

OBITUARY

O. H. K. SPATE

(1911-2000)



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Professor Oskar Herman Khristian Spate passed away on the 29th May, 2000, in his adopted home in Canberra, Australia, where

he had shifted residence from London forty-nine years earlier to accept the Foundation Chair in Geography at the Institute of Advanced Study

at the newly created Austration National University. Although known to most Indian geographers primarily for his trail blazing *India and Pakistan* (1954) and his contribution to the mid-twentieth century debate on possibilism versus determinism (that he had attempted to resolve through his own concept of probabilism) in his death the world of scholarship has lost one of the greatest geographers of the twentieth century. He made outstanding contributions to several branches of geography. While his book on India and Pakistan has been widely rated as one of the finest regional geography ever written in the English language, his three volume historical work on *The Pacific since Magellan* (1979, 1983, 1988) had firmly established his reputation as a master of the art of writing history. He was one of our discipline's leading thinkers, and one of the most attractive writers of English prose in the geographical profession. In his demise comes to end the era of old style all-round ("non-specialist") geographer of the pre-quantitative revolution phase - the tribe that had professed geography in its varied richness of a wholesome mix of historical-political-cultural approaches, the one to which the great stalwarts like Carl Sauer, Richard Hartshorne and Preston E. James belonged.

Oskar Spate was born in London on 30th March, 1911, to Olive Sarah Margaret Tester (who hailed from a large family of tenant farmers near Hastings in southern England) and Karl Georg Spath (who was born in Bavaria, Germany) who had come to London at the height of its imperial power as an apprentice cook. After their marriage Spate's parents ran two small hotels in Charlotte Street, Soho, which they lost when the war broke out in 1914, and Spate's father was interned as enemy alien, and his mother took child Oskar to the United States. After the war they returned to London where the couple now ran a

succession of family hotels in terrace houses (in one of which Charles Dickens had lived). Spate received his early education in the St. Clement Danes Grammar School where he came in contact with one Dr. Suggate, a geography teacher of some eminence, who took Spate under his charge and helped him in obtaining a scholarship to St. Catherine's College, Cambridge. There he studied geography, literature, history and architecture, obtaining a triple First in Geography and English in Part I of the Tripos, and in Geography in Part II. He wrote a thesis on the historical geography of the first half of the nineteenth century London for his Ph.D. While he was studying at Cambridge, Spate came under the influence of Marxism, joined the Communist Party, and married a fellow comrade, Daphne Huband in 1936. (She bore him a daughter and two sons, and was with him in Canberra until late in the 1950s when they divorced. In 1962 Spate married Browning, an American.) After his Ph. D., Spate had spent a brief term as lecturer in Reading, and later accepted appointment as lecturer in geography at the University of Rangoon in Burma, since his professor at Cambridge advised him that with his (half-German) ancestry and his (Marxist-oriented) politics, he could not expect a good academic position in England. While he was serving at the University in Rangoon, the Second World War broke out. He volunteered for army service and was seriously wounded in the first Japanese air raid on that city at Christmas 1941. He was hospitalized and evacuated to India, where he spent remainder of the war, first as Military Press Censor in Bombay, later obtaining the rank of Major in charge of the Burma Section of the Inter-services Topographical Department, South-east Asia Command.

After the war he returned to London, first as lecturer at Bedford College, and later got

promoted as Reader at the London School of Economics (LSE). After his appointment at LSE, he devoted himself completely to the writing of a comprehensive geography of India and Pakistan, then the most happening part of the world. He had got attracted to the geography and politics of this region in the course of his forced stay in India during the war, while serving in the Inter-services Topographical Department. The first fruits of his labour came in the form of a set of two articles dealing with problems and prospects of post-partition India and Pakistan, published in the (*Geographical Review* (1948, 1950) and his chapter on south Asia in *The Changing Map of Asia* (East and Spate, eds., 1950). Prior to the publication of these articles he had already attracted professional attention by his chapter on the growth of London in Darby's *Historical Geography of England Before 1800* (1936) and his two earlier articles (one on Factors in the Development of Capital Cities, 1942 and the other on the Burmese village, 1945) in the same journal. While in London Spate had been actively associated with the work of the Punjab Boundary Commission (1947). (He had been employed to plead the case for Ahmadias before the Commission.) In 1951 he left London to accept appointment as Foundation Professor in Geography in the Institute of Advanced Study at the Australian National University (ANU). In line with the current status of geography as preeminently regional geography, the Department of Geography was located in the Research School of Pacific Studies and, as such, it was expected to have a pronounced focus on the study of land and the peoples of the whole of the Southwest Pacific region. In view of his rich field experience, his broad based publications on Burma, and India-and-Pakistan, and his work-in-progress on the regional geography of the latter region. Spate was most suitably

qualified to organize and lead this department, focused on a vast area requiring broad vision and high quality synthetic skill. It is not often that a task and the skill of the person chosen to perform it match so eminently. His daughter Virginia Spate (Professor of English at Sydney University) says : "Oskar enjoyed telling one that he was asked to recommend names for the foundation Chair of Geography at ANU, but when he had reviewed them, he decided he could not think anyone better than himself.'

The University had been set up to serve as the premier intellectual centre of Australia, and was intended to match the finest academic institution anywhere in the world. With that objective in mind facilities were created to attract the best available talents from far and wide. The purpose was to contribute to raising standards of intellectual discourse, and to stimulate progress in the existing universities in the country. To begin with it projected purely as the apex centre for advance training and research, though later a separate School of General Studies was started to cater to the requirements of Bachelor and Master level students. Supported by lavish funds, and almost complete freedom granted to those holding Foundation Chairs to chart out their own course of progress for their respective departments, the University had offered a life time opportunity to the visionary and enterprising, and Spate made full use of it. Before long, the Department of Geography at ANU had begun to count among the best in the discipline, and it had started attracting high quality graduate (doctoral) students from almost every country in the world. By around 1960, Australia had begun to figure distinctively on the world map of geographical scholarship.

Spate had taken the task of building his department with full consciousness of the fact

that the Department was expected to serve as a model for other universities in Australia, and as nucleus for all round development of geography in that country. At the time Spate had arrived in Canberra, there were only around half a dozen full-time academic geographers in the whole of that country. Spate's view of geography was of a discipline focused on the study of man's life on the earth in its complete regional complexity, and by the virtue of such a focus, comprising two equally essential disciplinary components – physical and human. He chose his substantive faculty accordingly. While he himself towered as the geography-of-man specialist par excellence, his three Readers included a human-regional geographer (Harol Brookfield), a geomorphologist (Joe Jennings), and a biogeographer (Donald Walker.) (One may object to the absence of a climatologist, but perhaps given the fact that the Department was focused on advanced research with a pronounced regional orientation toward the geography of the Southwest Pacific, the absence of a specialist in climatology could be rationalized.) While recruiting his staff with different specializations, Spate took care that each of them was focused on the common starting point of "patterns of things on the earth surface..... with just sufficient overlap to allow [them] to ask useful questions of one another". His staff also exemplified one of Spate's prerequisites of geography as an academic discipline, namely, "a compelling concern for the processes underlying the patterns" (Walker in Ward and Rimmer, 2000). Insofar as the human-regional side of geography is concerned, in his focused concern for processes underlying the patterns under investigation, Spate was well ahead of his time, considering that until around the beginning of the 1970s, geography had remained dominated by the predominantly a-historical perspectives of

areal-differentiation, areal-organization, and spatial quantitative geography, and the formal remarriage between the geographical and historical imaginations-between the spatial and historical materialist perspectives-had to wait until around mid-1970s. As a geographer who had been from the beginning a keen student of history, Spate believed that history and geography are inseparable, and that process of geographical change are simultaneously temporal as well as spatial. Spate's approach to geography had all along been characterized by a wholesome intermix of the temporal and spatial perspectives, an approach that reached its commanding height in his last great work, *The Pacific since Magellan*. So abiding was his faith in the inseparability of the historical and geographical perspectives in the study of life and landscapes, that when he felt that in the post-quantitative revolution phase, spatial-systematic geography had taken the discipline of geography far too away from its time tested focus on a comprehensive view of man's life on the earth, he elected to shift his base from the geographical side of the space-time frontier to the historical. Thus, on the completion of his term as Director of the Research School of Pacific Studies (where his department had from the beginning been located) he terminated his formal affiliation with geography and moved over to the Department of Pacific and Southeast Asian History in the same School.

On the eve of taking charge as Director of the Research School of Pacific Studies in 1967, Spate had agreed to his colleagues' demand to fall in line with the prevailing trend in Europe and America, and split his department into two separate entities, one the Department of Human Geography, and the other Department of Biogeography and Geomorphology. Separating human geography from the physical was apparently against his life long credo on

the unity of geography. It would, however, be wrong to think that he had in any way lost "confidence in his convictions" - though this impression may sometimes appear to get confirmed by his later decision to shift his base from geography to history. As one who had been part of the Department of Human Geography in the immediate post-split period, I view it differently. So long as Spate had continued to head the Department himself, given his towering stature as scholar, his status as father figure (in the immediate institutional context), his liberal view of geography as a united discipline, and the even-handed treatment he had meted out to the developmental needs of both physical as well as human geography, keeping the two components of the discipline together in harmony was a smooth affair, and the widening gap between physical and human geography elsewhere was largely treated as a question of academic debate that was of little immediate concern. But after he was appointed Director of the Research School, there was a qualitative change in the situation. Given the presence of three senior members of almost equal standing, one on the human side and two on the physical, and in view of the general trend in the discipline worldwide, it would appear that splitting of the Department in two separate parts was the only rational course of action that could be taken. Furthermore, as his colleagues in the original Department tell us, as the head of his Department, Spate was a great democrat: "Oskar ran the show on light rein. He could make decisions and did so-firmly", says one of his former colleagues. He further adds, that during his stewardship of the Department, Spate had treated both parts of the department with equal care: "Not only did he ensure that the physical group had first rate laboratories, necessary technicians and excellent field equipment, but he valued it as part of the

Department and the Research School" When a new research school of biological sciences was created, and many in the establishment had pressed for the transfer of biogeography there and geomorphologists somewhere else, Spate's response was to the effect that: "a geography department needed its 'physical side' and that it also provided a necessary leaven in a regionally-oriented Research School otherwise given over to humanities and social sciences" (Walker, op. cit.). The reality was that Spate was the last of the great masters who envisioned and justified geography (through personal example) as an integrated discipline-simultaneously both physical and human, regional as well as systematic. In the stormy sixties he was the only one in sight who could have kept the two advanced-research-oriented components of his Department together. Thus, visualizing the problems that lay in store for the future, he persuaded himself to allow the two sides to have their own separate departments. Rather than lack of confidence in his convictions, it was a realistic view of the situation that had persuaded him to take this step. Insofar as his changeover from geography to history is concerned, the actual position was that he had for some time been planning a major project on the history of the Pacific. Given the nature of the project, the Department of Pacific and Southeast Asian History offered him a more suitable base than the existing Department of Human geography. Students and the staff in the former would have provided him a more interested audience. Part of the reason could also be that he might not have felt all that comfortable in going back to the now truncated edifice of his own former department.

He was no doubt out of sympathy for the manner in which quantification was going on in geography in the sixties, but it shall be wrong to think that he was against the use of

quantitative techniques in geography per se. As Donald Walker says, "During the Sixties, Oskar presided over a rapidly expanding Department....., in its nature the expansion gave lie to some of his own pretended beliefs. He always delighted in railing against 'quantification' yet almost everyone in his Department was busy putting numbers to something or another..... I think in many such matters he thought 'Well. I wouldn't do it like that but, if it works for you and the product is good, go for it'". This, I think, puts Spate's attitude to quantification in the correct perspective. A close reading of his two articles on this subject (Spate 1960a, 1960b) is instructive. He very clearly recognized (Spate, 1960a) that quantification is "an essential element" in the geographer's tool kit, and wrote: "This is, like it or not, the Quantified Age. The stance of King Canute is not very helpful or realistic; better to ride waves, if one has sufficient finesse, than to strike attitudes of humanistic defiance and end, in Toynbee's phrase, in the dust bin of history". His objection was to the tendency toward confusing ends and means-the attitude that echoed Lord Kelvin's dictum: "when you cannot express it in numbers, your knowledge is of a meagre and unsatisfactory kind" (Spate, 1960b). He was against wholesale use of quantification as a fashion, and wanted the revolutionaries to be more discriminate in their use of quantitative techniques, and to recognize that there are some things, like the position of Madrid and Barcelona in Spanish thought, that cannot be explained quantitatively. He took a sagely view of the whole problem and was against the extreme positions taken by the protagonists-the perks (the hyper-quantifiers) and pokes (hypo-quantifierse), as Robinson (1961) had called them. Looking back at the history of quantification in geography one finds that Spate had been saying way back in 1960

virtually the same thing that the erstwhile revolutionaries started saying twenty years later (see: Billinge, Gregory, and Martin, eds., 1982).

Spate's three-volume work. *The Pacific since Magellan*, written and published after he shifted base from geography to history, has been described by critics and admirers as his "crowning opus", his life's great work that "beautifully integrated studies in geography, history and literature- a masterly fusion of Oskar's three great academic loves". In a review of the third edition of his *India and Pakistan* (1967), American geographer David Sopher had remarked to the effect that the essential Spate was still there-some body's ten or twenty pages of close analysis summarized in a sentence or two. That remarkable skill in synthesis that characterized all his substantive work is found at its best in his Pacific volumes, which the historian Daws has described as "a great project, boldly conceived, and wonderfully executed: magisterial, one of the monuments of the craft" (in Ward and Rimmer, eds., 2000). As Spate wrote to me once, he was very pleased with the fact that the book had elicited favourable comparisons with the works of the French historian Fernand Braudel (who like Spate had also started as a geographer).

Scholars have expressed surprise that Spate has failed to receive due recognition in recent books on history of geography, getting only incidental references specially in the context of determinism versus possibilism, and his commentary on the quantitative revolution. Part of the reason for such a neglect on the part of current historians of geography may indeed lie in the fact that Spate was located away from the happening world of geography in Europe and the United States, in the sense that for the last fifty years of his life he had been

living in Australia. Another point to be noted is that Spate did not belong to any school of geography-his vision and his sweep were far too wide for him to narrow his perspectives down to any single school. He wrote one of the finest regional geographies in the English language, but was never counted as part of the regional geography movement of any kind. When the quantitative revolution was in full swing, he stood apart, siding neither with the proponents, nor the opponents of the revolution. While critical of indiscriminate use of quantification by some of the over-enthusiastic revolutionaries, he fully acknowledged the value of quantitative techniques as a set of important tools for geographical analysis. By virtue of his all-encompassing view of geography as a united discipline, Spate was neither part of any reformist movement in the discipline, nor did he propound any new concept or theory, so that textbook oriented current histories of geography find few occasions to mention his name. Another point worth mentioning is that while the historical-cultural perspective in geographical work is very much in currency since the 1980s, historical geography as a branch of the discipline of geography-in the pursuit of which Spate devoted the last thirty years of his life- has remained largely neglected, so that the histories of geography under reference, devote relatively little attention to developments in this area.

After taking charge of the Foundation Chair in Geography at ANU, Spate had come to occupy a position of great professional eminece, and he wielded considerable influence in the educational scene of the Southwest Pacific region, particularly so since his arrival in Canberra had coincided with the process of decolonization and post-war reconstruction in the territories around Australia and New Zealand. Almost from the beginning he was

invited to play an active role in policy formulation for future reconstruction of the erstwhile colonial areas. In 1953 he was joint author of a report to the Commonwealth Government of Australia on Papua and New Guinea, which has been described by knowledgeable people as the basic document for postwar economic policy for that region. He was subsequently appointed member of the Curie Commission on Higher Education in Papua and New Guinea that led to the establishment of the University of Papua and New Guinea. He was also closely involved in the affairs of Fiji. The colonial government of the island colony had commissioned him to make a comprehensive report on the economic problems of the colony. "The Spate Report", as it is called, titled: *The Fijian People: Economic Problems and Prospects*, was published in 1959. The Report is regarded by experts on Fijian affairs, as one of the most farsighted analyses of the fundamental problems of the Fijian people. Spate himself had once described this report as "perhaps the greatest thing in my life". In a seminar at the University of Papua and new Guinea in 1971 he had said, "I tried my hardest to understand the difficulties and aspirations of this very loveable people; to translate what they wanted and what they needed-not always the same thing-into a language which would have some effect in the corridors of power, and it did have an effect" (cited in Ward and Rimmer, 2000). Spate was also actively involved in the planning of the University of Papua and new Guinea, as also the University of South Pacific in Fiji. He was a member of the Interim Councils of both.

Stories about Spate's memory for words, his extraordinarily rich vocabulary, his love for literature and his mastery of the art of writing English prose, abound among his students and colleagues. Of his quality of writing (so full

of scholarly wisdom and spirit) we all know a quality now so rare among geographers as a breed. This quality was displayed most majestically in his volumes on the history of the Pacific. As Gavin Daws (former Chairman of the Department of Pacific and Southeast Asian History at ANU) says: "Oskar lived his working life in high spirits.... [and] This came through his writings", and adds that when young Ph. D. students would come to him "head down, slump shouldered in their twenties under the already fearsome weight of accumulated footnotes, mired in the mangrove swamp of their dissertation topic, worried....about how they were ever going to get anything on the page", he "had a ready and reliable tonic prescription to recommend. Go away, take ten pages of Oskar Spate's maturely marinated yet effervescent prose on his history of the Pacific, tasty and nutritious restorative, and you will feel better in the morning. It was efficacious in every case".

India was very dear to Spate and Spate to the community of Indian geographers who adored him as an ideal scholar and looked upon his India and Pakistan as a model of meticulous scholarship. All through mid-1950s to 1970s this book had remained an essential reference for postgraduate students in Indian universities. Part of the high respect owed to him by the geographical community in India, arose from his status as guru (a revered teacher), who had (together with professor Dudley Stamp, his senior at LSE), trained most of the senior geographers who were heading various university departments of geography in India in the 1950s and 1960s. Among Spate's own former Ph. D. students, who rose to the status of full professors, were P. Dayal (Patna), Enayat Ahmad (Ranchi), and Mohd. Anas (who had studied with him at Canberra). I was privileged to have been his last Ph. D. student in Canberra before he decided to change his

affiliation from geography to history. India had a special place in Spate's life. It was in the course of his stay in India during the war that he got interested in the geography and politics of the South Asian region, an interest that bore fruit in the form of his celebrated book on India and Pakistan. This book had brought him much name and fame, and, to begin with was largely responsible for his front rank status as geographer. This book had also remained his most celebrated work until the publication of his monumental last work, *The Pacific since Magellan*, which is considered by scholars as a major contribution to the literature on this subject.

Though not easily accessible, Spate was a most loving and helpful elder. His general inaccessibility arose from his constantly thinking and occupied state of mind, which was also the reason why he was given to mood-very relaxed and affable at one time and most grave and reticent at another. But the welfare of those under his charge was on his mind all the time. And help was given without being asked for. A most hardworking person himself, he was also a hard taskmaster. Accordingly, he was very choosy in the recruitment of staff and students who, he made sure, must focus on in-depth knowledge about the theme each of them was working on. It was by virtue of such an emphasis on his part, that "anybody in [his] Department in the early 'sixties, from research scholars through to Oskar himself, could have occupied an equivalent post in another discipline" (Walker, op. cit.). What better example to cite than his own; A front rank geographer, one of the leaders in the discipline in the second half of the twentieth century, he had suddenly shifted his base from geography to history, and had produced thereafter, one of the finest histories of a large area ever written.

In Professor Spate's demise, the world of geography has lost one of the discipline's greatest devotees. He has left behind a rich and enduring legacy in the form of his various scholarly works, both in geography and history (that he wrote in the way as only a geographer

would write). His works will continue to inspire professional geographers for a long time to come.

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