



ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY
(with The Institute of British Geographers)



**HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY OF GEOGRAPHY RESEARCH
GROUP**

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CONFERENCE REPORTS

Geography and Enlightenment, University of Edinburgh 3-6 July 1996

Few places could have been more appropriate for a conference on Geography and Enlightenment than the elegant city of Edinburgh, an elegance matched by the cordiality shown by the University of Edinburgh's Department of Geography and also by the City Council at a Reception in the City Chambers. As the organisers Professors Charles Withers (University of Edinburgh) and David Livingstone (Queen's University Belfast), noted, Geography has been implicated in the 'enlightenment project' in complex ways. For the 30-40 participants who had come from a wide range of countries (Australia, Canada, Germany, Ireland, Netherlands, United Kingdom and United States of America) and disciplines (geography, cartography, art history, history of science, anthropology) there was ample evidence of this claim. [The conference format with thirteen sessions with ample time devoted to discussion - allowed for much interaction and a welcome sharing of ideas]. Evidence abounded that "enlightenment" might be best regarded as a verb rather than a noun, a process of shedding light on hitherto taken-for-granted beliefs and practices, or illuminating new paths toward understanding. This process led to distinct and sometimes paradoxical outcomes; always, however, reflecting the time and space contexts where it unfolded. There have been many "enlightenments" even within Euro-American history; it will be difficult in future to maintain either the capital "E" or the "the" without a qualifying prefix.

David Livingstone's opening paper on "Geographical Enquiry, Rational Religion and Moral Philosophy" used examples from the mid seventeenth and later eighteenth centuries to illustrate how geography was implicated in versions of Enlightenment. As data from geographical explorations challenged traditional Christian beliefs about the nature and culture, faith and science, enquiry into the origins of the human race gained in appeal. In the work of Isaac de la Peyrère, the case was made for a polygenetic rather than monogenetic account of human origins - a sceptical voice about the standard biblical narrative. A century later in North America, one Samuel Stanhope Smith, convinced about the unity of human nature, advanced an environmentally-deterministic explanation for the varieties of human groups around the world. His concern for preserving a Christian morality in eighteenth-century Protestant America led him to espouse the *didactic Enlightenment* - based on Scottish Common Sense moral philosophy - rather than the *revolutionary Enlightenment* proclaimed