

## From the World of Geography

*At this new column of Nordia Yearbook we can read about talking points and events that have taken place in the world of Geography and geographers. In the current issue we have two stories about conferences; first one from the heart of geography, the other from related field of science.*

### Stepping into the international world of geography in Scotland

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“One Earth – Many Worlds” was the promising name of the 30th congress of the International Geographic Union (IGU) held in Glasgow, UK, in August 2004. The first of a series of geographical congresses met in 1871 in Antwerp, even though the International Geographical Union was not established until fifty one years later. We were four PhD students from Oulu who got a chance to explore the congress, Glasgow and Scotland this year – the next one will take place four years from now in Tunis. Besides organizing congresses, IGU brings together geographers and geographical research from all over the world. It promotes, coordinates and facilitates geographical study and supports the work of geographers. Since its early days IGU has consisted of three major components: 1) a General Assembly of the delegates appointed by the member countries which meets at the time of the Congress and is the highest authority of the Union; 2) an Executive Committee which consists of a President, eight Vice-Presidents (Finnish Markku

Löytönen among others) and a Secretary-General and a Treasurer; 3) Commissions and Study Groups which continue their work between General Assembly meetings. The alteration of President Professor Anne Buttimer, University College Dublin, to the new President Professor Adalberto Vallega, University of Genoa, was announced in Congress Dinner with appropriate speeches.

Taking part a major congress for the first time was an educating and stimulating experience in many ways. For a young geographer, going to congresses is an important part of becoming a professional researcher. International contacts, newest knowledge of your subject of study, valuable information of what is going on in geography, opening possibilities to publish your paper... Benefits are many of which the overall *experience*, seeing how things really work, is not without importance. Associating with other geographers strengthens also ones identity as a geographer.

The scientific programme of the congress offered plenary lectures by Peter Haggett, Doreen Massey, David Livingstone and Nigel Thrift, among others, as well as paper sessions of the various fields of geography – *Public Policy, Information Society, Local Development*, just to name a few from the endless seeming list. Scottish Exhibition and Conference Centre, SECC, the biggest



Figure 1. The Armadillo, Scottish Exhibition and Conference Centre, Glasgow (Photo: Tea Remahl).

conference centre in UK (figure 1), offered a meeting place for about 1,800 geographers from all over the world. There was an abundance of appearances, languages and research interests. Understandably, the majority of the participants were nevertheless Europeans. The official languages of the conferences and the working languages of the Union are English and French.

### **Glimpses on commissions and work groups**

The biggest challenge was undoubtedly to give a presentation to a critical international audience. The sooner you take the first steps in the international community the more time you have to ascend there as a researcher. The presentations were held in group sessions from Monday to Friday, starting at 7.30 AM – all too early! Espe-

cially the early morning sessions witnessed almost or totally empty class-rooms, which we considered as strange and unprofessional behaviour, not only from the audience but even from some presentators and chairpersons themselves. We were pleased to notice that the Finnish geography fits well in the international scene and that our presentations were also satisfactory. Altogether, the level of the presentations we saw varied from excellent to almost incomprehensible. These congresses should be considered serious business where you give your best effort, and careful preparation, fluent English or French and confidence are likely to lead to the result good enough.

There are 34 different IGU-Commissions of which some are big and well connected with the others and some are not very dynamic (figure 2). This depends not only on the area of geography and its the-

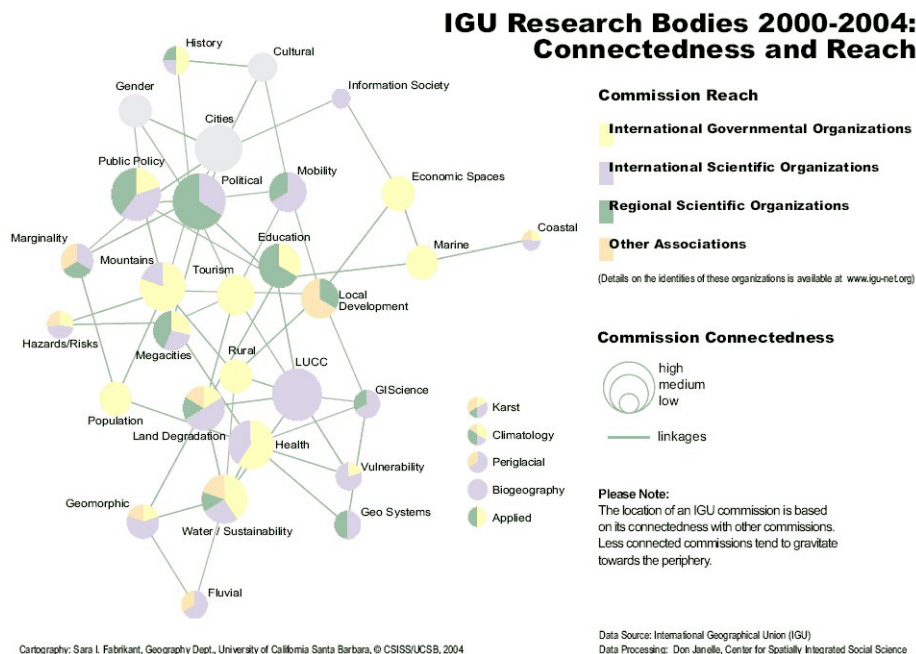


Figure 2. IGU Research Bodies 2000-2004 (Source: [http://www.igu-net.org/uk/what\\_is\\_igu/comreachgraph26may.pdf](http://www.igu-net.org/uk/what_is_igu/comreachgraph26may.pdf)).

matic position within geography but especially on the doings of the chairperson and the members. For instance, *Information Society* is a small Commission with few linkages only after its first four year term, but it has been successful. After having participated in the busy e-mail list of the commission before the meeting, the congress gave Katariina a useful opportunity to discuss face to face with central actors. Supposedly because the chairman Kellerman keenly contacted his group members beforehand, the problem of “no shows” didn’t bother his sessions. *Information Society* as well as some other Commissions has special congress paper publications in some journals. Attending to a congress can help

to get your article published – even in a recognized series.

So it does not depend only on you how much you get out of the congress professionally. Besides the presentations it is important to be socially active. We took part in events like Civic and University receptions and Congress dinner and mingled with people. Some of these contacts may turn out to be useful later, some were simply nice. To that 9-year-old Japanese boy who accompanied his mother, it probably was one of the highlights of his trip – judged by his face - to see real people from “Mumin-country”. The congresses are a good way of meeting people also from different parts of your own country. It did seem that most people, including us, stuck

with their own nationalities most of the time, but we did make some international contacts as well.

### **Bonnie and friendly Scotland**

The population of Scotland is about the same as of Finland, about 5 million, and Glasgow with its little over 600 000 Glaswegians is a little bit bigger than our Helsinki. The capital of Scotland welcomed us warmly and was worth seeing - and hearing! The taxi drivers kept chatting to us all through our taxi rides, but the problem was to figure out what they actually said with their thick Scottish accents that resembles English, more or less. So, in Aberdeen, where Aila made a little visit, a taxi driver taught her how to answer a question that sounds something like 'ferry boot'. A Finn answers 'from Finland', naturally!

Glasgow is a city of three universities, Glasgow, Strathclyde and Glasgow Caledonian with a total body of 85,000 students. The University of Strathclyde has its geography unit in the Department of Geography and Sociology. In Oulu, the Geography department is within Sciences. Our University dates back to 1958 being 'only' 497 years younger than the University of Glasgow. The amount of students is 16,000 and 20,000, respectively. We had a privilege to visit their department of Geography and Geomatics. It is situated in the main campus's neo-Gothic main buildings that have overlooked the city from Gilmorehill since 1870, guarded by a huge dinosaur.

We have our Alvar Aalto in Finland and the Glaswegians have their Rennie Macintosh, whose sensuous Art Nouveau works give its own contemporary touch of glass,

steel and titanium to the city where you also find Victorian sandstone buildings, neo-gothic towers and medieval spires – just name it! The congress centre by the river Glyde, named Armadillo for obvious reasons, gives still more zest to the layered architectural scenery.

A good way to end a day was going for a dinner to some of the many restaurants, from Indian to Scottish. We had tatties, haggis, fish and chips, seafood chowder, mussels etc, all tasty and new to us, at least by name (tatties is spuds or potatoes). And then "slainte" with a Scotch whisky, preferably from the island of Islay.

We explored Scotland a little further and enjoyed the scenery from the song:

*"O ye'll tak' the high road and I'll tak' the  
low road,*

*And I'll be in Scotland afore ye.*

*But me and my true love will never meet  
again,*

*On the bonnie, bonnie banks o' Loch  
Lomond."*

We visited the "bonnie banks" in Balloch, a little city in the south end of Loch Lomond, not far from Glasgow. Balloch presents itself as a gate to the praised national park of Loch Lomond. There is a newly established visitor centre that offers something for everyone: nature and arts exhibitions, a cinema, restaurants, entertainment for children, a selection of retail outlets, outdoor activities services, and of course the balcony with the view over the loch. We were told that there is only one



Figure 3. The visitor centre of Loch Lomond, Balloch. (Source: <http://www.loch-lomond.net/villages/balloch/balloch.html>).

lake in Scotland – the others are lochs; the one was named by an Englishman. The scenery from the cruise ship towards the banks was also beautiful, but whether the architect succeeded in representing a castle or not when drawing the visitor centre tower remains a question, as many a tourist has enquired whether the huge building is a power plant (figure 3). Towards the northern end of the loch the mountains grow higher and the scenery gets even more impressive, but for us from the Oulu flatlands the topography was exiting enough even in the south. We also witnessed that the smoothly strolling golf courses are ready for the perfect swing only after a lot of heavy duty earthwork with bulldozers!

The most astonishing feature of Scotland was the friendliness. Especially in Balloch we, a couple of strangers, were constantly greeted hello and good morning by the people on the street – a thing that does not happen in Finland – which does create a certain feeling of being welcome. Unlike we anticipated even the weather treated us friendly. We were pampered with the almost only non-rainy week of the summer!

P.S. Regional Conference of IGU will be in Brisbane, Australia in July of 2006. We heard that there are great beaches nearby the conference centre. One more reason to prepare yourself for the conference trip!

## **Doing geography on the related fields of sciences**

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Geography is related with the large fields of sciences, from geomorphology to informatics, and the role of geographers on this field is often discussed. But following short article is not going to discuss the place of geography on the field of sciences. Rather it will just give one example about doing geographies. This example is coming from my participation in the 5. annual conference of Estonian social scientists "Estonia in Europe: new challenges for Estonian social scientists" during 12-13<sup>th</sup> November 2004 in Tartu. This conference was focused on the themes connected to the enlarged European Union and its influences on Estonian society. As a tradition, scientists gather to that conference one year in Tartu and the next year in Tallinn.

The wide spectre of the conference themes was divided into 17 working groups, where there was 51 sessions with about 200 presentations in total. There were about 450 participants at the conference all together. There were not special statistics about the representations of geographers. But according to the personal observations, geographers gave most papers and actively participated on two working groups; "Landscape as medium" and "Extending space". Unfortunately these two groups were overlapping in the program and therefore I can tell only about the geographies of "Extending space", where one of my colleagues in Oulu (Joel Peetersoo) and I had possibility to give presentations. These two workshops are described only how

geographers are related with social sciences in Estonia, e.g. political geographers did not create own discussion group for this conference.

Workshop "Extending space" was divided into two sessions: "Widening space" and "Media space"; first session approached the transformations of social and physical environments in Estonia through practical examples, and the other concentrated on the questions of media representations of Estonia and in Estonia. These two parts of the workshop were connected in the beginning with the H. Lefebvres (and other authors) concept of "production of space". As the term "widening space" reflects, the topics under that discussion group was quite different. There were three presentations; about the development of tourism and local identity in Otepää, about research method and first findings about the mobility in Tallinn region, and about changing governance of Helsinki-Tallinn region. "Media space" was more focused; presented papers approached the following themes: representations of Baltic Sea countries in Estonian printed media; representations of Estonia in Finnish and Swedish mass media; the information amount presented about the world countries in Estonian media; and the media relations according to the cultural statistics. However, the link between physical/social transformations and media representations could have been more actively discussed after presentations.

The conference offered also a possibility to create contacts and discuss interesting themes in the banquet atmosphere of the History Museum of Tartu University. Additionally to the scientific workshops there was held two plenary sessions; involving themes of Estonian knowledge society

and economic convergence in EU, and new directions in scientific policies of EU and the legitimacy of social sciences. At the end of the conference prof. M. Lauristin approached in her presentation the questions about the role of social sciences in Estonian society and what it means to make science. These questions also were and are asked from geographers.