Translating place: orthography and the problem of place names at the Royal Geographical Society, 1830–1919

*technē* CDA studentship

**Summary**

This project seeks to understand how the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) sought to resolve a seemingly intractable problem: how to accurately and authoritatively record the world’s place names in the face of dizzying variety in global spelling, pronunciation, and alphabet. How the RGS tackled the problem of “orthography”—and how it subsequently policed and promoted its solution—reveals much about the relationship between institutional authority and geographical knowledge and exposes the complex relationships between indigenous and imperial modes of understanding space and place. In tracing the development of the RGS’s orthographic principles, the project will show how geography and linguistics, and politics and diplomacy, shaped the way the world was brought to “order” in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Revealing the imperial underpinnings of orthography, and its impact on the production of maps and other geographical publications, offers an important opportunity to contribute to wider efforts to decolonise the discipline and to encourage new audiences to engage with its empirical and material legacies. The project will use community engagement activities—including counter-mapping and the development of non-imperial orthographies—to challenge traditional histories of geography and to engage under-represented communities with the collections of the Society.

**Focus and significance**

This project takes as its focus a problem that troubled the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) from its inception in 1830: how should the recording of place names on maps and in other geographical publications be standardised given the international vagaries of language, alphabet, spelling, and pronunciation? Far from an esoteric issue, the problem of “orthography” raised fundamental and enduring questions about who had the authority to adjudicate on place names, to determine their correct spelling or pronunciation, and to anticipate the cultural consequences that particular practices of naming might have. Orthography was, in that sense, part of a wider imperial programme that sought to leverage Western scientific authority in bringing to “order” the geography of the non-Western world. Orthography sat at the intersection of science and colonialism, cosmopolitanism and geopolitics. It was, simultaneously, a problem of linguistics, geography, politics, and diplomacy.

Orthography mattered, in particular, in the production of two unique geographical media: maps and gazetteers (the printed indices or dictionaries of place names, and their
associated geographical characteristics, that typically accompanied maps). Central to the authority of both forms of publication was certainty not only over the location of places, but also the names of those places. Just as the Linnean system had sought to provide an international language for the classification of the natural world in the 18th century, so too did orthography seek, in the 19th, to impose certainty over the diversity of the human world. Understanding the development of the RGS’s orthographic system, and its impact on the making of maps and gazetteers, provides an important opportunity to interrogate the forms of cultural, linguistic, and knowledge exchange that underpinned the making of geographical knowledge in the period under investigation.

A history of geography’s approaches to orthography has never been attempted and is a new and significant focus of attention. This project seeks not only to reveal the imperial and colonial underpinnings of the RGS’s work on orthography, but also to demonstrate the cultural and political power that place names have and how, in the spirit of decolonisation, communities previously silenced by particular forms of orthography can counter that process through the production of their own systems of orthography. Working in collaboration with the RGS-IBG, the project will engage new audiences in the development of alternative, non-imperial orthographies. It will do this specifically by using community counter-mapping as a tool of public engagement. Working with school groups and diasporic communities from the former British Empire, the project will facilitate the creation of a collaborative map and gazetteer of London’s place names. In reversing the indigenous/imperial logic of earlier orthographic projects, this mapping exercise will return geographical agency to BAME communities and offer an opportunity to explore the diversity of 21st-century London. Here, the project will benefit significantly from the Society’s links with London’s schools and diasporic communities.

Institutional and disciplinary contexts

The role of the RGS as an arbiter of geographical truth came into particular focus following its decision in 1878 to establish a special committee tasked with drawing up a set of orthographic rules. The RGS had, until this point, relied on a system of transliteration drawn up the previous century by the philologist Sir William Jones that, by the last quarter of the 19th century, was no longer considered sufficient. The minutes and reports of the Orthography Committee (1879–1919) detail the development of the principles by which the Society sought to define and promote a revised system of orthography. This work was not, however, undertaken in a scholarly silo; the strategic military and diplomatic implications of orthography were widely recognised and the Orthography Committee worked in close cooperation with the Admiralty. The Society’s orthographic project was, in that respect, one that brought together academic expertise, naval priorities, and the concerns of statecraft.

The task of interpreting and operationalising the RGS’s system—which came to be known subsequently as “Geographic I”—was most vociferously pursued by the Edinburgh geographer George Goudie Chisholm. Central amongst Chisholm’s concerns was to develop and promote an international standard for orthography built upon the Society’s principles—a scheme he outlined first at the Sixth International Geographical Congress in London in 1895. One of Chisholm’s more innovative proposals to facilitate the internationalisation of the Society’s orthographic rules was to deposit gramophone recordings of approved pronunciations at geographical societies around the world. Chisholm’s correspondence with
the committee, and reports and papers on this subject—uniquely preserved at the Society—will form an important focus.

Tracing the diffusion and adoption of “Geographic I” within and beyond the United Kingdom presents an opportunity to consider how the RGS managed and promoted its status as an international authority in and for geography. Equally, the legacy of “Geographic I” also provides an insight into the processes by which the RGS ultimately relinquished direct control over the orthographic system as its civil and military implications became more fully appreciated. From 1919, the Society’s Orthography Committee was replaced by a Permanent Committee on Geographical Names (PCGN)—a multi-agency authority that included representatives from the RGS, the Admiralty and War Office, various branches of Whitehall, and the Post Office. The PCGN remains in operation today, with offices at the RGS-IBG, and is tasked with advising the British government “on policies and procedures for the proper writing of geographical names for places and features outside the UK”.

As much as orthography was a matter of certainty and seemingly objective and rational standardisation—an exercise in administration—it was, perhaps more significantly, a matter of listening. Among the rules devised by the Orthography Committee was that “The true sound of the word as locally pronounced will be taken as the basis of the spelling”. This apparently straightforward principle raised, in fact, a number of intractable questions about what constituted the “true” sound of a place name and which individuals were qualified to deliver its local pronunciation. While “local” was used here as a synonym for “native”, there was little certainty about what to do in situations where more than one indigenous population shared a territory but not a common language. In short, orthography necessitated careful listening, but it also forced a judgement to be made about who should be listened to. The orthographic system served, in this respect, to amplify some voices whilst it silenced others.

**Academic contexts**

While the history of orthography in geography has not yet been subject to any sustained scholarly attention, the project will draw from the more extensive and related literatures on the cultural politics of place names (e.g., Berg and Vuolteenaho, 2009; Eades, 2017) and on 19th-century international cartographic projects (e.g., Pearson and Heffernan, 2015). The project sits, more broadly, within a context of critical disciplinary historiography that is attentive to the situated and embodied production of geographical knowledge. In this respect, it draws on work in the history of science that is defined by its attention to the contested nature of truth and authority (e.g., Shapin, 1994) and work in the history of geography that examines the role and agency of individuals and institutions in the production, evaluation, and circulation of knowledge (e.g., Livingstone, 2003; Jöns et al., 2017). In its engagement with maps and gazetteers, the project intersects with both book history and critical cartography (e.g., Keighren et al., 2015; Dodge et al., 2009; Edney, 2019). The project is also part of—and will draw on literature from—a larger undertaking to decolonise the discipline of geography by attending to its colonial underpinnings, placing its work in international context, and making space for voices previously silenced by particular forms of geographical practice (e.g., Schelhaas et al., 2020).
Research questions

1. What factors led the RGS to develop a new orthographic system?
2. What linguistic and geographical principles underpinned the development of that system’s rules?
3. How were those rules interpreted and what impact did they have on maps and gazetteers published after 1878?
4. What does orthography tell us about the role of the RGS as an arbiter of geographical truth?
5. What does orthography reveal about the exchange and authorisation of geographical and scientific knowledge in the age of empire? What is its legacy in a postcolonial present?

Sources and methods

The archives of the RGS-IBG are rich with respect to the problem of orthography. Of particular significance are the minutes, reports, and correspondence of the Orthography Committee which trace the Society’s forty-year effort to develop, implement, and disseminate its orthographic system. The longer history of debates over orthography will be followed through the minutes of the Society’s Council and, more particularly, its Publication Committee, among whose tasks was to decide on how orthographic principles should be applied to the Society’s publications. The Society’s Journal Manuscript Collection—which includes correspondence between individual authors and the Society’s editors—will, in addition, provide valuable insights into how authors sought either to demonstrate their compliance with the Society’s orthographic principles or to highlight the limitations and compromises of those principles. The archives also include pamphlets and publications on geographical naming and transliteration that shed light on wider linguistic debates in geography and allied disciplines.

In addition to the range of primary manuscript sources upon which the project will draw, the RGS-IBG holds a significant collection of 19th- and early 20th-century gazetteers, as well as the atlases and maps they typically accompanied. These sources are particularly important for tracing the use of competing orthographic systems prior to 1878 and the subsequent application of “Geographic I” as a project of geographical standardisation. Beyond the RGS-IBG, the libraries of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew and Royal Society hold a number of important examples of 19th-century gazetteers.

The project will combine archival and bibliographical research with critical cartographical analysis. Primary and secondary sources will be used to reconstruct and explain the development of orthography in 19th- and early 20th-century geography and critical bibliographical and cartographical approaches will be employed to trace its influence on the production of gazetteers and maps. While the project will draw on the physical collections of the RGS-IBG, it will also benefit significantly from the recently launched Wiley Digital Archives platform, which provides searchable online access to a major proportion of the Society’s manuscripts, maps, and atlases prior to 1953. The distinctive value of this platform—access to which will be provided as a benefit of the partnership—lies in the ability to identify relevant source material by keyword search and to facilitate the comparative side-by-side study of different sources and media that is otherwise difficult to achieve when using physical sources alone. Given the project’s empirical focus, and range of investigative
methods, it is likely to attract an applicant with a background in historical geography, history, linguistics, or post-colonial studies.

Research support

The RGS-IBG will offer the student a range of in-kind support. It will provide access to a dedicated workspace in the Foyle Reading Room to support the student’s staff-level engagement with its collections and, as noted previously, the student will also be given full access to the Wiley Digital Archives platform. The student will be assisted in their research by a team of qualified archivists and information specialists and will gain experience of working with a diverse and dynamic organisation with a high public profile.

Working under the guidance of Dr Sarah Evans (second partner supervisor), and drawing on the RGS-IBG’s expertise in this area, the student will be supported in the development of the project’s public-engagement activities, including its community workshops on counter-mapping and lectures on the project’s findings.

The Department of Geography at Royal Holloway, University of London will support the student in evaluating the project’s research ethics and securing the necessary approvals. The Department is one of the UK’s leading research centres in geography, having been placed second out of seventy-four submissions in the 2014 Research Excellence Framework. Part of the department’s strength lies in its long-term commitment to partnering with cultural heritage organisations in research, teaching, and knowledge-exchange activities. Since 2001, for example, the department has supervised forty collaborative PhD students.

PhD students in the department are part of a vibrant community of some eighty postgraduate researchers, many of whom work in collaboration with museums, libraries, and heritage organisations (including the British Library, Museum of London, National Maritime Museum, and Natural History Museum). Research in this area is supported by the department’s Social, Cultural, and Historical Geography research group—particularly through its fortnightly postgraduate-focused “Landscape Surgery” seminar—and the Royal Holloway Centre for the Geohumanities, which it leads. As a member of both the group and the centre, the student will benefit from access to a wide range of training opportunities and interdisciplinary research workshops. In addition, the student will be eligible to become an associate of the AHRC’s technē Doctoral Training Partnership, led by Royal Holloway, which will allow them access to valuable training and research opportunities in the arts and humanities offered by the DTP’s ten HEI members and sixteen partner organisations.

The department is closely involved with regional, national, and international research networks in historical geography, including the London Group of Historical Geographers seminar series at the Institute of Historical Research, the Historical Geography Research Group of the RGS-IBG, the International Conference of Historical Geographers, and the Museo di Geografia at the Università degli Studi di Padova. The student will benefit from access to these networks and the opportunity to discuss and present their work at sponsored events in the UK and internationally.

Key bibliography


