Chauncy Dennison Harris (1914–2003)

Marvin W. Mikesell

Committee on Geographical Studies, University of Chicago

Chauncy Harris was an important pioneer in economic and urban geography, a renowned leader among Americans studying the Soviet Union, and the world’s foremost authority on geographical bibliography. Much honored during his long and multifaceted career, he is sure to be remembered as an exemplary member of our profession. His natural dignity, four-language fluency, and unfailing courtesy suggest that he will also be recalled, here and abroad, as an exceptionally congenial colleague who acted in many ways as a diplomat as well as a scholar.

The assessment I can offer reflects more than four decades of rewarding friendship, a review of his scholarly work, and transcripts of eight taped interviews conducted (1986–1987) for the Oral History Project of the University of Chicago (cited hereafter as OHP 1–8). I have also profited from an unpublished report he prepared immediately after his first visit to the Soviet Union in 1957. Published statements by Harris cover his recollections of geography in Chicago in the 1930s and 1940s (1979), his early work in urban geography (1990b, 1997a), involvement in Russian area studies (1997d), wartime experience in Washington (1997b), and work with Theodore Shabad in launching and sustaining Soviet Geography: Review and Translation and its successor journals (1998c). Much incidental information on his life and work can be gleaned from several memorial essays, including those devoted to Robert Platt (1964c), Charles Colby (1966), Edward Ullman (1977a), Stephen Jones (1985b), Theodore Shabad (1987a), and Harold Mayer (1990a). The three Festschriften published in his honor offer a wide array of rewarding comment on his contribution to and influence on studies of the Soviet Union (Demko and Fuchs 1984), modern urban change (Conzen 1986), and city modeling (Ehlers 1992).

Utah Years and the Example of His Father

As the second son of Franklin S. Harris (1884–1960), Professor of Agronomy at Utah State Agricultural College (later Utah State University), Chauncy Harris grew up in the shadow of the Wasatch Range and often stated later in his life that interest in geography was inspired by concern about “what was on the other side of the mountains.” The senior Harris had been trained in agronomy at Cornell (Ph.D. 1911), where he grew to know and respect the physiographic and, more broadly, physical geographic work of Ralph S. Tarr. He achieved a substantial reputation as a teacher, prolific writer, and renowned authority on many aspects of agricultural economics, soil science, and crop ecology. He eventually became even better known as an academic administrator (Jenson 2003). In 1921, at age thirty-six, he was installed as President of Brigham Young University, a position he held until 1945. Often described as “Mister BYU,” his enduring status on the Provo campus is manifest in the Franklin Harris Fine Arts Center dedicated in 1961. In his combined role as an agronomist and university president he traveled extensively, including a world tour (1926–1927), and made the acquaintance of two notable geographers, Glenn Trewartha of the University of Wisconsin and W. W. Atwood of Clark University. In 1929, he led a group that investigated the prospects for...
Jewish settlement in the remote Siberian district of Birobidschan. His international influence was also re-
vealed when he served as agricultural advisor to the
Shah of Iran (1939–1940) and later (1950–1952) as
Director of the U.S. Technical Assistance Program in
that country.

When his young son expressed interest in geography,
Franklin Harris could offer informed encouragement.
That interest, however, was manifest eventually in ways
quite different from the observational and laboratory
experience of the father. In addition to concern about
“the other side of the mountains,” Chauncy Harris was
fascinated when he was only eight years old by a World
Almanac that had population figures for cities in the
United States. He became interested then in “why some
cities were larger than others and what were the activ-
ities that supported the larger cities” (1990b, 406). This
early curiosity, remote from his father’s concerns, be-
came a defining focus of his career.

Becoming a Geographer

In the summer of 1933, after graduating at age
nineteen as valedictorian of his BYU class, Harris began
geographical studies at the University of Chicago. He
had also considered attending Clark University or the
University of Wisconsin but selected Chicago on the
basis of its national reputation and status as the alma
mater of some of his BYU teachers. He took three
courses that summer, taught by Harlan Barrows, Charles
Colby, and Edith Parker, and was encouraged to con-
tinue. But, lacking a fellowship, he was concerned about
personal finances and so returned to BYU to take courses
required for a secondary-school teaching certificate.
Discouraged by the quality of these courses, especially
“methods of teaching,” which he remembered as “one of
the worst taught courses I ever had in my life” (OHP 1),
he sought other ways to finance his education, came
across information on the Rhodes scholarship program,
and decided to apply. He thought he had a good chance
to survive the Utah competition but was apprehensive
about the larger Western States field. When he received
word of his success, after being interviewed as one of
twelve finalists in San Francisco, he was so elated and
eager to inform his father that he indulged in an ex-
travagance beyond the realm of his previous experience:
a long-distance telephone call!

Because his three-year Rhodes scholarship would not
begin until autumn, Harris returned to Chicago for more
geographical training during the spring and summer of
1934. The summer event was Robert Platt’s field trip,
extending that year from the Straits of Mackinac to
Hudson’s Bay. Edward Ullman, the son of Berthold
Ullman, a prominent member of the Chicago faculty
(Latin and Roman history), was also on the trip, and the
two students discovered a wide range of common in-
terests, became good friends, and eventually coauthors
of a famous paper.

At Oxford, Harris enjoyed the tutorial system and the
luxury of reading and writing about only one subject per
week. His tutor was J. N. L. Baker, whose work on the
history of exploration included the American West,
which made the young American from Utah a welcome
responsibility. Harris decided to take an undergraduate
degree at Oxford in spite of his B.A. from BYU. That
decision reflected doubt about the strength of his back-
ground in geography and, more importantly, a realization,
as he later indicated, that “undergraduate degrees are
what Oxford does best” (OHP 1). His major accom-
plishment at Oxford was a paper on the Ipswich region
that was later published (1942). Having earned his Ox-
ford BA in two years, Harris was eligible for a third year
of study, pursued at the London School of Economics,
where he found a more research-oriented faculty than he
had known at Oxford and enjoyed contact with L.
Dudley Stamp and other prominent British geographers.
His major effort at LSE was a study of electricity gener-
ation in London that was also later published (1941a).

In addition to his geographical studies, Harris made a
serious effort to improve his command of French and
German. Rhodes House kept a list of families on the
continent with whom students could live and acquire
some speaking proficiency during Oxford’s long vacation
periods. Harris spent a month in a pension at Versailles,
took a Berlitz course there, and lived for two months with
families in Wuppertal and Hamburg. He also traveled
extensively by bus, train, and bicycle in both countries
(OHP 1). Harris had a good understanding of grammar, a
benefit of well-taught English and Latin courses in high
school. In his French and German studies, as well as his
later study of Russian, he was able to muster the disci-
pline necessary for the long march to fluency.

Dissertation Research and Beginning an
Academic Career

Returning to Chicago, Harris selected urban geogra-
phy as a special field and Charles Colby as his disserta-
tion supervisor. As the author of only one important
paper, “Centrifugal and Centripetal Forces in Urban
Geography” (1933), it is surprising that Colby was the
official mentor of four of the most prominent figures
in the early history of American urban geography: Harris,
Ullman, and also Harold Mayer and Howard Nelson. Harris valued mainly Colby’s editorial advice when he was engaged in his dissertation study of “Salt Lake City: A Regional Capital” (1940). Although the cost-saving advantage of being able to live at home had some influence on this choice, he had no doubt about its geographical importance: “Salt Lake City is the capital of a state, the seat of a religious denomination, a nucleus of commercial and financial enterprises, a focus of transport, a leading center in educational activities, and the largest city in a vast section of Western United States” (1940, iii). Since he was interested in the nodal or functional character of his study area, the most important contribution of the work was a delimitation of the Salt Lake City tributary area. Harris’s unpublished dissertation had more influence than one might expect because of the practice of the University of Chicago at the time to print one hundred copies of dissertations for distribution to libraries and his purchase of a hundred more copies for additional distribution. One went to R. E. Dickinson, who published an extended excerpt, including Harris’s tributary map, in his City, Region, and Regionalism (1947).

With degree in hand, Harris’s first appointment was at Indiana University, where he settled with his bride, also from Utah, the former Edith Young. The Harrises enjoyed the beauty of the Bloomington campus and surrounding countryside, but he came to feel that the department there suffered from tension between its older and younger members (OHP 3). This perception encouraged him to accept an invitation to move to the University of Nebraska, where Nels Bengtson recruited him as an assistant professor and eventual replacement for himself as department chairman. This was the first of many occasions when Harris was recognized for his leadership potential as well as his scholarly credentials.

War Years

Harris might be the unique—or at least rare—example of a geographer whose career was advanced rather than interrupted by World War II. In 1942 he joined the Office of the Geographer in the State Department. One asset of that office was its large collection of atlases, including the Great Soviet Atlas, Volume 2, produced on the eve of the war and immediately withdrawn by Soviet authorities for security reasons. It had abundant information on the USSR, including economic and population maps, which were later used by Harris in two articles on Soviet cities (1945a, b). But he first had to learn enough Russian to understand the legends of the maps and to use Soviet statistical publications. His study of Russian, initiated in Washington in 1942, continued for many years to be a serious commitment. While working in the State Department he also completed his notably successful “Functional Classification of the Cities of the United States” (1943a). That paper, first presented during the AAG meeting in New York in 1941, was well received and resulted in his election to membership in the Association, which was open at that time only to “mature scholars of demonstrable accomplishment.” Harris returned to Chicago in 1943 to teach courses on Europe and the Soviet Union for the Army Specialized Training Program, which meant appointment as an assistant professor. Drafted into military service, Private Harris was shifted from possible infantry duty to the OSS (Office of Strategic Services), where he was placed in charge of “cities and ports of the Far East” and worked on a classification of Japanese cities. As the European war approached termination, Harris made an effort to transfer geographers to his Far Eastern office. He later recalled with delight (1997, 248) the time when Colonel Preston E. James, head of the European Section of OSS, confronted Private Harris with “Damn it, Chauncy, quit trying to steal my best men!” James’s anger must have been feigned or short-lived because Harris was soon rewar ded with an officer’s commission.

The war years were satisfying for Harris not only for the work he accomplished but also for the many geographers he encountered in Washington and with whom he could share ideas. In the State Department, he worked with Stephen Jones, who became a life-long friend, and John Weaver, a recent Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin. While in the OSS he renewed his acquaintance with Edward Ullman, and they produced a joint essay on “The Nature of Cities” (1945d) that became the most cited (and reprinted) paper either of them ever wrote.

I suspect that Harris may have been more amused than flattered by the many requests he received for permission to use Figure 5 of that article with its depiction of “concentric zones,” “sectors,” and “multiple nuclei.” One such request arrived in 2002, fifty-seven years after the original publication! In many ways, “The Nature of Cities” was an atypical expression of his (although perhaps not of Ullman’s) work, a “think piece” rather than a data-rich substantive paper. In his later reflections on this famous publication, Harris commented mainly on its obsolescence and the popularity of simplistic thinking revealed in cartograms (1997a, 1998a). He also suggested (OHP 8) that “I spent less time on that article than any other I have written.” Fortunately, perhaps, any attempt to assign primary credit for the article is frustrated by the placement of Harris before Ullman on its
Continuing and Evolving Interests: U.S. and USSR

At the end of the war, Harris was in an enviable position. He had several publications of acknowledged value, had advanced two years on his University of Chicago tenure track (in spite of being on leave), and was receiving offers from other universities. In 1946, he was promoted to associate professor with tenure. A year later, at age thirty-three, he was a full professor, firmly placed on the top rung of the academic ladder. He had also been elected Secretary of the AAG, in which capacity he played a key role in the negotiations (1993c) that led to the merger in 1948 of the AAG and ASPG (American Society for Professional Geographers). A happy dilemma for Harris was to decide among several promising directions for research. Interest in the Soviet Union remained keen, as did interest in Germany, which was revealed in a study based on German sources of "The Ruhr Coal Mining District" (1946) and his role as an exchange professor (1950–1951) in the Geographical Institute of the University at Frankfurt-am-Main.

Interest in American geography, especially its economic geography, was expressed in "The Market as a Factor in the Localization of Industry in the United States" (1954b), which he regarded as one of his "most original and important papers" (OHP 8). In his chapter on "The Pressure of Residential-Industrial Land Use" (1956b) for the Princeton symposium on "Man's Role in changing the Face of the Earth," he noted the rich economic value of residential and industrial, as opposed to agricultural, land use and so failed to deliver the antiurban or antimodern message that the organizers of the conference had expected (OHP 8). "Agricultural Production in the United States: The Past Fifty Years and the Next" (1957), in which he demonstrated that intensification had been and would continue to be more important than expansion, was his last major paper on an American topic.

Harris was well aware that our understanding of the geography of the Soviet Union required not only that American geographers learn Russian but also that Russian geographical literature be translated into English. During the period from 1944 to 1952 the American Council of Learned Societies sponsored the translation of several works, including two by geographers, L. S. Berg's masterful The Natural Regions of the USSR (1950) and the more problematical Economic Geography of the USSR by S. S. Balzak, V. F. Vasyutin, and Ya. G. Feigen (1949a). Editorial responsibility for the Berg translation was undertaken by John A. Morrison, who was the first major American geographer to learn Russian and taught a course on the Soviet Union (1928–1938) at the University of Chicago. Harris, to his regret, did not take that course and became well acquainted with Morrison only when they were engaged in the translation project. The problematical aspect of the economic geography book appeared mainly in its introduction and third chapter where Lenin and Stalin are quoted as authorities on the evils of "bourgeois apologetic theory." With characteristic restraint, Harris confined his editorial notes to criticism of misrepresentations of Hettner and Weber and exaggeration of the influence of Huntington.

As he continued to read and write about the USSR, Harris was attracted by the prospects for comparative study. Location theory could be tested in reference to the efficacy of centralized planning as opposed to market controls. Climate and soils could be examined in regard to agricultural potentials. Industrial development could be assessed in relation to natural resources and explicit or implicit transportation costs. Pointing to conspicuous environmental contrasts, such as the "latitudinal disadvantage" of the Soviet Union or the "wrong course" of its Siberian rivers, was a good way to begin an undergraduate course. Comparative study, needless to say, offered unlimited opportunity to ponder the geographical meaning of capitalism versus socialism or, as Harris suggested in an early essay on "Isolationism in the Soviet Union" (1949b), the divergent character of the American and Russian revolutions.

In a comprehensive review of geographical literature on the Soviet Union presented in the form of a dialogue or debate among four imaginary authorities, Harris (1952) offered a dazzling early display of his knowledge. Ability to address a larger audience was demonstrated in his essay for Foreign Affairs on "Growing Food by Decree in Soviet Russia" (1955c). The 1950s seem, however, to have been a time of mixed blessing for Harris. Elected vice president of the International Geographical Union in 1956 and president of the Association of American Geographers in 1957, he had earned emphatic professional respect. But he had to wonder if he could hope to experience the Soviet Union directly or only through literature he could review or information he could extract from Pravda and Izvestia.

In Russia at Last

In 1957 Harris spent a month in the Soviet Union on a tourist visa. He had informed Intourist of his desire to
meet geographers and indicated the names of Russian colleagues he had encountered during the International Geographical Congress held in Rio de Janeiro the previous year. His reception was beyond all expectation. On his arrival in Leningrad, on 14 May, he was invited to give a lecture the following day at the All Union Geographical Society. The morning of that day was spent typing a short paper devoted to comparisons of the Soviet Union and the U.S. and an account of the growth of American agriculture. He delivered the paper for translation and had time only to scan the Russian text before addressing and responding to questions from an overflowing crowd of 150. On 31 May Harris presented the agricultural part of the translated paper, now much improved in delivery, to an even larger audience of about three hundred at Moscow State University. A second Moscow lecture at the Institute of Geography of the Academy of Sciences on 7 June was devoted to impressions of American and Soviet geography and attracted another large audience. Harris's Russian colleagues were keenly interested in what he had to say and were eager to establish contact with Western geographers. The Intourist part of Harris's first visit to the USSR—Bol’shoi performances, a trip to Stalingrad and on the Moscow Canal, and visits to various museums, a collective farm, and a shoe factory—were only incidental rewards. His main accomplishment was learning of the interests of well over a hundred geographers and arrangement for the shipment to Chicago of a vast number of books, journals, and maps, most of which arrived. This first exposure to Soviet geographers and their country was revealing of Harris's astonishing energy and ability to turn strangers into friends. He eventually visited the Soviet Union fourteen times, but it was his remarkably rewarding “tourist experience” in 1957 that set scholarly objectives for him and resolved any doubts about the future course of his career.

It is interesting to speculate on why Harris was so successful on a personal basis in his relationship with Soviet geographers. His ability to speak Russian was undoubtedly the key consideration. One can also assume that the perception of him as neither a “cold warrior” nor a “fellow traveler” enhanced his status as a serious scholar devoted to research interests that could be shared. He also discovered, like many other American geographers, that Soviet colleagues could be remarkably cordial as individuals in spite of the pervasive tension and acrimonious rhetoric of the cold war. Harris was able to offer reciprocal hospitality in the summer of 1961, when he acted as mentor and host for a tour in the U.S. of six Soviet geographers, and he enjoyed more of their hospitality when he led a delegation of American geographers in autumn of that year on a trip that extended from Moscow and Leningrad to Tbilisi and Tashkent.

Is it possible that Harris was ever regarded as a spy? He doubted that this was so and encountered frustration for security reasons only when the gazetteer added to his statistical analysis of the population of Soviet cities (1970d) was denied circulation because it contained information on latitude and longitude, an obvious breach, for missile-targeting reasons, of Soviet security. The problem was resolved when Academician S. V. Kalesnik published a review of the work in the Izvestia of the Geographical Society of the USSR, which meant that Harris's tabulations could be assumed to have been cleared (OHP 8). Parenthetically, I can note that when Harris had to undergo a security clearance in connection with his appointment in 1972 as an American delegate to the 17th General Conference of UNESCO, the person who interviewed me expressed concern that Harris “was known to receive mail from behind the Iron Curtain.”

When I informed Harris about this concern, he quoted Schiller's famous words: “Against stupidity the very gods themselves contend in vain.”

Refinement and Elaboration of Interests

The focus Harris selected for his personal research was the growth of Soviet cities, the topic of his first publication on the USSR in 1945. He was impressed then and during many subsequent years that the extraordinarily rapid urbanization of the USSR could be regarded as an accelerated counterpart of a process that had also been evident in Europe and the U.S. This interest, revealed in several preliminary publications, was expressed most emphatically in his Cities of the Soviet Union: Studies of Their Function, Size, Density, and Growth (1970a). It is indicative of Harris's persistent effort to bring the work of Soviet authors to the attention of Western readers that the first chapter of this book is a copiously annotated review of Russian literature on the several topics of his investigation.

His concern that Westerners be aware of what Soviet scholars were doing was also expressed in the translation into English of Soviet Geography: Accomplishments and Tasks (1962a), a collection of papers by fifty-six authors, which Harris edited for the American Geographical Society. The idea that “we should be aware of what they are doing” can also be regarded as a rationale for the launching in 1961 of Soviet Geography: Review and Translation, a publication venture that entailed a happy collaboration with Theodore Shabad, probably the only
American geographer interested in the USSR with an energy and tenacity equal to what Harris could offer.

Harris, like most American Soviet specialists, was well aware that the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 would exacerbate inherent ethnic tensions for the compelling reason that the former “non-Russian republics” had large concentrations of Russians, especially in their cities, and the continuing Russian Federation had many non-Russians. This dual problem of post-Soviet geography was exposed by Harris in several articles (e.g., 1993a, b, and f, 2000, 2002). He also examined the ethnic problems of the successor states of Yugoslavia (1993d).

Russian Reviews

Harris’s two most original and influential publications on the USSR were reviewed extensively and favorably in Western language journals. Thanks to Soviet Geography: Review and Translation, we have a good sample in English of the opinion of Russian reviewers. Cities of the Soviet Union was the subject of a meeting attended by eighty members of the Moscow branch of the Geographical Society of the USSR. The summary of that meeting (SG, April, 1972) includes comments by eight urban specialists. They noted some specific errors and raised questions about his “formal” (i.e., statistical) analysis, but the general tone was respectful and even laudatory. In his summary statement, V. V. Pokshishevskiy praised Harris for his “conscientious and objective treatment of the Soviet approach to cities” and declared his book to be “progressive”—the ultimate Soviet accolade. Harris, predictably, had some reservations. Looking back on the book in 1987 (OHP 8), he thought it was “perhaps too closely tied to statistical data” and “somewhat lacking in imagination.”

Harris’s Guide to Geographical Bibliographies and Reference Works in Russian or on the Soviet Union (1975), an annotated inventory of 2,660 works, attracted the attention of three Russian reviewers. The English version of their comments (SG, March, May, 1976, October, 1979) reveals nearly unqualified praise. A few classification problems were noted and also some transliteration difficulties, mainly from Georgian, but the tone was exuberantly positive. Pokshishevskiy, clearly a fan of Harris, declared that this work was a “rich gift” and “the fruit of an assiduous labor of love.” Each of the reviewers noted with gratitude that Harris’s guide was published in anticipation of the 23rd International Geographical Congress in Moscow and one of them suggested that it had “provided an object lesson” that should make Soviet geographers think seriously about how they might improve the quality and utility of their own reference works.

A Useful Hobby

In addition to his more original research and writing, Harris managed to find time to produce other bibliographic works of enduring value. He often remarked that bibliography was a hobby and form of relaxation for him. I first became aware of this attitude in 1960 when I saw Harris heading for home with a large book. Since I knew he preferred to work in his office and do only recreational reading at home, I was curious about what he was carrying. It turned out to be a new edition of the Bibliographie Ge´ographique Internationale.

Harris enjoyed helping his students and, by extension, other geographers learn how to make good use of a research library. Together with Jerome Fellmann, he made a persistent effort (1950, 1961, 1973a, 1981) to survey geographical serials. This effort was enhanced by his status as secretary-general of the IGU, which encouraged geographers throughout the world to regard him as an appropriate recipient of their reprints. His most impressive publication on serials (Harris and Fellmann 1980b) lists 3,445 titles from 107 countries in fifty-five languages. We have no more convincing evidence of the international and multilingual character of our discipline.

Harris produced or edited several additional bibliographic works (1976, 1984, 1985a), each requiring, in the pre-Internet age, a laborious search in card catalogues not only in Chicago but also in other libraries both in the United States and abroad. He also offered a demonstration of the breadth of geographical research in an important interdisciplinary survey. His chapter in Sources of Information in the Social Sciences (1973c) probably encouraged a favorable assessment of our accomplishment in comparison with work done by historians, economists, sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and political scientists.

Administrative Responsibilities

Harris was engaged in administrative work during nearly the whole of his Chicago career. For the most part, this work had only indirect connection with geography. In 1953, he served as chairman of the Frankfurt-Chicago Inter-University Project and earned respect as a skillful coordinator. When the dean of the Division of the Social Sciences, a political scientist, had to resign for health reasons in 1954, Harris, at age forty, was the obvious choice to replace him. Harris later admitted to some apprehension about this job (OHP 4). He had not been well educated in social science and had little experience in budget management, the primary concern of any dean. His years as dean (1954–1960) were marked not
only by financial worries but also by epic struggles resulting in abandonment of the planning program in Chicago, demotion of the Graduate School of Education to department status, and a fight for control of the sociology department between a noted demographer and an equally famous social philosopher. The latter lost the battle, but was consoled, adequately perhaps, by an appointment at Harvard. Harris was perceived generally to have been a judicious dean who acted wisely within the constraints of a never-adequate budget.

Harris might have moved on to higher administrative positions, but such was not his aspiration and he often contrasted his fate with that of his State Department co-worker, John Weaver, who made a steady advance up the administrative ladder until he became president of the University of Wisconsin. The most serious temptation for Harris was not a higher academic position but the directorship of the American Geographical Society, which he was twice invited to consider.

Less than a year after the end of his term as dean, Harris was again involved in administration as chairman of Non-Western and International Studies, which entailed negotiation with the Ford Foundation for a series of grants totaling $9.8 million. Charged with responsibility for the supervision of the programs and appointments thus funded, Harris held the title of Director of the Center for International Studies from 1966 to 1984. From 1973 until 1975 he served part time as assistant to the president and then was engaged full time from 1975 until 1978 as vice-president for academic resources. These activities, especially the latter, entailed primarily financial management and fundraising.

Harris served only briefly, 1967–1969, as chairman of the Department of Geography. Other duties, especially IGU duties, were pressing at that time and he was glad to relinquish the chairmanship to a less-burdened younger colleague. It is safe to state that Harris’s greatest and perhaps only regret about his University of Chicago career was that he could not do more for the Department of Geography. When serious problems became evident in 1984, he had reached mandatory retirement age and experienced a precipitous decline in his influence. Moreover, most of the important people he knew well and who respected his judgment, notably President Edward Levi and Provost and later President John Wilson, had also retired.

Preferences and Personality

It would be fair, I think, to suggest that Harris’s most original work was data-driven. Census reports were the foundation for most of his American and Soviet studies. He can thus be described as a “quantifier,” but he had little interest in mathematical or computer modeling per se, and most of his numerical analyses were accomplished with pencil and paper or a hand-calculator. He was well versed in classical location theory (e.g., Weber, Lösch, and Christaller) but did not claim to offer new theoretical insights. His career, needless to say, coincided with an era when reform movements and counter-movements swept over American geography, but he was little influenced by contending forces or claims. When a perceptive student asked if Richard Hartshorne’s The Nature of Geography, published in 1939 when Harris was completing his dissertation, had any influence on him, Harris replied that he learned much from this work about the history of geography but did not regard Hartshorne’s interpretation of geographical thought as a guide for his own thinking.

Harris seldom wrote scolding reviews. His assessments, published in twenty-one journals and most frequently in the Geographical Review, which carried forty of his reviews, were objective and generally complimentary. They were, as he once suggested to me, “memos for the profession” and not opportunities to display superior wisdom or to expose “wrong thinking.” This pervasive quality of his many reviews indicates selectivity rather than a lack of critical perspective. What he did not appreciate he did not review.

There is probably wide agreement about the distinguishing qualities of Harris’s personality. Early in the 1970s, Chicago students adopted clandestine nicknames for members of the geography faculty, some of which were notably uncomplimentary. The name selected for Harris was “Mr. Ambassador.” Because he looked like someone sent from central casting to play the role of an ambassador, the name was apt and enduring. But also misleading. Although Harris had a dignified bearing, he never displayed aloofness or forbidding formality. A ready smile and propensity for punning precluded these prospects. In common with most academics, he had a signature set of likes and dislikes. As for the latter, I recall that “breathless last-minute submissions” always annoyed him and “compulsive talkers” were people he tried to avoid.

I recall only one instance of genuine anger, which occurred during a divisional faculty meeting devoted to whether foreign language competence should continue to be regarded as a requirement for the Ph.D. During that discussion, a prominent member of the economics department announced that he knew only English and then added that nothing of value for him had been published in any other language. At that point, Harris, in an astonishingly loud voice, asked, “How would you know?” After the meeting, that remark was described by
a friendly colleague as both welcome and surprising. It is possible, of course, that he should have offered other remarks of this character, especially when more than his usual politeness was needed to defend what he wanted or believed.

Honoris Causa

Chauncy Harris was unquestionably one of the most honored geographers of the twentieth century. Some of that recognition was accorded when he was secretary-general of the IGU and an obvious choice for geographical societies seeking to place their mantle on a prominent authority. Many other honors reflect the respect of scholarly peers well aware of his specific accomplishments.

Harris was awarded honorary degrees by the Universidad Católica de Chile (1956), Oxford University (1973), Indiana University (1979), Universität Bonn (1991), and the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee (1991). Other honors include the Alexander Csoma de Kőrösi Memorial Medal of the Hungarian Geographical Society (1971), the Lauréat d'Honneur of the International Geographical Union (1976), the Alexander von Humboldt Gold Medal of the Gesellschaft für Erdkunde zu Berlin (1978), an award for Distinguished Contributions to Slavic Studies from the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies (1978), the Cullum Medal of the American Geographical Society (1985), and the Victoria Medal of the Royal Geographical Society (1987). In addition, Harris was an honorary member of geographical societies in Belgrade, Berlin, Florence, Frankfurt-am-Main, London, Paris, Rome, Tokyo, and Warsaw. These degrees, awards, and honorary memberships, plus his two presidencies (AAG and American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies), three Festschriften, and election to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, add up to an extraordinary degree of national and international recognition.

Envoi

In 1999 the Harrises decided to leave their Hyde Park apartment and “dacha” in the Indiana dunes and move to Montgomery Place, a retirement community located on the shore of Lake Michigan and only a mile from the University of Chicago. “The Montgomery Messenger” soon offered the predictable news that Chauncy had been elected president of the resident’s council and then began to carry articles by him on the age, place of birth, travels, professional background, and language abilities of his new neighbors. A good listener, as always, his friendly curiosity was revealed in this closing chapter of his life, as it had been whenever he encountered people he wanted to know and information he could collect, analyze, and share. From the first years of his career, marked by prodigious energy and keen ambition, until his final years when he displayed the serenity and mellow wisdom of a quintessential elder statesman, Chauncy Harris was a professor in the best sense of the word. We should be grateful for what he learned and taught and hope that his example will continue to inspire us.

Bibliography

Archival Sources


Supplementary Sources


Selected Publications


1941b. Location of Salt Lake City. Economic Geography 17: 204–12.


1964a. Methods of research in economic regionalization. Geograficheskie Polonica 4:59–86.


Correspondence: Committee on Geographical Studies, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL 60637, e-mail: mmikesel@uchicago.edu.