

International Geographical Union / RGS Annual Conference, Glasgow August 2004

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For many years the annual meeting for many British geographers was for the IBG, a university based conference held in the depth of winter, in the first few days of the year, somewhere in the UK. Inconvenient travel arrangement, 'warming up' university accommodation and venues after the Christmas closure and the burden on individual organizing committees and departments meant that while their atmosphere of was heroic and collegiate, some questioned the wisdom of these arrangements. Maybe an American style academic assembly, held in a congress hotel, or better still a cruise ship?



Memories of driving to the ferry for Belfast in a light blizzard, of returning from Southampton by train overnight when it had snowed, and of countless chilly rooms and dark journeys, reinforce the wisdom of a summer event, even at the cost of missing a stint at 'Clearing', or the few days one can swim in warm English lakes. Such optimism was challenged by Glasgow IGC, the four yearly congress of the international Geographic Union, which in 2004 combined with several other events, including the annual research conference of the Royal Geographical Society (as the IBG meeting has become).



This was held in the vast halls and smart facilities of Glasgow international conference centre, the SECC, on reclaimed dockland by the Clyde. As an infrequent international event it attracted far more delegates that the 1,000 or so normal at an IBG, but not reached by less accessible venues. IGC list approximately 2,800 'authors'.

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But the numerical scale of the event was dwarfed by the premises and by parallel meetings, up to 22 at the same time, scheduled business style between 7.30 am and closure in the early evening. As an 'ordinary' delegate I found the atmosphere anonymous, very different from the IBG annual meeting at Glasgow Caledonia University some years before. It lacked the collegiate feel or easy sociability of the last 30 or so IBGs. There were the usual minor hiccups. Some small groups met in very large lecture theatres, and a few meetings were crammed into rooms that were far too small. SECC rooms lacked natural light, while hotel meeting rooms were more attractive but not always appropriate. Sometimes rooms were so far apart that it was difficult or impossible to get between sessions in time. Roughly double the usual IBG fee is cheap by business standards, but not sufficient to provide more than basic refreshments at sessions (irritated hotel staff made clear their facilities were not for us, galling if arriving at 7am, before conference provision, when the few outlets open had long queues). I could go on about an ethos that reminded me of Schipol Airport, the lack of conference bars and the general 'executive' style of the whole event. Perhaps some of us are not cut out for the business life, which is why we opt for academic careers. Maybe it takes longer to find ones feet in an event like this. Or perhaps evidence reported at the Plymouth IBG, that Geography graduates are increasingly 'head hunted' by financial institutions, has altered our professional ethos. Thought club like conviviality at the 2003 annual meeting in the RGS London Headquarters (Society House) suggests not. There are unlikely parallels with the Glastonbury Festival. So much was happening that it was difficult to identify, and find, the best sessions and papers to go to, and parallel sessions meant much good was missed.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the unfamiliar congress style and the pressure on UK academics to publish or be damned at the next appraisal or promotion round, there was a wealth of material presented, and much to excite and interest delegates. The variety was remarkable. For example, how administrative considerations have made it difficult for port planners to use China's best, self scouring deepwater locations, and why post ice age sea level rise and processes of sedimentation are crucial in their identification; the sociology and class conflict of inter-war caravanning in Britain; much on hazards; many mentions of town planning and urban form; discussion of tourism / development issues, most memorably in Natal and Croatia; after-use of urban military sites in the former East Germany; what seems to be an emerging field of Industrial Ecology, and the important but still underdeveloped relationship in Marine Geography between port and coastal industrial planning and environmental policy. As is perhaps inevitable, the Environmental Justice session at which I gave a paper took place at the same time as the International Seminar on Urban Form, and this also clashed with the session on 'Mobilities, Materialities and Cities' and some useful looking presentations on Hazards and on Local Development. Perhaps the best way of summarizing this all is to say that this was a launch pad at which one could dip into the research frontier. So no different from any other academic conference, except a Global draw meant an even wider range of emerging work, some linked to IGU Commissions and initiatives. Much of the material presented at the congress will be published. For example, papers from the PERG sponsored session 'Environmental Justice: global to local' convened by Harriet Bulkeley, Sue Percy and Gordon Walker will be included in a special issue of the journal *Local Environment: the international journal of justice and sustainability*. However, it seems a pity that while delegates receive, and by now probably have lost, abstracts and other material from this vast gathering, more is not made of such events after they have taken place. For further information on the IGU see their 2000-4 Brochure. The Earthquakes and Megacities Initiative, p24 and other initiatives are listed:

http://www.igu-net.org/uk/news_and_events/IGU_Brochure_low_res.pdf.

Also see the Commission on Geography and Public Policy website, December edition at:

<http://www.igu-gapp.org/newsletters/Newsletter%20December%202004.pdf>.

The next IGC is in Tunis in 2008. GBER users may find it useful to add it to their plans, and perhaps become part of this important, remarkably diverse, organization. RGS did well to host such an event. Their 2005 annual research meeting "*Flows and spaces in a globalised world*" is in London, August 31st – September 2nd. Prepare for Tunis. Be there. <http://www.rgs.org/templ.php?page=3resann05int>