The topicality and tropicality of health: from the annals of the RSGS

This virtual issue of the *Scottish Geographical Journal (SGJ)* seeks to support the focus of the current issue of *The Geographer* on health inequalities by connecting it to the annals of the RSGS. Health is a fluid term, and a subject of enduring social, scientific and political concern. Used, variously, to refer to the body and mind, illness and disease, fitness and well-being, and in connection with a range of medical and political interventions in and around the body, ‘health’ has had a significant place in geographical inquiry since the professional beginnings of the discipline in the second half of the nineteenth century, and has long featured in the pages of the *SGJ* and its forerunner, the *Scottish Geographical Magazine (SGM, 1885-1998)*. Perusal of the diverse and changing treatment and connotations of health in the annals of the *SGM/SGJ*, and as evinced from the papers comprising this virtual issue, yields some poignant and prescient reflections.

With more than 3,000 papers written by around 1,500 authors over the past 130 years, the *SGM/SGJ* (now digitized) is a veritable treasure trove of geographical research and education, and questions of health have a prominent, and at times problematic, place in this historical archive and wider geographical discourse. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century geographical writing about health was caught within the clutches of imperialism and environmental determinism. Essays, addresses, and expedition and fieldwork reports in the *SGM* expedited the Victorian and bourgeois, and racialized and sexualized, health preoccupations of the day: public and political concern over squalor, disease and social degradation; scientific interest in epidemiology and contagion; intellectual advocacy of doctrines of climatic determinism, which drew strong connections between disease and backwardness; and imperial anxieties surrounding ‘white acclimatization’ in an exotic (seductive and resource-rich) yet disease-ridden tropical colonial world. Questions of health were integral to the scientific and moral compass, and physical and political reach, of empire. They were imbued with binary distinctions between healthy and unhealthy peoples, practices and parts of the world, and were part and parcel of a Western imperial discourse of tropicality, which valorized a healthy (and by association normal, stable and productive) temperate world over an intemperate and pestilential (and by association abnormal, hazardous and lethargic) tropical world.

Geographical research from this era sought to disclose what was deemed to be natural and inviolable about the health (or otherwise) of nations, races and traditions, and served as a practical guide to politicians, administrators and the public as well as an ideological handmaiden of empire. More overtly racialized and jingoistic incarnations of this kind of geography have been omitted from this virtual issue (while we still need to be mindful of them, there is no need to reprint them), but one can detect many of the above dynamics in the papers by Clark and Bell.
Two world wars, the post-war eclipse of empire (era of decolonization), and the promulgation within Britain of a welfare state with a key focus on public health, along with projects of international development that homed in on the relations between health, population and resources, yielded new challenges and priorities. Health remained a topical area of geographical research, but for changing reasons. Different spatial facets of health began to be taken up and explored in a range of specialized - medical, population, health and development - sub-fields of geographical inquiry, and these developments were bound up with a wider quantitative (statistical and model-based) turn in the discipline, as the papers by Wilson and Howe attest.

Yet matters do not end there. Writing in the SGM on the eve of World War II about English health resorts, E.W. Gilbert hinted at yet other futures and possibilities. First, he pointed to the significance of thinking about health in qualitative as well as quantitative terms, as a matter of social meaning and interpretation as well as of scientific measurement and explanation. Second, his work suggested that the places and spaces within which particular health attributes are identified, lived and embodied are integral to what health means to the individuals, society and the state. And third, Gilbert was one of the first geographers to envision a geography of health as a matter of life as well as death. His paper on health resorts, included here, portends much in what is now a rich and eclectic literature that deems questions of health and well-being as integral to geographies of work, leisure, consumption, heritage, tourism, environmental quality and conservation, governance and identity. The papers by Hall, Philo & Parr, and Philip et al, point in these directions. These and other papers from the more recent annals of the SGJ seek to show how space and context have a fundamental bearing on the way health characteristics and associations are produced and reproduced, and how distinctions between ‘healthy’ and ‘unhealthy’ bodies, practices, situations, spaces and experiences are shaped. They also suggest - as do a number of the pieces in the current issue of The Geographer - that differences in health cannot simply be equated with inequity or mapped on to normative or standardized templates of health equality. Health variations and disparities are also entangled with demands for, and journeys around, difference.

The theoretical winds blowing through geography and the RSGS have changed quite considerably (and a number of times) since Gilbert wrote. However, what remains of his time and example, and is abroad in the discipline of geography, and the SGJ and The Geographer, today is an impulse to think creatively and critically about how geographical ideas and practices are involved in the way health in all of its - affirmative, diverse, changing, disabling and adverse - forms is made and remade, and made meaningful and contested.

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Papers

Remarks on malaria and acclimatisation, H. Maktyn Clark
Scottish Geographical Magazine Volume 9, Issue 6, June 1893, pages 281-302


The growth of Inland and seaside health resorts in England, E. W. Gilbert.
Scottish Geographical Magazine Volume 55, Issue 1, January 1939, pages 16-35

The foul burns of Edinburgh: Public health attitudes and environmental change, P. J. Smith
Scottish Geographical Magazine Volume 91, Issue 1, April 1975, pages 25-37

London and Glasgow: A spatial analysis of mortality experience in contrasting metropolitan Centres
G. Melvyn Howe, Scottish Geographical Magazine Volume 98, Issue 2, September 1982, pages 119-127

Two decades of ‘legal’ abortion in Scotland: A spatio-temporal analysis, Murray G.A. Wilson
Scottish Geographical Journal Volume 116, Issue 1, January 2000, pages 1-23

‘They shut them out the road’: Migration, mental health and the Scottish highlands, Chris Philo & Hester Parr Scottish Geographical Journal Volume 120, Issue 1-2, January 2004, pages 47-70

Spaces of Wellbeing for People with Learning Disabilities, Edward Hall
Scottish Geographical Journal Volume 126, Issue 4, December 2010, pages 275-284

Technology for Older Adults: Maximising Personal and Social Interaction: Exploring Opportunities for eHealth to Support the Older Rural Population with Chronic Pain, Lorna Philip, Anne Roberts, Margaret Currie & Alasdair Mort Scottish Geographical Journal Volume 131, Issue 3-4, October 2015, pages 181-193