

Halford Mackinder

SIR HALFORD JOHN MACKINDER WAS AN EMINENT VICTORIAN who also lived through the first half of the twentieth century, but who never lost that impatient and eclectic mental vigour which was the mark of his high Victorian outlook (1861-1947). He was a man of insatiable curiosity who pursued his interests wherever they led. His knowledge was prodigious and he took its character for granted. To him, it was not remarkable to need to know much about many different subjects. The term 'inter-disciplinary' was not yet current. Not for him that conception of research and scholarship which is content to crawl along the boundaries of knowledge with a magnifying glass, ticking performance indicator boxes and counting publications.

Halford Mackinder pursued simultaneous careers as an innovative thinker, an explorer, a builder of academic institutions, as a politician, a diplomat and a public servant. He once described his life as 'a long succession of adventures and resignations.' His most significant legacy is intellectual. Starting with his synthesising 'new geography' in 1887, Mackinder laid the foundation stone of modern geo-political thinking. It is expressed in the three evolving versions of his 'heartland' theory, first stated in his 'Pivot' paper at the Royal Geographical Society in 1904. He then amplified and refined it after the first world war ('Democratic ideals and reality,' 1919) and again, in his old age, in the midst of the World War ('The round world and the winning of the peace,' 1943). The generous scope of his thought and the nature of his thesis – first to conceive of a socio-physical system under long wave effects; then to hypothesise the grand strategic implications of pressure when a formerly open socio-physical system closes – most closely resemble those of his virtual American contemporary Frederick Jackson Turner whose Frontier thesis of American history has had immense influence in framing and interpreting the American experience.

In his second career, Mackinder built Universities. He was involved in the creation of the University of Reading from 1892. He founded the School of Geography at Oxford in 1899. He was Director of LSE, of course, from 1903-8. It is the combination of the intellectual and the institution-building careers, in particular, that is celebrated in the new Programme which bears his name at LSE.

As an explorer, Mackinder led the first expedition perilously but successfully to climb Mount Kenya (June-September 1899) – his name



is still on the mountain in Mackinder's Camp and an obstacle called Mackinder's Gendarme. As a politician, he was elected as a Liberal Unionist MP in Glasgow (1910-1922). When war was declared, through the good offices of his friend Lord Haldane, he led recruitment for Kitchener's Army in Scotland. As a public servant, he initiated the National Savings Movement in 1915 and was Chairman of the Imperial Shipping Committee through the inter-war years (1920-39).

Early in the Great War, Mackinder realised that smaller Eastern European states could have a vital role, disproportionate to their size, in buffering the competition between Germany and Russia to dominate the Eurasian heartland. So in 1916 he helped to found the Serbian Society and engaged with Tomas Masaryk, the father of Czechoslovakia and with RW Seton-Watson, the famous historian of east-central Europe, in the New Europe group surrounding the *New Europe Journal*.

When Lord Curzon became Foreign Secretary in October 1919, he appointed Mackinder as British High Commissioner to South Russia to promote the gathering of intelligence on the Bolsheviks and to assist General Denikin and the White Russians against them. Mackinder's diplomatic career was brief, prescient and unsuccessful. He quickly concluded that military means alone would not defeat Bolshevism. So, writing from HMS *Centaur* in the Mediterranean in January 1920, he presented the Cabinet with a comprehensive strategy. It coupled a firm declaration of refusal to make peace with the Bolsheviks to restrained but consistent military, economic and diplomatic support of the Whites, to encouragement of the swift establishment of a ring of buffer states (White Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Daghestan). But after he had briefed the Cabinet on it, Mackinder's plan commanded little support. People were weary of war and fearful of issuing even the intimation of more. Mackinder predicted that when in control of the rim-states, the Soviet State would acquire the means to bid for great power status, as it duly did.

Halford Mackinder's geo-political ideas were not determinist, either geographically or environmentally, as some have suggested. They were merely observantly curious, free of excess theoretical baggage and coped well with new evidence. Perhaps in consequence, they have worn better across the past century than more extravagant, noisy and brittle theories of history and society. They are now being more widely discussed again.