urban and economic) and, in more general terms, of environmental management. Some geographers even became executive members or members of the planning committees. It is significant to note that the types of employment of geographers have changed considerably over the last twenty years. Whereas previously almost all of the graduates in geography pursued a career in the educational field, in the last fifteen years the majority of graduates have joined public, semi-public or private research consultancies. The number of graduates employed in the educational field has dropped from 65 percent for those who graduated between 1970 and 1976, to 25 percent for those graduating between 1988 and 1992. (Belgeo, 2000, p. 245). The proportion of unemployed is remarkably low compared to graduates from other natural or human science fields. In the last decade, the number of graduate students has risen considerably compared to the previous two decades.

## The present organisation of education and research

- 30 *University education* has evolved in order to take account of present concerns and demands. A complete curriculum is in place in the six main universities of the country (Gent, Liège, Louvain-la-Neuve, Leuven, Bruxelles, Brussel) and the two first years are also taught at the Faculties of Namur. The curriculum programme is very similar between one university and another as the general outline remains fixed by the government. It should

be noted that the main general courses have often been replaced by smaller, more specialised units, some of which are optional. Often the designation “human geography” no longer exists and has been replaced by multiple subdivisions (social geography, cultural geography, demogeography, rural geography, trade geography, urban geography, etc.) Courses on automated cartography, quantitative methods, remote sensing and Geographic Information Systems are in all curricula. In the graduate programme, students choose between two main career orientations, one being human geography *sensu lato* and the other physical geography. It should be noted that if the two principal sections of geography are included in the mandatory part of the programme, often there is a clear topographic separation between the departments which are responsible for it, for instance, geomorphology being located on the same premises as geology. At the university of Liège, however, on the occasion of the instauration of the campus of Sart Tilman, both orientations were grouped into one Institute of Geography which is located into a building entirely for its own use. Elsewhere, the topographical dissociation also reflects the growing divergence between studies and research. However, environmental concerns have resulted in a rapprochement, precisely on the occasion of impact evaluations being conducted for development projects and studies concerning the human aspects of natural risks.

- 31 Postgraduate studies, sometimes organized on an inter-university basis, are in particular concerned with applied geography in town and country planning or with cartography or remote sensing techniques. In both the universities of Ghent and Liège, a new path has been created to prepare specialists in geometry-topography, cartography, photogrammetry, remote sensing, use of GIS, satellite positioning, etc. (graduate in geomatics-geometrology). The geographers have also participated in the organisation of graduate curricula in tourism, management of the environment and transport management.
- 32 As to *research*, this is carried out mainly in the universities. Apart from the meagre resources which the universities have for research, they also work with public subsidies provided by the Regional or Federal Funds for Scientific Research. The gross of research work today is carried out under contract, for public or semi-public institutions, sometimes for professional organizations and more rarely for private companies.
- 33 In the framework of the National Committee of Geography, which has kept a united structure, Belgian geographers continue to execute common projects. Let us recall the fact that it was through the National Committee that Belgian geography played an important role in the International Geographical Union. P. Michotte was the general secretary of the organisation in the years leading up to the Second World War and M. Lefèvre was vice-president of the Union after first having been assistant secretary.
- 34 Following a recommendation made by the IGU, the National Committee produced two successive national Atlases. The third has taken the shape of monographs, and is being executed by inter-university groups and is subsidised by the Federal Services of Scientific Research. It was also under the aegis of the National Committee that a synthesis on Belgian geography in 1992 was published. Specific sub-commissions concentrate either on the Atlas, or on geomorphology or cartography.
- 35 We should also note that it is under the auspices of the Belgian Society for Geographical Studies that each university department of geography in turn organizes a Belgian Geographical Day every two years, where young researchers go and present their work.

## Persistence, but also the ups and downs of geography at secondary school level

- 36 In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, geography was associated with history at secondary school level. There were no proper geography instructors to teach the subject. As we have seen above, it was only in 1929 that geography achieved the same status as the other subjects of the Faculty of Sciences and that geography graduates, holding a complementary teaching degree for secondary education, obtained access to the regular teaching positions in the education system. For those who had obtained a degree in conformity with the Royal Decree of 1900, access was denied in some of the educational establishments and in the teachers' training colleges (the study of the environment had gained an important role in the primary schools). It was, however, after the second World War that the number of geography graduates started to grow significantly.
- 37 Today it is difficult to give an outline of the present situation of geography in the Belgian educational system due to its complexity. It is more complex still than the situation at university level already outlined above. There are three linguistic systems, each pertaining to one of the three cultural communities of the country : the Flemish, French and German- speaking communities. There are two sectors : one public (or assimilated as), the other private (mostly catholic but with public grants). All these systems may have different programmes and objectives. These, moreover, have varied over time. Some more recent pedagogical innovations in the French-speaking public sector, for instance, have increased the weekly number of geography lessons in the framework of certain study orientations, whereas others have reduced the number of hours and integrated them into other lesson plans dealing with current affairs. Most often, there is not more than one hour of geography per week in the public system. The further division of middle school into three cycles of two years (in the French-speaking system) has also reduced the number of teaching positions since only the last two years are available to university graduate teaching positions, as the other two cycles are reserved for polyvalent college graduates in education. This last point has contributed to a decrease in attraction of university graduates to teaching positions, since nowadays it is hard to find a full-time position in one school institution only. It is paradoxical that the increasing number of geography students at university level coincides with the tendency to reduce the number of geography classes at secondary education level.

## Conclusion

- 38 It is clear that, similarly to other European countries, Belgian geography today has to face identity and recognition problems in the scientific and educational community. Its social usefulness is not disregarded, but this does not always guarantee its rightful place in the educational and research programmes due to competition with other social sciences *stricto sensu* on the one hand and with the natural sciences on the other. This however has not prevented Belgian geography from keeping all its dynamism and showing a more enterprising face than ever.

## Three eminent geographers in Belgium in the midst of the 20<sup>th</sup> century



**OMER TULIPPE (1896-1968)**

**PROFESSOR AT THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF LIÈGE. HE WAS APPOINTED GENERAL COMMISSIONER OF THE NATIONAL SURVEY IN 1945. PRESIDENT OF THE BELGIAN NATIONAL COMMITTEE FOR GEOGRAPHY. FIRST PRESIDENT OF THE UGI COMMISSION ON APPLIED GEOGRAPHY.**



**MARGUERITE LEFÈVRE (1894-1967)**  
**THIS DISTINGUISHED GEOGRAPHER WAS THE FIRST WOMAN TO BE APPOINTED PROFESSOR AT THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF LOUVAIN. SECRETARY OF THE SOCIÉTÉ BELGE D'ÉTUDES GÉOGRAPHIQUES FROM 1931 TO 1958. FIRST VICE-PRESIDENT OF UGI (1949-1952).**



**PIERRE GOUROU (1900-1999)**  
**PROFESSOR AT THE FREE UNIVERSITY OF BRUSSELS AND PROFESSOR IN GEOGRAPHY OF THE TROPICAL WORLD AT THE COLLÈGE DE FRANCE (PARIS). ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT FRENCH GEOGRAPHERS OF THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY. HE HAS BEEN PRESIDENT OF THE TWO BELGIAN GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETIES.**

## Société Royale Belge de Géographie



The *Société Royale Belge de Géographie* was founded 128 years ago, on 27 August 1876, as the *Société Belge de Géographie*, just a few days before King Léopold II opened the *Conférence géographique de Bruxelles* and a few months before the creation of the *Société de Géographie d'Anvers*. In that time, there was a great interest towards a better knowledge of the different parts of the world, under the influence of colonialism and trade. At the beginning, its members were scientists as well as businessmen, lawyers or functionaries. At the end of the century, the Society had more than a thousand members. The Society has supported various explorations in different parts of the world. For example, it gave special receptions to Henry-Morton Stanley in 1878 and 1890, organised a public subscription for the *Belgica* expedition of Adrien de Gerlache to the South Pole in 1896 and attributed a prize to the Belgian scientific expedition to the Ruwenzori in 1933.

In 1882, King Léopold II took the Society under his protection and authorized the introduction of the term “royale” in the name of the Society. Later, King Albert I took part to several meetings of the Society. More recently, the festivities of the centenary of the Society received support from the King.

From the beginning, the Society has published a journal, named *Bulletin de la Société Belge de Géographie* the first seven years, *Bulletin de la Société Royale Belge de Géographie* afterwards, and *Revue belge de géographie* from 1962. This last change of name renders deeper changes. At the end of the fifties, the Society lost the financial support from different colonial organisations and established its seat at the *Institut de Géographie* from the *Université Libre de Bruxelles*. Under the influence of Jean Annaert, general

secretary from 1959 to 1976, the *Revue* became more scientific, closely associated to academic research, publishing doctoral thesis and memoirs. Further evolution occurred under the influence of Christian Vandermotten, who became editorial secretary of the *Revue* in 1973, and who transformed the publication into a more international one, publishing contributions from colleagues from other countries, papers from colloquiums or from international research teams, often in English.

In 2000, the journal merged with the “Bulletin de la Société Belge d'Etudes géographiques” under the name “Belgeo”, acronym for “Revue Belge de Géographie – Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Geografie – Belgian Journal of Geography”. Another constant goal of the Society is popularization. This goal has for a long time been achieved through the organisation of conferences. Since 1986, the Society publishes a collection of touristic guides, under the title *Hommes et Paysages*. At the moment, 33 guides have been published. The general idea is to teach the non specialist how to understand a landscape. Most items are the result of collaborations between authors from different disciplines.

Furthermore, the Society has been holding from the beginning a library, which collection is composed of books, journals but also atlases and maps. The collection is now of even greater interest due to the growing age of the Society ; some books, atlases and maps of the last two centuries have gained evident historical value.

Since its foundation, the Society has established relations with foreign associations and colleagues. The *Société Royale Belge de Géographie* has become a founder member of the European Society for Geography (EUGEO). Henri Nicolaï, was the first president of EUGEO, now chaired by Christian Vandermotten, who is president of our Society.

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KESTELOOT C., THOMAS I. *et al.*, (2000), "Belgian geographers at work : the occupations of graduates in 1999", *Belgeo*, Special Issue, 20<sup>th</sup> International Geographical Congress, pp. 241-249.

The *Bulletin of the Belgian Society for Geographical Studies* has published every three to four years the list of graduate papers and doctoral theses presented in all Belgian universities. *Belgeo* has taken over this tradition. The *Belgeo* 2003/2 issue contains the list for the years 1999 to 2003 (pp. 196-222). In 2003, the Geographical Society of Liège has published a summary listing of all papers and theses defended in its university between 1904 and 2002 (see reference above, pp. 151-184).

#### WEB SITES AND ADDRESSES PROVIDING INFORMATION ON THE GEOGRAPHICAL LIFE IN BELGIUM

Comité National de Géographie, National Committee of Geography. URL : <http://www.geo.ulg.ac.be/NatComGeo>

Société Royale Belge de Géographie (Royal Belgian Society of Geography), Campus U.L.B.de la Plaine, C.P. 246, Boulevard du Triomphe B-1050 Brussels ; [srbg@ulb.ac.be](mailto:srbg@ulb.ac.be) ; <http://www.srbg.be>

Société belge d'Etudes géographiques, Belgische Vereniging voor Aardrijkskundige Studies (Belgian Society for Geographical Studies), W.de Croylaan, 42, B-3001 Heverlee

Société géographique de Liège (Geographical Society of Liège), Institut de Géographie, Allée du 6 Août , 2, B-4000 Liège

FEGEPRO, Fédération des Professeurs de Géographie (Federation of Teachers in Geography), French-speaking society ; e-mail : [fegepro.andries@skynet.be](mailto:fegepro.andries@skynet.be)

VLA, Vereniging Leraren Aardrijkskunde (Society of Geography Teachers), Dutch-speaking society, Postbus 88, B-2550 Kontich. URL : [www.vla.geo.org](http://www.vla.geo.org)

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