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Please send to: **Edward.Armston- Sheret.2017**@rhul.ac.uk



## HGRG Newsletter, Summer 2021



- Summer 2021 -

## Letter from the Chair

Welcome everyone to the next edition of our HGRG newsletter. It is almost a year since I took over as Chair of the HGRG, and what a year it has been! As the world still grapples with the ongoing pandemic and the uncertainties and tragedies this has brought to many people's lives, a sense of a "new normal" is beginning to flourish. As archives and collections begin to reopen and tentative gatherings take place, a hopeful space is emerging for igniting new and old scholarship. The HGRG is acutely aware of the impact the pandemic and its aftermaths have, and will have, on elements of research from a range of perspectives and we aim to try and support our community as we navigate new worldly terrains.

The summer is a busy time for HGRG activity as conference season takes hold. Plans for the 2021 RGS-IBG Conference are fully underway and the HGRG is very pleased to be sponsoring a range of fascinating sessions. These include: Bordering the Body, Bordering Empires, Historical geographies of environmental futures, Everest as a space of exception, Bound by Craft, Drawing the line, and our annual New and Emerging Research in Historical Geography. The diversity of sessions highlight the range of exciting ideas across historical geography scholarship and we hope the conference, in its hybrid online and inperson form, will help to share these ideas across the geographical community.

Our AGM will be taking place online during the conference on Thursday 2<sup>nd</sup> September at 1pm GMT. We have a number of committee positions available at the forthcoming AGM, these include Treasurer, Communications Officer, Conference Officer, Newsletter Editor and Research Series Editor so please do get in touch with myself (<a href="mailto:cheryl.mcgeachan@glasgow.ac.uk">cheryl.mcgeachan@glasgow.ac.uk</a>) or Hannah Awcock (<a href="mailto:hannah.awcock.91@gmail.com">hannah.awcock.91@gmail.com</a>) if you would be keen to be involved. More generally,

we would love to welcome new members to the HGRG, so please do recommend the Group to your PhD students and colleagues. More details about the AGM and the committee can be found on the HGRG website (https://hgrg.org.uk/).

This month's Newsletter is full of wonderful insights into the makings of historical and historical geographies. Professor Alan Lester shares powerful insights into his unforeseen dissertation journey and the ways in which this has shaped his thinking and practice. Freely moving between historian and historical geographer, Lester compellingly highlights the increased relevance for his specialism and its ongoing attempts to counter the denial of imperial racism and violence (https://blogs.sussex.ac.uk/snapshotsofempire/ author/fafc6/). Sarah Pickman shares her intriguing PhD research into expedition gear carried by British and American explorers from the middle of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth. Taking seriously the "stuff" of travellers, Pickman advocates the importance of understanding the wider experiences of expeditions during this time. Finally, Jenna Kirk shares her Shelfie and delightfully draws attention to issues of waste, ruins, landscape, storytelling, and the complex politics of what to do when your intended archive is turned into toilet paper! Thanks to all the contributors for sharing their work.

Members keen to contribute to any of these regular features are encouraged to get in touch with our newsletter editor, Edward Armston-Sheret (ed.armston-sheret.2017@live.rhul.ac.uk), or to drop me a line.

Kind regards, Cheryl McGeachan Chair HGRG

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## How I became a historical geographer

### Alan Lester



Alan Lester is Professor of Historical Geography at the University of Sussex, and has also been Professor of History at La Trobe University in Australia. He is the author of From Colonization to Democracy: A Nev Historical Geography of South Africa (I.B. Tauris, 1996) and Imperial Networks: Creating Identities in Nineteenth Century South Africa and Britain (Routledge 2001); co-author of South Africa Past, Present and Future (Prentice Hall 2000); Colonization and the Origins of Humanitarian Governance: Protecting Aborigines Across the Nineteenth Century British Empire (Cambridge University Press, 2014) and Ruling the World: Freedom, Civilization and Liberalism in the Nineteenth Century British Empire (Cambridge University Press, 2021) and co-editor of *Colonial Lives Across the British Empire*: Imperial Careering in the Long Nineteenth Century (Cambridge University Press, 2006); Indigenous Communities and Settler Colonialism (Palgrave 2014) and The East India Company and the Natural World (Palgrave 2015).

t school I always liked both History and Geography. I must admit that I found History the most interesting and Geography the easiest. The latter's O level syllabus, at least for human geography, seemed to be dominated by identifying pretty obvious conflicts of interest: who would be upset and who would be pleased by speedboats allowed on a lake, the building of a football stadium or a motorway? I didn't really see the point of role playing an angry fisherman (always men), a gleeful fan or a relieved motorist, but it was at least easy marks. I would have done History rather than Geography at A level (we couldn't do both) if it weren't for the fact that I couldn't stand my History teacher. My gut feeling was later vindicated by rumours that he had been sacked for sexual harassment.

So I came to be first an A-level and then an undergraduate geographer by default. I was lucky enough, however, to get into Cambridge, where Derek Gregory and Mark Billinge showed that it was possible to be an historian and a geographer at the same time. I have straddled the two disciplines ever since, not really caring whether I'm doing historical research with an emphasis on spatial connectivity or geographical research on the past. The phenomena studied have always been of more interest to me than following any particular disciplinary tradition.

My first experience of doing actual historicalgeographical research was not auspicious. I managed to obtain a travel bursary from Girton College to go to late-apartheid South Africa in 1988 to undertake my dissertation. In retrospect it feels I obtained the funds under false pretences. I had set out with good intentions: to uncover the role that a monopoly of trade might have played in the rise of the Zulu Kingdom during the early nineteenth century. Ever since the age of eleven I had been obsessed with the film Zulu, and this was my chance to visit the site of the Battle of Rorkes Drift that featured in the film. When I got to the archives in Pietermaritzburg, where I had hoped to find original traders' maps, diaries and other relevant records, however, I found ... nothing. Remember this was before online catalogues and email, so the whole venture was somewhat speculative. That's my excuse anyway.

My failure to produce a decent dissertation proved to be the making of me as an historical geographer. This was all thanks to my choice of seating at dinner. After loading my tray in the University of Natal (now KwaZulu-Natal)'s refectory on my first evening in the country, I was confronted with a decision. Sit among the white students who were legally permitted to be at the university, or take the plunge and ask if I could sit at the single table occupied by a handful of illicitly-admitted Black students? It proved to be a Sliding Doors moment.

The Zulu students granted my request to join them with some surprise, one of them saying "you're not from around here are you?" These newfound friends took me under their wing for the next six weeks, proving not only hospitable, but determined to show this white English visitor what life was like under the yoke of the

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late apartheid regime. They did so regardless of the personal costs. Under Emergency legislation at this time of township insurrection, detention without trial frequently resulted in fatalities. Detainees would "slip on a bar of soap in the shower" or "fall out of a window". Among my guides were activists belonging to the United Democratic Front, effectively the internal front for the banned and exiled ANC, who tended to be the most prone to these "accidents".

These new friends and their families in the townships of Pietermaritzburg and Durban showed me Black hospitals overflowing, while those reserved for Whites stood under-used just a few miles away; African schools with peeling walls, too few desks, books, and teachers, contrasting with supremely well-resourced White-only schools; African women struggling to care for their own children while they earned a meagre income looking after White children, and the other inequities that structured every aspect of life under apartheid. I also experienced the novelty of being a racial minority; conscious for the first time of how my skin colour was normalised in the UK, rather than just normal. My first political act was joining the Anti-Apartheid Movement upon my return to Britain. I also attempted to contact two boys whom I had racially abused at school. Meeting one of them in the street, he was gracious enough to accept my apology.

Having graduated I took a teaching qualification and began teaching in a racially diverse North London secondary school. The white boys there tried to speak Jamaican patois and sucked their teeth because it sounded harder than their parents' accents, and overt racism was much less prevalent than it had been in my own school a decade before. I spent my free lessons and holidays working on a part-time PhD on the origins and implementation of apartheid. I ended up emphasising the British colonial foundations upon which the Afrikaner nationalist government had layered the system after 1948, the conquest of the Zulu and the breaking apart of their kingdom being one of them. I have researched, written and taught about the British Empire ever since. I promise that I have conducted my research more thoroughly than I did as an undergraduate in Pietermaritzburg.

My interest in the British Empire and its legacies has been a relatively marginal one for most of the last twenty five years. Despite mountains of academic monographs and journal articles, there has not been all that much public interest in the details of that Empire; more a vague understanding that it made Britain great, but that it had some regrettable excesses too. Taken in the round, the consensus among white Britons has always been that it was an admirable national adventure which probably did more good than harm. The racial apportioning of the privileges and suffering of colonialism was irrelevant, especially after Britain abolished slavery. This has been the view fostered by most of the popular treatments of Empire in books, film and TV, reinforced by conservative public historians, over the greatest part of my career.

All that changed in the wake of the Black Lives Matter demonstrations last year. Never has my specialism been so relevant and never have I felt so strongly the need to venture beyond the realms of academia to write about it; whether as an historical geographer or an historian, I don't

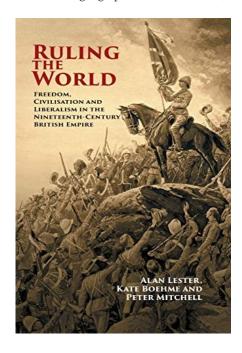


Fig. 1: Alan Lester's Latest coauthored book, Ruling the World.

really mind; as long as I use whatever expertise I've garnered in the last thirty years to combat Right Wing culture warriors' attempts to defend a national story that is still based on the distancing, denial and disavowal of imperial racism and violence. If you are interested, go to blogs.sussex.ac.uk/snapshotsofempire/.

#### From the archives

Postgraduate Representatives

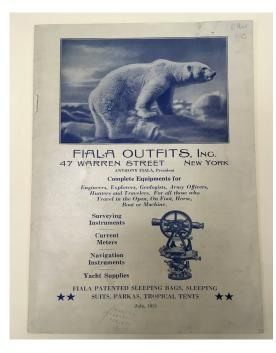
Jenna Kirk

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# Learning from Things: Unpacking a Gear Catalogue from the American Geographical Society Library

## By Sarah Pickman

ike so many other Ph.D. students, I found myself in March of last year suddenly without access to physical archives due to the Covid-19 pandemic. With plenty of enforced time at home, I began combing through the photographs from my pre-Covid archive trips, re-reading documents in search of inspiration for dissertation chapters. One item I was delighted to "re-discover" was this 1931 catalogue from Fiala Outfits, Inc., a New Yorkbased travel and expedition outfitter, that I originally encountered in the archives of the American Geographical Society Library (AGSL).



**Fig. 1:** Fiala Outfits, Inc. catalogue, 1931, American Geographical Society Library Pamphlet Collection, Box 410: Explorers, Manuals, Walking.

By the time he opened his own outfitting business in the 1920s, Anthony Fiala (1869-1950) was an experienced war correspondent and explorer, with expeditions to Franz Josef Land in the Arctic and the Brazilian Amazon under his belt. The 1931 catalogue opens with a description of Fiala's store. "Not all the

romance and adventure is found 'somewhere east of Suez'," the text reads, hinting at the "romance and adventure" that might be found in Fiala's shop while quoting Rudyard Kipling's colonialist poem "The Road to Mandalay." The text goes on to note that as a seasoned explorer Anthony Fiala "know[s] something of what a man would need on any expedition anywhere... From here trains of adventure lead to the known and unknown." The catalogue continues with descriptions and prices for goods ranging from sleeping bags and inflatable rubber air mattresses to cloth parkas and trunks for pack animals. Peppered throughout are notes about the many expeditions to different environments that Fiala has outfitted, and endorsements of his business from other notable explorers like Hubert Wilkins.

Stumbling upon this catalogue in the archives of the AGSL had been a goldmine for me. For the last several years, I've been working on a dissertation on expedition gear carried by British and American explorers from the middle of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth. I focus on the mundane items explorers brought with them - such as waterproof clothing and textiles, chocolate, first aid kits, and tents - and how they used these goods in the field to recreate notions of comfort and safety they brought with them from home. I examine how explorers circulated knowledge about what to pack through geographical societies, expedition guidebooks, personal correspondence, and product endorsements, and how many items of gear were the product of sprawling colonial networks that brought raw materials, like rubber, cacao, and quinine, to British and American factories. Part of my project has also involved looking at how explorers were used in advertisements to sell these same products to a much broader Anglophone public, especially at a time when more individuals were venturing outdoors in search of recreation through camping and hiking.

The 1931 Fiala Outfits catalogue encapsulates many of these themes that I'm attempting to draw out in my dissertation. The catalogue is crammed with goods for far-ranging



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#### From the archives

expeditions, designed to be useful in vastly differing environments, from tropical to polar to desert. Fiala's own credentials as an explorer undoubtedly lent authority to his decisions to sell certain goods; the back of the catalogue notes that Fiala "is ever thinking up new devices for making the life of the wanderer along the uncharted trails more safe and comfortable."

The AGSL archives also include a letter that Anthony Fiala sent, along with the catalogue, directly to the American Geographical Society in 1931, and AGSL records indicate that the catalogue was part of a collection of pamphlets and news articles displayed in the Society's library. Explorers meeting at the American Geographical Society headquarters in New York could have perused Fiala's catalogue while planning future expeditions, or visited his store to speak directly with the veteran traveler himself. The existence of Anthony Fiala's retail business and others like it speaks to the presence of explorers as a consumer segment by the early 1930s.

At the same time, while many of Fiala's customers were explorers, many more were

example, they might choose to purchase a tent in a "marquee" style that "was used by the ancient crusaders and is now popular with the automobile camper." Additionally, just reading the catalogue, with its descriptions of products for extreme environments and evocations of far -flung expeditions, provides some armchair adventure thrills. One can imagine that even someone who never ventured far from home would enjoy paging through the catalogues of Fiala Outfits, or other similar retailers like Abercrombie & Fitch, whose tagline for many years was "where the blazed trail meets the boulevard." As Michael Robinson has written, exploration happened in far-off locales, but somewhat paradoxically, unfolded in in full view of the Anglophone general public, through newspaper accounts, books, and films that documented explorers' exploits. In my dissertation, I argue that material goods performed a similar function. Explorers relied on their gear while on the march, but this same gear also helped them entertain paying audiences once back at home. Robert Peary, for example, displayed his dog sleds and Inuitmade fur clothing while giving lectures to audiences in the United States, and Henry Morton Stanley waxed rhapsodical about the nine chests of medical equipment that Burroughs, Wellcome & Co. made for him in his bestselling expedition account, In Darkest Africa. Retailers like Anthony Fiala sold gear to explorers, but they also used associations with explorers and their adventurous exploits to attract a wider public.

part of a long line of intrepid travelers - for





**Figs. 2 and 3:** Selection of tents and waterproof garments ("Good looking, light weight and really waterproof") from Fiala Outfits.

likely weekend campers who were not venturing far from their urban homes. Alongside endorsements from explorers, the catalogue contains praise for Fiala's products from directors of youth scouting organizations, and from Horace Kephart, one of the grandfathers of the American recreational camping movement. Still, the catalogue allows these leisure campers to imagine that they are

Today, it can seem easy to lampoon previous generations of travelers, especially late Victorian travelers, for the sheer amount of stuff they carried with them, as well as some of their specific choices on expeditions (folding bathtubs? Champagne and pâté?) However, I believe that we should take this *stuff* seriously. Understanding what kinds of familiar, sensory



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## Shelfie

experiences and rituals British and American Acknowledgements: My research in the provisions, would have had different experiences supported my work in innumerable ways. and perceptions than earlier generations of travelers. And examining how the romance of exploration was used to sell goods to a wider public provides insights into public perceptions of exploration during this time, as well as possibly into aspects of Western tourism and leisure camping that are still with us in the twenty -first century; something I hope to delve into further in a future project. Documents like the 1931 Fiala Outfits catalogue can help researchers grasp what historical actors packed and why, and that makes these documents themselves worth unpacking.

explorers wished to bring from home, and how American Geographical Society Library their gear mediated between their own bodies archives (currently housed at the University and surrounding environments, is part of of Wisconsin-Milwaukee) in 2019 was made understanding the experience of scientific possible by an AGS Library Research expeditions of this era. Explorers who expected Fellowship. I am grateful to my advisor, Prof. that their gear would insulate them from certain Joanna Radin, as well as to the many environmental conditions, or from having to colleagues in the historical geography and depend on local or Indigenous populations for history of science communities who have

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## Shelfie By Jenna Kirk



ow to wrestle some kind of chronology from the first eight months of my PhD research? A time of happy drifting through the warm seas of academic literature, yet a time too of being disconcertingly washed hither and thither by the currents of external circumstance. In this shelfie I hope to impose a sense of order on

this early period of work, without lending an impression of orderly progress. My chosen texts are thus displayed in amongst objects, which represent moments of setback, unexpected developments and instances of clarity.



# Canada Service Control of the Contro

#### In the beginning-waste matters

Two years ago, I arrived at my university library, ready to plan my approach to a PhD interview. The project concerned the historical, social and environmental legacies of steel slag in the context of the former Glengarnock Steelworks in North Ayrshire. 'Slag' is an umbrella term encompassing stony waste products from heavy industries- sometimes a prefix is added, to denote the type of industry that the slag derives from. After some thought as to how I would tackle the interview preparations, I opened up the library catalogue search engine and typed 'Glengarnock.' (Although my memory is somewhat hazy, I assume I also conducted equally incisive searches for the terms 'slag' and possibly, 'legacies; historical, social, environmental'). This somewhat uninspired tactic was unexpectedly but amply rewarded with the first volume on my shelf, which I clutched throughout my PhD interview. Glengarnock- A Scottish Open Hearth Steelworks: The Works- The People (1981) is the somewhat lengthy title of a book which tells of an attempt by a team of researchers to record the story of the Glengarnock Steelworks in the face of its impending closure. An implicit narrative also runs through the text however, reflecting the struggle of doing research which is being devalued in real time. Set against a socio-economic backdrop of deindustrialisation, the researchers' ambitious plans extended to an archaeological excavation of the steelworks site, oral history recording with the Glengarnock community and organisation of the steelworks' documentary archives, although evidence of funding cuts to other plans is evidenced throughout the text. After the project's completion, the considerable archive that this slim volume introduces was sent to the British Steel Scottish regional records centre.

The first task of my PhD therefore seemed clearlocate the archive. This was achieved in the space of a few weeks, when I discovered that the documents had subsequently been sent to Shotton in North Wales, where they had been recycled into toilet paper. This information arrived via a conference presentation by Dr Lorna Waite, who had completed a PhD on the Glengarnock Steelworks in 2011. During her research, Dr Waite had travelled to Wales where she was met by the toilet paper news; and whilst I was disappointed by the potential loss of the archive, I was delighted to have found a completed PhD project which had such relevance to my own. The hands of the research gods both giveth and taketh away however- before I had a chance to access Dr Waite's PhD thesis (held in hard copy at Kilbirnie, North Ayrshire and Dundee University libraries) coronavirus restrictions descended again and I was unable to retrieve a copy of

her work. This first section of my shelfie thenreplete with presences and absences- signifies the matter of waste in archival settings. As the documentary archive resources generated by the 1981 Glengarnock project were evidently considered a 'waste of space' and discarded, and my anxieties surrounding 'time being wasted' intensified as access to libraries was prohibited, so my conception of what an archive could be needed to be expanded.

#### From ruination to redevelopment?

I began to look for other scholars who consider the value of waste, and this led me to a broad area of relatively recent work on ruins. Ruins have been variously conceptualised as both object and process, but it was the notion of ruination as a landscape condition which most caught my interest. Here perhaps was one way to consider a landscape as an archive-through tracing the records of use, contamination and discard which characterise post-human environments. Islands of Abandonment by Cal Flyn was hugely influential to my thoughts in this regard. At the core of Flyn's argument is the recognition that places abandoned by humans cannot be reduced simply to the label 'wasteland'- rather, these landscapes do not need us to dictate their character, and indeed are worthy of consideration for what they tell us about ourselves. She skilfully treads a fine line, always maintaining the tension in the narrative threads she interlaces between human and nonhuman agencies. Haunted by people, whether they be landscape decision-makers of the past, illicit visitors or temporary inhabitants in the present, Flyn's abandoned landscapes propose a future where posthuman states of being are valued- and left to their own devices.

Historical geographers of science have made a well-documented contribution to the wider field of science and technology studies, asserting the importance of place in critically considering the doings of science. Echoes of this influence abound in Flyn's text, and in the work of Sebastian Ureta, the next scholar on my shelf. Based on his work in the post-industrial mining region of Atacama in Chile, Ureta proposes the term 'ruination science' as a means to denote the material and conceptual differences entailed by practising science in contaminated environments. Widely adopted scientific measures, such as toxicity baselines, can be troubled in these settings, as the line drawn between what is 'natural' and 'unnatural' is blurred. Often situated at the margins of scientific knowledge circulation, Ureta argues that scientific work conducted in ruined sites should become a more central concern.

## Shelfie

By now then, I was feeling pretty pleased with the potential that the Glengarnock steel slag landscape held as an abandoned place which could potentially make some contributions to Ureta's call. However, more unexpected discoveries were afoot. Early this year, North Ayrshire Council announced that the former Glengarnock Steelworks site would undergo a multimillion-pound regeneration, transforming it into a walking and water sports destination. Initially, I assumed that this would cause the redefinition of the Glengarnock landscape-prompting a metamorphosis from ruination to redevelopment. I must admit that this revelation also almost prompted me to discard my still ink-fresh notes on ruined landscapes- 'was this theme of waste to follow me constantly through this project?' I lamented self-pityingly. Well, as it turns out, yesbut I have Nadia Bartolini and Caitlin DeSilvey to thank for helping me to appreciate the reverberations of ruination in the re-verbs (regeneration, redevelopment, renewal) that swirl around and through post-industrial landscape changes. Casting Cornish china clay mining slag as a central protagonist in their work, Bartolini and De-Silvey thus demonstrate its active role in influencing the landscape planning assemblages surrounding the sites of its discard. They showed me that such landscapes are therefore hybrids, blending ruination and redevelopment, as well as human and nonhuman agencies.

## Betwixt and Between- interdisciplinarity endeavours

The final text on my shelf contains a chapter which highlights a vital, but as yet undiscussed element of my PhD project- that of interdisciplinarity. My PhD blends the perspectives of human geography, archaeology and earth science. As a self-identified historical geographer, our sub-discipline offers many useful ways to approach interdisciplinarity. For instance, the selfreflexive turn and the re-appreciation of archives as sites of knowledge making have informed my choice to interrogate my own cross-disciplinary research practices throughout my PhD, as well as to study the spaces I will inhabit as I attempt this work. Yet it also takes a village to raise a researcher, and perhaps an especially well populated one to nurture a project with interdisciplinary ambitions. Michael Given's chapter, entitled 'Encountering the past through slag and storytelling' represents one such voice in my own village. His piece allows me to read the familiar through the eyes of another, that is, his narrative allows me to encounter slag through the eyes of an archaeologist. Yet in his consideration of storytelling as research methodology, Given simultaneously models the value of thinking through another's experiences. On a field trip to Cyprus, and frustrated by more traditional means of archaeological knowledge gathering, Given encounters a former copper mine worker, who seems to echo his hunch that there is more than one way to know the slag upon which he is working. The former mine worker entreats Given to listen to the stories of human suffering that the slag belies, before suddenly departing, overcome by his own traumatic memories of working down the mines. It is only when the reader later realises that the slag deposits under investigation are from Late Roman times that Givens' encounter with this mine worker is revealed to be fictional. Yet in blurring the lines between fact and fiction- for the details in Givens' story are very much based in fact- other dichotomies (between past and present; detached analysis and embodied emotion; what is valued or undervalued as academic knowledge) are simultaneously blurred and more clearly defined. In telling my own slag stories as my PhD progresses then, and through listening to the multiplicity of voices in the village that will help to raise me, I hope to continue to recognise hybrid ways of appreciating landscape and interdisciplinary practice.

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