

THE MANCHESTER SOCIETY OF COMMERCIAL GEOGRAPHY.

Addressing a packed audience in the Free Trade Hall on 21st October, 1884, H. M. Stanley concluded his remarks on "Central Africa and the Congo Basin, or the Importance of Scientific Study of Geography," by saying that he must needs congratulate Manchester that she had been the second city in this kingdom to aspire to possess a Society of Geography. (1) The Manchester Geographical Society, now some seventy years old, with weekly audiences of two hundred and fifty persons and an established place in the cultural life of the district, was not, however, without its birth-pangs as the following account of the events preceding its foundation will show.

Though second in seniority in the British Isles, the Society is by no means amongst the pioneers. If abortive attempts in Germany and Holland from 1693 onwards are excluded, the body with the longest continuous existence is the Societe de Geographie de Paris, founded in 1821, surprisingly soon after Waterloo. This curiosity, perhaps, provides the key, for the movement of armies across Europe and the Near East fostered an interest in travel and geography amongst the combatants which reinforced the effect of the discoveries of Captain Cook, Mungo Park, Ross, and others towards the end of the preceding century. Then, in the peace that followed, improved communications began to carry the expanding commerce of the Industrial Revolution into distant lands, whilst better education, new printing processes and a more efficient postal system enabled explorers and merchants overseas to keep their home countries better informed by means of letters, books and articles of their adventures and observations and, more important still, of trading conditions.

In the general thirst for knowledge, numerous learned and semi-learned societies began to appear, and as interest in the analytical sciences quickened, so too did interest in Geography.

The Paris venture of 1821 was soon followed by the Berlin Gesellschaft fur Erdkunde (1828) and the Royal Geographical Society (1830). The fourth foundation, and the first outside Europe, was the Mexican "Geographical and Statistical Society" in 1833. During the next thirty years only fourteen more were established, but by 1883, with the full development of the Industrial Revolution, and of bitter international rivalry in exploration, colonisation and trade, the number had risen to ninety, nearly half of which were in either France or Germany. (2)

Britain, as the heart of a vast and expanding Empire, with world-wide trading connections and a leading role in the field of exploration, might well have been expected to support many such societies but, in the event, the Royal

Geographical Society remained unique. Even to-day there are only four public Geographical Societies in Great Britain and another of recent origin in Dublin. True, other attempts were made from 1887 onwards to found similar bodies at Cardiff, Hull, Liverpool, Newcastle and Southampton, but they all failed after varying degrees of success. This is not the place to speculate on this phenomenon, but the fact does underline the special significance of the Manchester Society.

The Manchester of the early nineteenth century exhibited great vitality. Its inhabitants, by their initiative, brought the little town to the forefront of the nation, and then kept it there by the breadth of their vision and the sweat of their brow. With increasing industrial prominence and a rapidly swelling population, municipal status was achieved in 1836, city status in 1853. Spurred by growing prosperity, the city fathers resolved that Manchester should be second to none, and evolved a model administration that attracted such universal praise that they were encouraged to undertake such inspired projects as the Longdendale Reservoirs (1860), the Thirlmere Aquaduct (1877), and the Ship Canal.

In commerce, likewise, the city grew in stature to become "the classic type of modern manufacturing town." The Chamber of Commerce, founded in 1820, came to exert a continuous influence on national policy and the fertile-minded, far-seeing adherents of the "Manchester School" led to the nation in the repeal of the Corn Laws, and urged the cause of Free Trade with vehemence. By the middle of the century the growth of the cotton trade had brought great wealth and prosperity to the city, and Manchester's interests began to shift away from the manufacturing processes towards merchanting, with the result that it extended its influence to become a regional centre with tributary provinces. Improvements in communications by land and sea, a rising national population, and the opening of new markets abroad held out the promise of limitless prosperity.

Success in material matters brought with it a desire for the refinements of civilised life. There was a tradition in existence, for the Grammar School dated from the 16th Century, Chetham's Hospital from 1656, the Infirmary from the mid-18th Century and the Literary and Philosophical Society from 1781. Now the new prosperity demanded more. In 1824 came the foundation of the Royal College of Medicine and also the Mechanics' Institute. Nine years later the Manchester Statistical Society appeared and soon achieved fame for its attack on the deplorable state of education. Then, in 1835, came the Athenaeum and the Manchester Natural History Society. In 1850, the long-felt desire for university education was gratified when, under the Will of a local merchant, Owen's College opened in Quay Street to become the pioneer and model provincial university. Within two years, educational facilities were further augmented by the setting-up of a Public Library. In 1857

the Halle Orchestra gave its first concert. In short, anything was possible in Manchester. The unprecedented opportunities of the nineteenth century had been seized by the shrewd Lancashire business men and turned to profit, both commercially and intellectually.

Then a cloud appeared. Lancashire relied almost entirely on the cotton trade and this, in turn, depended on American raw material. Thus the shortages of supplies resulting from the American Civil War came as a sharp jolt to equanimity. Attempts were made to supplement supplies from India, but cotton imports in 1862 were only half those of the previous year, and the situation remained critical for the next few years, so much so that the Chamber of Commerce set up a Cotton Supply Association to seek out fresh sources of raw cotton. Eventually the situation righted itself but not before foreign competitors had been able to obtain a foothold in the keenly contested markets. Towards the end of the Seventies trade again declined, and from 1880 merchants spoke of a slump. Manchester must look to its laurels.

As early as 21st February, 1879, a meeting was convened at the Chamber of Commerce to discuss the possibility of promoting trade with Africa. In a speech on that occasion, the Bishop of Salford, the Very Reverend Dr. Vaughan (later Cardinal Vaughan) made pointed reference to the existence of societies of Commercial Geography in France and Germany and to the lack of them in Britain, an essentially commercial country greatly dependent on her foreign trade. His remarks so impressed those present that a small committee was organised to take the initiatory steps to form a similar society in Manchester. As the city, together with south-east Lancashire represented a large aggregate of commerce and manufactures it was thought that the proposed society held a good prospect of success in a community which would at once appreciate its utility.

With commendable speed, the special committee met at the Chamber of Commerce on 12th March, 1879, the Lord Mayor being asked to take the Chair. Amongst those present were the Bishop of Salford, the President of the Chamber (Benjamin Armitage), the Professor of Geology at Owen's College (Dr. W. Boyd-Dawkins), C. P. Scott, of the "Manchester Guardian," and such prominent citizens as E. J. Broadfield, J. S. Darbishire, J. F. Hutton, Hugh Mason, A. Provand, John Slagg, and H. M. Steinthal. Letters of support came from Chancellor Christie, Principal Greenwood (of Owen's College), Professors Adamson and Ward, the High Master of the Grammar School (S. Dill), and many others. The suggestion had evidently commended itself to the leaders of Manchester life.

The gathering, representing so many facets of the city's activities, heard the Bishop explain the grounds for his proposal and his suggested Rules and Objects. They immediately resolved to proceed with the foundation of "The

indicated. A Provisional Committee was set up to take the first steps and to draw up a list of officers. "Thomas Manchester Society of Commercial Geography" on the lines Browning of the Chamber was appointed temporary secretary. (3)

Little more than a week afterwards, on 20th March, the Provisional Committee held its first meeting, the Bishop of Salford being called to the Chair. Some measure of his enthusiasm may be gauged from the fact that he presented a detailed draft of the regulations for the new body which could be adopted with only minor amendments, the chief of which was the modification of the title to "The Society of Commercial Geography." This was to be set up "with the object of pursuing scientifically the study of Geography with a view to the practical benefits which such study will confer on Commerce and Civilisation."

After a further meeting on 1st April, when the rules were finally agreed, the constitution, together with a letter from Armitage (as President of the Chamber of Commerce) was sent out to potential members: to firms in Manchester and Salford, gentlemen of official and local standing in Lancashire and Cheshire, and to Directors of all the Chambers of Commerce in Great Britain and Ireland.

When the third meeting took place on 9th May, Armitage, as Chairman, had to report that the response had been disappointing. Upwards of two thousand circulars had been distributed, but only 130 people had replied, 13 desiring to be Honorary Vice-President (£25), 29 to be Life Members (£10), and 88 asking to be enrolled as annual subscribers (£1). The committee thought that such weak support did not justify them in taking any further steps without consulting those who had consented to join.

A General Meeting was therefore called on 27th June, and even though the fate of the Society hinged on it, only twenty people met under the Chairmanship of Armitage. Obviously discouraged but loth to abandon all hope, those present resolved to postpone any definite action until the Autumn to allow more time for subscribers to be recruited: some of the faintheartedness was attributed to the depression and more support might be forthcoming if trade improved.

In the event, the next meeting did not take place until 19th April, 1880. Even so, Armitage could report no significant improvement, even though he and his colleagues had done their utmost to bring in new members. The majority feeling favoured the abandonment of the scheme. Although Hutton pleaded that the Society should be founded with the existing membership to keep it alive until the public realised its worth and importance, the equally enthusiastic Boyd-Dawkins and Steinthal pointed out that, in the face of such apathy, the cost of an efficient administration would prove too burdensome.

The remarks of Thomas Browning, the Secretary, at this meeting are illuminating, not only in relation to the failure of the Society of Commercial Geography, but also to subsequent developments. He complained that the Bishop of Salford, in his outline of the work to be undertaken, had covered a field which comprehended not alone Geography in relation to trade, but the whole scheme of scientific geographical research and discussion. Herein, he thought, was the mistake. Merchants regarded Geography from the point of view of pecuniary interests. The character of a country in relation to its natural products, means of access or otherwise; the population and the articles they would consume of our manufactures; any information of this character would be received with the greatest of interest as means to an end, viz., a market for our goods. To this extent the Chamber might not unreasonably be expected to contribute information. On the other hand, merchants engaged in foreign trade had a personal interest in keeping markets with which they were connected closely to themselves, and the money which individual firms expended was for the benefit of themselves and not for their neighbours. Hence the intention of obtaining commercial geographical information was directly opposed to its publicity through a society.

In regard to recondite inquiries in physical or other branches of geographical fact, it was, he said, a separate and distinct interest from the commercial aspect, and members in Manchester would not be found willingly to subscribe to a society which gave information through the reading of papers which, as a rule, would be had after the business appointments of the day. The members therefore to supply a sufficient excuse would not be found in Manchester, and the Geographical Society was only supported in London as a metropolitan centre embracing geographers throughout Great Britain and foreign corresponding members too.

After such defeatist remarks from the chief official, there remained no alternative but to pass the resolution that "the scheme for the formation of a Society of Commercial Geography not having met with sufficient support and encouragement, it is hereby resolved that further proceedings be abandoned for the present."

Fortunately, the promoters of the Society did not lose their faith. Manchester might consider herself sufficiently well informed on matters geographical, and local merchants might consider only the financial advantages involved, but men of more vision, such as the Bishop of Salford, John Slagg, H. M. Steinthal and J. F. Hutton still firmly believed that such a body was needed and could succeed. They preferred to regard the first attempt as a reconnaissance, and refused to accept the failure as final. How they worked quietly towards their goal, how they enlisted the services of an ideal Secretary inspired with truly missionary zeal, in the legendary person of Eli Sowerbutts, and how another meeting in 1884 led rapidly to the foundation of the present

Manchester Geographical Society, is a story that has yet to be written, but which is well worth the telling.

T.N.L.B.

The Provisional Committee, 1879

The Lord Bishop of Manchester.	J. F. Cheetham.
The Bishop of Salford.	J. Stanley Darbishire.
Lord Houghton.	Rudolph Dehn.
Benjamin Armitage.	Arnold Dehn.
Hugh Mason	James Heywood.
John Slagg	C. P. Henderson, junr.
Councillor P. Goldschmidt.	H. J. Leppoc.
Dean Cowie.	John Mitchell.
Principal J. G. Greenwood.	E. C. Potter.
Rev. A. M'Laren.	H. J. Roby.
Chancellor R. C. Christie.	C. P. Scott.
Professor W. Boyd-Dawkins.	T. R. Wilkinson.
Professor A. W. Ward.	R. M. Wilson.
Sir John Iles Mantel.	Oliver Heywood.
J. F. Hutton.	J. C. Zigomala.
H. M. Steinthal.	W. H. Houldsworth.
E. J. Broadfield.	Alfred Neild.
	Thomas Browning: Secretary.

NOTES.

- (1).—Journal of the Manchester Geographical Society, Vol. 1, p. 25.
- (2).—A Brochure of the provisional Scottish Geographical Society dated 1st August, 1884, gives the following statistics of Geographical Societies at that time:— France 24, Germany 21, Russia 5, Switzerland 4, Portugal 4, Austria-Hungary 2, Italy 2, Belgium 2, Netherlands 2, Denmark 1, Rumania 1, Sweden 1, Spain 1, Great Britain 1, United States 2, Canada, Mexico 1, S. America 5, Africa 5, India 1, Japan 1, Java 2, New South Wales 1. The R.G.S. had 3,400 members, the French Geographical Societies totalled 15,000 members. See also Sparr, Boletín de la Academia Nacional de Ciencias, Cordoba, Argentina, Vol. XXXII.
- (3).—The minutes of the meetings mentioned in this account are in the Society's archives, together with letters from tentative members, copies of draft rules, circulars, etc.