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The Rural Geography Research Group at 50: Reflections on an evolving community of practice

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Abstract

This paper explores the development and work of the Rural Geography Research Group (RGRG) of the Royal Geographical Society over the last fifty years since its inception in 1972. It draws on the minutes of the RGRG's Annual General Meetings, content in its biannual newsletters, and reports of conferences. Using the concept of academic communities of practice (CoP), the paper explores the RGRG's contributions to UK and international geography and allied disciplines. It charts the evolution of the RGRG as a CoP through the influence of its members in (re)shaping rural geography. The roles of quadrennial conferences dating to 1991 between rural geographers from the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States, and a series of bilateral conferences with Dutch, French, German and Spanish geographers are explored. These conferences produced a series of books which help illustrate the evolution of ideas and research in rural geography. In addition, the paper outlines how the RGRG functions as a space for personal and professional development, and the influence its office holders have had both within and beyond the Research Group. The paper concludes with a consideration of the future of rural geography, including the position of the Research Group within contemporary critical debates and likely themes for future research.

Keywords

Rural geography; Royal Geographical Society; Research group; Communities of practice; Conferences

1. Introduction

The fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Rural Geography Research Group (RGRG) was celebrated in August 2022 at the Annual Conference of the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) held at Newcastle University. Formed originally as the Rural Geography Study Group (RGSG) within the Institute of British Geographers (IBG), which merged with the RGS in 1995, the Study Group (subsequently re-badged as a Research Group in the 1990s) has played a prominent part in the evolution of rural geography within the United Kingdom (UK) while also generating a wider international influence. The anniversary provides a timely opportunity to evaluate the role of the RGRG in this evolution and to consider more broadly how academic institutions shape disciplines, influencing their trajectories and pathways.

This paper draws on minutes of the RGRG's annual general meetings, content from its biannual newsletters, conference reports, and key publications to explore the development of the RGRG as a community of practice (CoP). Wenger's (1998) conceptualisation of CoPs is applied to the activities of the Research Group to explore how membership of such a group contributes to learning and development across a particular disciplinary context. Specific activities highlighted are the quadrennial conferences with rural geographers in Canada and the United States, bilateral conferences between the RGRG and rural geographers in France, Germany, the Netherlands and Spain, and conference sessions specifically aimed at postgraduate researchers (PGRs) and early career researchers (ECRs).

The RGRG can be likened to a CoP, or an 'intentional community' (Lopez and Weaver, 2019), a purposeful creation of a network of people who share specific ideals or commitments (Amin and Roberts, 2008). Another descriptor is 'discourse community,' referring to "groups that have goals and purposes, and use communication to achieve their goals" (Swales, 2016, p.8). In the

context of the RGS-IBG there are 32 such 'communities' or research groups, "which bring together active researchers and those with a professional interest in a particular aspect of geography and related disciplines" (RGS, 2023). This echoes a commonly used definition of a CoP, namely that "it refers to a social process of negotiating competence in a domain over time" (Farnsworth et al., 2016, p.143). It is a learning partnership related to a specific domain, in this case rural geography, in which the members have contributed to shaping and reshaping that domain under various influences, notably from those working in a similar area in other countries and from within the broader discipline of geography worldwide. The 'practice' is reflected not only in the content of its members' publications and their work, extending into education, public policy and research, government and enterprise, but also in the Group's activities. The latter include meetings at the Annual Conference of the RGS-IBG (which includes an annual general meeting), events (notably conferences and training sessions for PGRs and ECRs), undergraduate and postgraduate dissertation prizes, and funding support for rural geography PGRs (usually in the form of travel funds to conferences).

In developing the concept of a CoP, Wenger (1998) argues that members negotiate competence in the domain over time. This may foster social and work-related relationships but essentially it is part of a learning process that influences the nature of the shared enterprise, in this case the evolution of rural geography. The members are part of a network in which different individuals can exert an influence on how the community evolves. In this instance, evolution is manifest in the dynamic of the content of rural geography and how it is practised. However, individual members are also part of other communities, that is they are "always simultaneously a part of several discourses, several communities, … always already committed to a number of conflicting beliefs and practices" (Harris, 1989, p.19). This contributes to a dynamism and evolution in which different ideas can be introduced to the research group by members injecting

different perspectives into debate and to the trajectory followed by the group, for example by influencing the focus of conference sessions and the content of debates therein. It is also a dynamism that has contributed to a heterodoxy reflecting a diversity of focus and practice within the broad specialisation of rural geography. In this respect it reflects the wider discipline of geography, itself embracing specialisations but without intent to stifle theoretical or methodological plurality across the discipline (Castree et al., 2021). So, the members are 'practitioners' who produce an epistemic 'community' through their discursive practices in loose networks of multiple practice.

In this paper we draw on the work of Étienne Wenger-Trayner in suggesting that the RGRG is a CoP, which, since its inception in 1972, has drawn together "people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger-Trayner, E. and B., 2015, p.2). Wenger (1998) suggests that a CoP fulfils several functions with respect to knowledge creation and exchange. These include acting as a node for the exchange and interpretation of information; retaining tacit knowledge; stewarding competencies; and providing homes for identities. The RGRG serves all of these functions, and the latter has proved especially significant for ECRs and PGRs as they 'find their feet' in academia.

Although its c200 members work for different academic institutions, primarily in the UK but with some members based overseas, the RGRG is a community to which they can return to discuss emerging issues in rural geography, explore the relationship between their work and other members' research, and to network. In practice, there has tended to be a core group of members who have regularly attended the RGRG's sessions at annual conferences of the RGS-IBG and who have often been present at other conferences organised by the RGRG. For ECRs

and PGRs, the community has functioned as a space in which they can develop a sense of their academic selves, surrounded by more experienced members who can act as informal mentors and repositories of knowledge.

Throughout the rest of the paper, we consider specific RGRG activities through the lens of its role as a CoP. These activities include conferences and meetings for RGRG members, opportunities for PGRs and ECRs, the work of office holders, and collaborative events with rural geographers in other countries. We also consider how the CoP has been shaped by influences both from within geography and from other disciplines whilst, in turn, shaping development in those disciplines, notably sociology and planning.

2. The origins of the RGRG

Wenger (1998) explains that CoPs are not self-contained entities; rather, they develop, with specific resources and constraints, in larger contexts. In this section, we consider the historical, cultural and institutional context in which the RGRG first emerged, and how its development has been influenced by this context.

The origins of the RGRG lie in a growing recognition in the early 1970s that the then Agricultural Geography Study Group (AGSG) of the IBG was too narrowly conceived to do justice to the growing range of geographical research that possessed a rural focus, but which was not simply addressing issues relating solely to agriculture. Despite some influential texts on agricultural geography by members of the AGSG (e.g., Morgan and Munton, 1971; Tarrant, 1974), the embodiment of the burgeoning field of rural geography at this time was the publication in 1972 of Hugh Clout's *Rural geography: an introductory survey* (Clout, 1972). This effectively captured the interests of contemporary rural geographers, with just one of its

thirteen chapters devoted to agriculture. Indeed, it effectively illustrated the growing diversity of rural geography, including chapters on rural depopulation, urbanization of the countryside, forestry, landscape evaluation, rural settlement, industry, and transport as well as chapters devoted to land-use planning and management. These various strands were to be captured in the future work of the RGRG, with other key aspects emerging, initially including tourism and recreation, and landscape conservation.

The push to change the name of the AGSG was led by its chair, Terry Coppock (1972), who had produced several books and papers in the previous decade that sought to portray the spatial distribution of agricultural production in the UK (Coppock, 1971; 1964; Best and Coppock, 1962). Despite this agricultural focus, Coppock had founded the Tourism and Recreation Research Unit (TRRU) at the University of Edinburgh and was turning his attention to other rural issues and the fast-emerging possibilities for computerised handling and analysis of geographical data that led ultimately to the birth of geographical information systems (GIS) (Coppock, 1977; Duffield and Coppock, 1975; Robinson, 2007). The research focus on agriculture was continued by some members of the newly created RGSG, notably by Ian Bowler (1979; 1976b; 1975a,b), Brian Ilbery (1985; 1978), and Coppock (1976) himself. However, new foci, reflecting Clout's much broader conceptualisation of rural geography quickly emerged in the 1970s, representing a flowering of the sub-discipline (Best and Rogers, 1973; Haynes and Bentham, 1979; Blacksell and Gilg, 1977; 1975; Cherry, 1976; Clark, 1982b; 1982c; Cruickshank, 1982; Gilg, 1978; Lewis and Maund, 1976; Moseley, 1979; Rogers, 1978).

In part, these foci were shaped by mutual engagement at the Group's sessions at the annual conferences of the IBG and regional meetings for RGSG members in the form of symposia on

a selected topic. Sometimes the contents of symposia were reported in *Area* (e.g., Bowler, 1977), and several produced edited collections of selected presentations, which therefore reflect the changing concerns of RGSG members. Topics included second homes (Coppock, 1977), social issues (Bowler and Lewis, 1981), rural planning (Blacksell and Bowler, 1984; Jess et al., 1984), rural accessibility and mobility (Cloke, 1985a), rural industrialisation (Healey and Ilbery, 1985), land-use competition (Rogers, 1978), rural mobility and housing (Lewis and Sherwood, 1990), the impacts of the European Union (EU)'s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) (Bowler, 1986b; Jones and Robinson, 1991), structural changes in agriculture (Bowler, 1976a) and rural deprivation (Shaw, 1979). There was also a special volume commissioned by the RGRG committee on the future of the British rural landscape (Lockhart and Ilbery, 1987).

Irregular registers of research in rural geography were published on behalf of the Group at this time (Bowler, 1975a,b; Clark, 1978; 1981; Robinson, 1987) with two papers from future Chair, Gordon Clark (1979, 1982a), analysing the evolution of the Group, again showing the shifting content of rural geography research (Clout, 2008; Lowe and Ward, 2007). Agriculture continued to be an ongoing concern (e.g., Bowler, 1992; Grigg, 1984; 1992; Robinson, 1988; 2004), but in a broader, more dynamic and vibrant sub-discipline. In his 1997 editorial in *Journal of Rural Studies* (JRS), Paul Cloke writes of the resurgence of rural geography in the 1980s and early 1990s, with a "heightened activity profile amongst academic researchers interested in rurality and rural areas" (p. 367). Following a cultural turn in the wider discipline of geography (Jackson, 1997), notable areas of research at this time included rural landscapes; 'hidden others' in the countryside; the nature of rural development; and the spatiality of nature (Cloke et al., 1994; Hoggart and Buller, 1987; Ilbery, 1998; Little, 1999; Philo, 1992; Robinson, 1994). Members of the RGSG played a prominent role in this broadening of the topics embraced by rural geography, so it appears that a key aspect of the logic underpinning the

founding of the RGSG was being justified. The CoP as represented by the RGSG/RGRG was being reflected in a reshaping of the nature of rural geography, and a key mechanism in this process was the formal activities of the Group, primarily its conferences and symposia.

3. Conferences and meetings as opportunities to further develop a CoP

Wenger (1998, p. 74-75) writes that 'community maintenance' is an intrinsic part of any practice, but that it is 'easily undervalued'. We suggest that academic conferences and meetings have been vital arenas in which RGRG members undertake community maintenance and development, particularly through the opportunities for academic reflection and informal discussion. In this section, we explore the significance of international conferences organised by the RGRG and their role both in enabling mutual engagement and interaction with influences emanating outside the UK.

Once established, in addition to its sessions at the annual conferences of the RGS-IBG and occasional symposia, the RGSG developed a series of bilateral meetings with European rural geographers, notably the Dutch, French, German and Spanish. These helped expose participants to the different approaches and research foci of the other country, ultimately leading to some fruitful collaborations that drew upon European research funds (e.g., Meuwissen et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2017). However, a longer lasting series of meetings was launched in 1985 during a conference held at the University of Guelph in Ontario, Canada.

3.1 The Anglo-American-Canadian quadrennial rural geography conferences

The Guelph conference brought together around 75 rural geographers from the English-speaking world (including 17 from British universities) in a forum designed to consider the leading research topics of the day (Bowler, 1986a). Notable for the presence of senior

academics from Canada, the UK and the United States, an initiative was generated to create a regular conference for rural geographers from the three countries, to be hosted in turn by the three organisations representing academic geography: the Association of American Geographers (AAG), the Canadian Association of Geographers (CAG) and the IBG (subsequently RGS-IBG). In each organisation responsibility was devolved to the three sections or groups representing rural geography: the Contemporary Agriculture and Rural Land Use (CARLU) (now the Rural Geography) Specialty Group (AAG), the Rural Geography Study Group (CAG), and the RGRG (RGS-IBG) respectively.

In 1991 the RGRG hosted the initial Anglo-American-Canadian Rural Geography Conference, starting at University College London but moving to the Universities of Leicester and Birmingham over the course of a week. This became a quadrennial event with a format of about fifteen geographers from each country participating and a composition that attempted to blend ECRs with more experienced academics and included a few 'guests' from Australia, Ireland and New Zealand. Themes for each conference were selected by the hosts, but an important component was always the accompanying fieldtrips that built on the format established in Guelph, in which pressing rural problems and current research in the vicinity of the host venue were prominent. The area traversed by the fieldtrips was often increased by having a multi-venue format hosted by different institutions. Time spent in the field offered valuable opportunities for informal interaction between delegates. Table 1 summarises the meetings of these quadrennials.

Table 1 Venues and host institutions of the quadrennial Anglo-American-Canadian rural geography conferences

Year	Host country	Venue	Host institutions	Theme
1991	UK	London Leicester Birmingham	University College London University of Leicester University of Birmingham	Restructuring of rural areas
1995	USA	Charlotte, NC Greenville, NC	University of North Carolina East Carolina University	Rural systems and geographical scale
1999	Canada	Halifax, NS Truro, NS	St Mary's University	The new countryside: critical questions for the future of rural regions and communities
2003	UK	Exeter Plymouth	University of Exeter University of Plymouth	Contrasting ruralities: changing rural economies, societies and landscapes
2007	USA	Spokane, WA Wallace, ID Coeur d'Alene, ID	Washington State University	The global rural: rural change, connections, and scale
2011	Canada	Winnipeg, Man. Brandon, Man. Duck Mt., Sask.	University of Winnipeg Brandon University	Rural geography - rural develop-ment: theories and applica-tions
2015	UK	Swansea Aberystwyth Gregynog	Swansea University University of Aberystwyth University of Wales	Global challenges and rural responses
2019	USA	Burlington, VT Middlebury, VT	University of Vermont Middlebury College	Working landscapes and liveable communities
2023*	Canada	Vancouver Island	To be decided	To be decided

* Postponed to 2025

Harrington and Robinson (2012) observed that these regular meetings helped create an international CoP or 'professional learning community,' committed to sharing expertise and to learning from the different emphases and approaches being pursued in the respective countries.

Lasting collegial relationships were established through this joint enterprise, with groups being created on social media to exchange ideas and report on ongoing research, leading to subsequent visits between individual scholars, but as observed by Woods (2009), relatively little direct research collaboration occurred, though there were exceptions (e.g. Bowler and Everitt, 2001; Cawley and Duram, 2012; Everitt and Bowler, 1996). Moreover, interaction between the three national groups at other international conferences has been limited. What has transpired, though, is the creation of a small group of regular attendees from three countries: after the first six meetings of the Quadrennial there had been 149 individual participants overall, with 63 attending two or more, 30 attending three or more, and three attending all six.

One of the characteristics of the first five quadrennials was the subsequent production of a book incorporating some or all the papers from the conference (Table 2). The cessation of these publications reflects how articles in high-impact journals have become the all-important currency for academic advancement, but the books remain an excellent testament to research in progress at the time and serve as important artefacts indicating the evolution of ideas and research foci within the RGRG CoP. In effect, they are a snapshot of research and debates in rural geography at a particular point in time, through which it is possible to trace the changing concerns of rural geographers and the contributions by RGRG members whilst observing the distinctive national interests.

Table 2 Publications from the quadrennial Anglo-American-Canadian rural geography conferences

Quadrennial Conference	Publication	No. of contributors			
		Canada	USA	UK	Austr/NZ/Ire
1991	Contemporary rural systems in transition – Volume 1: Agriculture and Environment	8	6	9	0
	Contemporary rural systems in transition – Volume 2: Economy and Society	10	6	8	1
1995	Agricultural restructuring and sustainability: a geographical perspective	12	10	14	3
	Reshaping the countryside: perceptions and processes of rural change	6	6	11	0
1999	The new countryside: geographic perspectives on rural change	15	9	13	5
	Agricultural and environmental sustainability in the new countryside	10	1	4	1
2003	Rural change and sustainability: agriculture, the environment and communities	13	10	8	0
2007	Geographic perspectives on sustainable rural change	15	10	13	3
2011	Rural geography – rural development: special issue of *Journal of Rural and Community Development*	5	10	18	6

From the 1991 quadrennial two volumes were published (Bowler et al., 1992a; 1992b), capturing the state of rural geography two decades after the founding of the RGRG. Within the broad conference theme of 'restructuring rural areas,' the British contingent showed greater attention to theory and less to applied research, apart from policy analyses, whereas the North Americans, especially the United States delegates, focused on "more applied analyses of land use, more empirical studies of agriculture, and more Sauerian landscape interpretation" (Kurtz and Craig, 2009, p.377). This gave rise to sharp contrasts in perspectives on and understandings of rural change.

The ongoing prominence of work on agriculture is apparent but focused on the evolving agri-food system, illustrating how a wider perspective on agricultural issues was permeating the research agenda, including diversification of the farm business, sustainable agriculture as a policy option, and changing relationships between agriculture and the environment. There was also a strong policy dimension. Within the overarching notion of 'transition,' the editors referred primarily to a political economy framing that emphasised structuralist constraints imposed by uneven development, in which they argued rural areas were being increasingly marginalised in socio-economic terms. Yet, they acknowledged the heterogeneity of rurality and hence the differential impact of the forces of change associated with the emergence of post-industrial society. They acknowledged "the emergence of 'new needs' in society; the development of new transportational and communications technology; and the development of new technology affecting production processes" (Bowler et al., 1992c, p.4). 'New needs' were translated into lifestyle migration, quality of the environment, opportunities for tourism and recreation, and assurance of food quality. It was argued that greater regional specialisation and globalisation were buoyed by transport changes, such as containerisation, while the start of the revolution in information and communications technologies (ICT) was highlighted as presenting new opportunities for rural areas, again allied to globalisation and the emergence of what McLuhan (1964) had termed 'the global village'.

In contrast to the broadly structuralist interpretation of rural change in the 1991 quadrennial, a different view had emerged for the 1995 conference in North Carolina. There was a concentration on the huge changes sweeping through agriculture and the agri-food system in the developed world (Ilbery et al., 1997). The contribution of RGRG members to conceptualising these changes theorised a shift from productivism to post-productivism, though the ensuing debate stressed that the former remained dominant (Walford, 2003; 1999).

The broad restructuring of agriculture was represented in studies of farming culture, including the long-neglected role of women (see Little 2002; Whatmore, 1991; Whatmore et al., 1994), farm diversification, 'alternative agriculture,' and moves towards greater sustainability to address climate change. There was a strong policy dimension in the contributions by RGRG members, reflecting impacts of reforms to the EU's CAP (Potter, 1998). A second focus was on economic and social changes within the broader rural system, with papers addressing the characteristics of 'new countrysides,' the nature of socio-economic transformations, and policy and development responses (Walford et al., 1999). The UK delegates made significant observations about how change in rural areas was affecting rural society, with technological innovation significant but via multiple trajectories and highly variable input by rural residents to policy initiatives depending on who were the leading proponents of rural development.

The 1999 conference in Nova Scotia yielded one main volume (Beesley et al., 2003) and a smaller supplementary (Millward et al., 2000). The latter addressed the theme of agriculture and environment, with a deliberate attempt to link environmental change to sustainability, but in two specific contexts: globalisation and post-productivism. There was explicit reference to climate change, with three papers by Canadians examining how climate change was affecting agriculture. The editors argued that climate change was an increasingly important concern in 'fully rural areas' dominated by farming, forestry and mining, while the countryside in areas closer to expanding cities was experiencing a re-orientation of farming practices and land management to meet the needs of the neighbouring and dominant urban clientele.

The volume edited by Beesley et al. dealt with the evolution of farming and forestry, rural services, social issues, and the rural-urban fringe. The 'new countryside' was used as a coda for the impact of the city, especially in this fringe but, further afield, the power exerted by fast-food chains, supermarkets and the global market was increasingly recognised as reaching into

remote rural locations. The editors conceptualised this by combining considerations of scale with themes (globalisation, post-productivism/environmentalism, and core-periphery shifts), and drivers (socio-economic, environmental and technological) across different milieux (environment and resources, material wealth, policy orientation and market intervention, and land value). The differences between British and North American rural geography were still apparent in a stronger underpinning of political-economic and socio-cultural theories from the UK contributors. In part, this reflected how the RGRG CoP was more strongly influenced by developments in 'mainstream' geography (Woods, 2009).

The book from the 2003 quadrennial held in the UK in Exeter and Plymouth contains chapters involving only eight contributors from the host country (Essex et al., 2005a) as the impacts of the UK's research assessment exercise began to be felt, with its emphasis on papers in high-impact peer reviewed journals. This assessment is a significant external influence which has shaped the CoP's activity since the Millennium. As a result, there is a more North American flavour to the volume, especially the section on communities where various aspects of 'small town' North America are prominent, including the growing presence of new Latino migrants. The British editors focused on rural change (Essex et al., 2005b), noting that policy responses were emphasising local actions in rural places as a means of ensuring a more participatory, sustainable, and sensitive means of tackling rural needs and issues (see Moseley, 2003). They highlighted the role of rural geographers in contributing to the recent 'Perspectives on Rural Policy Planning' series published by Ashgate, with notable contributions from RGRG members (e.g., Buller and Hoggart, 2004; Halfacree et al., 2002; Holloway and Kneafsey, 2004). The evolving nature of rural geography was captured in terms of the influence of the 'cultural turn' (Cloke, 1997; 2004; Cloke and Little, 1997) and the 'post-rural' (Marsden et al., 2003; Murdoch and Pratt, 1993), seen through new conceptualisations of people, animals and nature, different

interactions with landscape, and new perspectives on living, working and visiting the countryside. So, while the ongoing concerns of agriculture, environment, community and governance are apparent, there were shifts in the content of associated debates (Buller and Morris, 2003; Evans and Yarwood, 2008; Phillips, 1998; Ward and McNicholas, 1998), not least in questioning of the so-called post-productivist transition (Evans et al., 2002; Wilson, 2001). The evolving emergence of alternative food networks and policy shifts favouring pro-environmental actions on farms are also captured, again reflecting significant research led by RGRG members (Ilbery, 1998; Whatmore et al., 2003; Wilson and Buller, 2001).

Winchell et al's (2010) book from the 2007 conference in Washington State and Idaho includes an introduction by two American geographers who drew distinctions between the foci of rural geography in Britain and North America (Winchell and Koster, 2010). For Britain it was argued there was a concern for protecting a human-created countryside that was imbued with cultural meanings relating in part to conceptions of a rural idyll (Holloway and Kneafsey, 2004) but juxtaposed with multidimensional changes associated with land-use competition (Halfacree, 2006). The concerns of American, Australian and Canadian rural geography were focused more on the incorporation of rural areas into global systems of production and consumption but with research often focusing on local impacts or 'glocalisation.' In contrast, one RGRG member's contribution explicitly traced the American policy response to rural development in the global context in the form of the 2002 Farm Bill (Woods, 2010). Other contributions were organised on familiar lines: nearly 40% each on farms/farming, and rural development policy, and the remainder on rural communities. The British input reflected the growing diversity of approaches to rural geography, with foci ranging across a socio-economic spectrum. This was captured in the book's conclusion on 'rural futures' (Robinson and Ramsey, 2010), which discussed the growing emphasis on rural landscapes as being multifunctional (Wilson, 2008;

2007), the rise of alternative food networks and a concern for sustainability (Cox et al., 2008; Marsden and Morley, 2014; Robinson, 2009), the continuing impact of rural depopulation and loss of key services (Mansfield, 2008; Stockdale, 2006; 2002), and the challenges posed by climate change (Parry et al., 2009) and growing crops for biofuels (Robinson and Harris, 2004).

The 2011 quadrennial in Canada generated 21 papers plus an editorial, all appearing in a special issue of *Journal of Rural and Community Development*, published by the Rural Development Institute at Brandon University, one of the host institutions for the conference. Just under half the contributors (46.2%) were from the UK. Conference themes included agriculture, rural policy and planning, and rural community. Input from UK delegates continued to include a strong agri-food focus, with concerns about disease and adoption of new technology, but with evidence of the wide range of topics embraced by rural geography: including migration, continuity and discontinuity in rural landscapes, and the impacts of globalisation. This range was captured effectively in a book on 'the rural' published in the year of the conference by a leading member of the RGRG, Michael Woods (2011), itself an extension of earlier influential work on rural restructuring by the same author (Woods, 2005). The journal articles also included work on rural gentrification (Smith, 2013) which was part of extensive research from active RGRG members (Phillips et al., 2021; Phillips and Smith, 2022; Smith, 2011; Smith and Holt, 2005; Smith and Phillips, 2001) and the forerunner to a substantial collaborative project that involved British, American and European rural geographers on 'international rural gentrification' (iRGENT), funded jointly by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), France's Agence Nationale de la Recherche (ANR) and the United States' National Science Foundation (NSF) (iRGENT, 2023; Phillips et al., 2020; Smith et al, 2019). This is one of the best examples of extensive international collaboration involving RGRG members.

In 2015, in Wales, the quadrennial took globalisation as a key theme, emphasising 'global challenges and rural responses'. This was translated into transdisciplinary practices, the changing nature of rural environmental challenges, the new faces of exurban development and rural landscapes, the realities and changing practices of modern farming, the role of alternative food networks, rural responses to global challenges, rural gentrification (re-imagining and rebuilding rural communities and rural-urban connections), and understanding the implications of global economic restructuring and collaborative responses in rural communities (Mount, 2015). The focus on globalisation was most apt given the role of Michael Woods and researchers at the University of Aberystwyth in the recently launched GLOBAL-RURAL project (2014-2019), funded by the European Research Council and aimed at advancing understanding of the workings and impact of globalisation in rural regions through the development and application of new conceptual and methodological approaches (Global-Rural, 2023; Jones et al., 2019; McDonagh et al., 2015; Woods, 2018a; Woods et al., 2021).

With eleven UK delegates, the 2019 conference in Vermont, under the theme 'working landscapes and liveable communities,' also placed the emphasis on global challenges, a theme reflected in current work by RGRG members (Robinson, 2018; Robinson and Carson, 2015; Woods, 2017; 2018b) and highlighting rural politics and processes in the new global (dis)order. Continuity with previous foci was evident in 'planning and community development,' which featured as one of six themes, which included migration and socio-environmental systems, but also encompassed relational ruralities, emphasising networks, connections, flows and mobility (Heley and Jones, 2012), and methodological concerns. The latter reflected a longstanding research thread to capture the multiplicity of rural experience, including that of the so-called rural 'others' (Halfacree, 2003; Milbourne, 1997). This dates to a significant contribution by Philo (1992) that sparked significant debate at the time in the

RGRG and beyond (Murdoch and Pratt, 1993). Indeed, responses to Philo's observations had a huge influence on rural geography (Cloke, 1997), helping it to be in the vanguard of the 'cultural turn' in the 1990s (Holloway and Kneafsey, 2004; Morris and Evans, 2004). The conference also re-examined rural gentrification, assumptions about rural out-migration and connection to place (Stockdale and Haartsen, 2018; Stockdale et al., 2018).

There has been some convergence of focus over time in the rural research agendas in the UK and North America. In part, this has reflected an overall move away from a dominant concern with farm-based agricultural production in the initial two quadrennials towards a much broader view of the agri-food system, including a recognition that in addition to its production role, the rural includes landscapes of consumption (e.g., tourism and recreation), production of ecosystem services and rural communities. Different publishing strategies on either side of the Atlantic may have had a part to play in creating different approaches (Kurtz and Craig, 2009), but the RGRG CoP has developed closer alignment with trends in 'mainstream' geography. It has also been more directly engaged with the broader trans-disciplinary growth of rural studies, readily embracing ideas from rural sociology and rural planning. There has perhaps been a fluidity of identity too, with the geography aspect of the CoP transcending a narrow conception of 'rural geography' by including the sociological, cultural and economic as expressed by individuals labelling themselves sociologists, cultural geographers, social geographers and planners rather than rural geographers. One illustration of the 'Quads' ability to develop some key working (and personal) alliances extending beyond rural geography is the collaboration between Holly Barcus (CARLU) and Keith Halfacree (RGRG) and in their book on population geographies (Barcus and Halfacree, 2018).

3.2 Bilateral conferences with European rural geographers

The various bilateral conferences with rural geographers in different European countries also led to a series of edited books being produced. As with similar publications from the quadrennial conferences they provide insights to the changing nature of rural geography in the RGRG CoP and internationally. Beginning with a collection based on contributions to the First British-Dutch Symposium on Rural Geography in 1982 (Clark et al., 1984), a total of ten such volumes were published (Table 3). Some suggest a strong degree of overlap of research interests between participants, one of the best examples being this 1982 Symposium. Here the initial section, on defining 'rural,' was an echo of a concern popular at the time (Cloke, 1977; Cloke and Edwards, 1986; Halfacree, 1993; Hoggart, 1990; 1988). The more substantive issues addressed were rural standards of living, political influences in the countryside, rural housing and rural planning. The latter is noteworthy for a contribution by future RGRG chair, Richard Munton (1984) on planning in the Metropolitan Green Belt (MGB) that was subsequently developed into research on the nature of change in the MGB within the context of green belt policies (Goodchild and Munton, 1985; Munton, 1983; Munton et al., 1988). This evolved into influential publications involving Munton, Philip Lowe, Terry Marsden, Andrew Flynn, Jon Murdoch and Sarah Whatmore, including two books in the 'Restructuring Rural Areas' series by UCL Press (Marsden et al., 1993; Murdoch and Marsden, 1994), which were highly influential across the broad field of rural studies.

Table 3 Publications from bilateral rural geography conferences involving the RGRG, 1982 – 2010

Conference year	Bilateral partner	Location	Publication (date of publication)	Editors
1982	Netherlands	Norwich	The changing countryside (1982)	Clark, Groenendijk and Thissen
1986	Netherlands	Amsterdam	Rural research and planning: The Netherlands and Great Britain (1987)	Clark, Dostal and Thissen
			Planning and the future of the countryside: Great Britain and the Netherlands (1989)	Clark, Huigen and Thissen
1993	Netherlands	Lancaster	The retreat: Rural land-use and European agriculture (1994)	Bolsius, Clark and Groenendijk
1996	Spain	Leicester	From traditional countryside to post-productivism (1996)	Lopez and Molinero
2000	Spain	Valladolid	Proceedings of the Second Anglo-Spanish Symposium on Rural Geography (2001)	Molinero, Baraia and Alario
2002*	France	Worcester/ Kingston	Innovations in rural areas (2003)	Evans and Walford
2002	Germany	Thurnau	The countryside in the 21st century: Anglo-German perspectives (2005)	Schmied and Wilson, O.
2007	France	Vichy	Les étrangers dans les campagnes (2008)	Diry
2008@	Germany	Oldenburg	Globalization and rural transitions in Germany and the UK (2010)	Mose, Robinson, Schmied and Wilson, G. A.
2009#	Spain	Canterbury	Proceedings of the Third Anglo-Spanish Symposium on Rural Geography	Robinson, Molinero and Guerra

* Previous Anglo-French rural geography conferences were held in 1989 (Caen), 1993 (Exeter) and 1997 (Nantes) but did not produce associated publications. The last in the series, held at Colchester in 2010, also failed to produce a publication.

@ This is the third Anglo-German rural conference. The second, held in Exeter in 2004, did not produce a publication.

\# A fourth Anglo-Spanish conference took the form of a Symposium on Iberian-British Rural Geography held jointly in Santiago de Compostella (Spain) and Porto (Portugal) in July 2013. No publication resulted from this.

The conferences with Dutch rural geographers increasingly developed a strong focus on rural planning, often with rather gloomy views about planning-related outcomes (Clark et al., 1989a; 1987), but illustrating how rural problems were being addressed "under two similar but not identical administrative, economic and social systems" (Wheeler, 1990, p.224). This theme was elaborated by Clark et al. (1989b) who asserted that similar issues faced both sets of rural geographers, especially "central/local government relations, the future of public-sector planning and the effects of changes in the political ethos in both countries" (p.13). In the third such meeting at Lancaster in 1993, the emphasis was on how reforms to the CAP would affect the European countryside (Bolsius et al., 1994), a theme subsequently pursued by RGRG members through a focus on how negative environmental impacts of modern farming methods might be ameliorated, e.g., via agri-environment policies (Buller et al., 2000; Fish et al., 2008; 2003; Marsden, 2017; Potter, 1998; Sutherland et al., 2015) and as part of a move from productivism to post-productivism (Mather et al., 2006).

The three Anglo-German conferences were significant for the role they played in helping to develop rural geography in Germany. At the first conference, on the countryside in the 21st century (Schmied and Wilson, 2005), Schmied (2005) commented on the relatively underdeveloped nature of German rural geography in contrast to the strength of the British counterpart. However, in 2004 a rural working group (*Arbeitskreis Ländlicher Raum*) was established, which Wilson et al. (2010, p.6, in Mose et al., 2010) argue, "owes a lot to the example of the British RGRG." German contributions to the three conferences emphasised a strong regional planning focus reflecting the significant role of the 16 states (*länder*) in this respect. Indeed, the third conference, at the University of Oldenburg, was hosted by the Institute of Environmental Sciences, featuring its research group in spatial planning and regional sciences. British contributions featured several recurring themes across the various conferences

listed in Tables 1 and 3 (e.g., post-productivism, second homes, rural accessibility, farm diversification and restructuring).

The six Anglo-French rural geography conferences were the most long-running of the bilateral meetings, though only two produced subsequent publications. Initially several of the French contributions echoed the strong traditional focus on *pays* (country) and distinctive *genres de vie* (ways of life) deriving originally from the work of Vidal de la Blache (1903; Clout, 2003; Tezuka, 1980). However, the post-1960s move away from a predominantly agricultural focus can be seen in papers dealing with environmental concerns, landscape conservation and issues pertaining to local development and governance (Plet, 2003). The different approaches of the French and British extended to the language used in the presentations, with a division into either the English or the French language breached only by a few bilingual British geographers, including Henry Buller, Hugh Clout, Robert Gant and Ian B. Thompson (though see Clout, 2005). Thompson (2003) is one example of a British delegate focusing on a French topic, partly in the *pays* tradition, while French geographer Annabelle Boulay (2003; 2008), an RGRG member working in England, writes about both countries. Nevertheless, the issue of language and mutual incomprehension had considerable implications for just how much could be developed through multi-national connections (Gkartzios et al., 2020).

The French focus on the impacts of agricultural modernisation is evident in the publication from the fourth colloquium, held in the UK (Walford and Evans, 2003). Entitled 'Innovations in rural areas,' innovation was attributed broadly to changes associated with farm diversification. This included innovations in both countries with respect to quality assurance for farm produce (Ilbery and Kneafsey, 2000), development of new rural networks and what the French termed *territorialisation* or attempts to recapture reliance on short agri-food circuits

as opposed to global supply (Little et al., 2009). This overlap in interests was repeated at the fifth colloquium in Vichy in 2007 where the broad theme of 'strangers in the countryside' permitted a range of approaches to the largely French concern about migrants, especially from northern Europe, settling in rural areas (Diry, 2008). This phenomenon had been tackled in previous research by RGRG members analysing British migrants to France (Buller and Hoggart, 1994; Hoggart, 1997; Hoggart et al., 1995; Hoggart and Buller, 1995). However, alongside, the dominant focus on migration into the French countryside, including five British contributions on this topic, RGRG members inserted studies based on changes to the British countryside, including the ongoing concern with rural gentrification (Phillips, 2008; Smith; 2008). Of the various bilateral conferences, this was perhaps the one in which the content of the various contributions was most closely focused on a single theme.

Building initially on a special issue of *Agricultura y Sociedad* (vol. 71, 1994) featuring papers in Spanish by Marc Mormont, Clive Potter, Michael Redclift, Guy M Robinson, Philip Lowe and Neil Ward, all three Anglo-Spanish rural geography conferences yielded volumes of collected papers (Lopez and Molinero, 1996; Molinero et al., 2001; Robinson et al. 2011). From the Spanish side, there was emphasis on how traditional Spanish rural landscapes were changing as modernisation affected farming and decades of rural-out-migration took their toll on the viability of many rural settlements. The RGRG delegates also focused on landscape change but within the context of post-productivism underscoring several of the papers and providing the dominant theme of the first conference. The Spanish geographers also utilised this as a guiding idea in several papers, many of which were presented and published in English, a forerunner to the development of English as the language used in many geographical conferences held in Europe in the past two decades. The Anglo-Spanish conferences also maintained the desire to include ECRs amongst the delegates, reinforcing the idea of

intentionally recruiting new members to the RGRG CoP and enabling new ideas to enter the CoP 'from below.'

The last of the bilateral conferences was held in 2010 between British and French rural geographers at the University of Essex, and like several other bilateral conferences it did not lead to a subsequent publication of collected papers. Similarly, a trilateral conference in 2013 between British, Spanish and Portuguese rural geographers yielded no publication. However, the cessation of such conferences did not mark the end of collaboration between British rural geographers and their European counterparts but showed both a recognition of a need to be more inclusive to engage with a wider range of interested parties and the emergence of multilateral conferences. Of the latter, three series have been significant. First, the European Society for Rural Sociology (ESRS), established in 1957, started a regular Congress in the 1980s. Held in different European countries, this has increasingly attracted British rural geographers as well as sociologists as participants. The Society's journal, *Sociologia Ruralis*, has been regarded as an attractive outlet for rural geographical research, and Henry Buller was editor of this journal whilst Chair of the RGRG.

In 2013 a rural geography conference for European rural geographers (Rurality: new perspectives and themes), including seven delegates from the RGRG, was held in Bamberg, Bavaria and was the unofficial predecessor of the first European Rural Geography Conference held in Nantes (France) the following year, with the RGRG as one of several joint organisers and four RGRG members on the 28-person scientific committee. With an overarching title of 'The countryside: spaces of innovation in an urban world,' the content covered three themes reflecting concerns of rural geographers across the continent: practices, values and images of rurality: reappropriations and 'recycling;' innovators and context for

innovation; scales and territories of innovation in Europe's countryside. In part, this emergence of a European initiative reflected a view held by then RGRG Chair, Keith Halfacree, that the RGRG's bilateral conferences had excluded large swathes of Europe, including the newly emerging post-socialist countries of eastern Europe and smaller countries, such as Belgium and Denmark.

This was followed by a second event in Braunschweig (Germany) in 2017 and a third in Groningen (Netherlands) in 2023 after a hiatus caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Strong British representation at these three events and the various ESRS Congresses has meant that formal engagement with a wider cross-section of rural geographers from Europe has occurred (Steinführer et al., 2021). These conferences have also marked the wide acceptance of English as the *lingua academia*, which for French and German academics was largely not the case before the 2000s, and which has now increased the opportunities for inter-country collaborations (Kwiek, 2018). The third development, through the International Geographical Union (IGU), has provided opportunities for even wider interaction, via annual conferences organised by the IGU's Commission on Sustainable Rural Systems (SRS) and similar events in the more recently founded Commission on Agricultural Geography and Land Engineering (AGLE). Although attendance by British rural geographers at these conferences has been limited, a presence from RGRG members has been more apparent at their conferences held in European venues, e.g., Poland (2023), Croatia (2022), Italy (2005), Scotland (2004), Spain (2009 and 2018) and France (virtually, 2021) and the four-yearly IGU Congresses, notably that held in Glasgow in 2004 (Robinson, 2008), with some SRS conferences producing edited volumes including papers by RGRG members (Bowler et al., 2002; Bryant and Grillotti di Giacomo, 2007; Frutos et al., 2009; Kim et al., 2001; Paul Carrill et al., 2018). These publications highlight one of the key challenges facing the RGRG, namely how to engage more

fully with the global scope and expression of 'rural geography' whilst maintaining a relatively distinctive national identity. Conferences involving delegates drawn from across the world may be one aspect of this, perhaps with more use to be made of virtual technology to increase the scope of such events.

To conclude this section on conferences, we turn back to the necessity of mutual engagement and community maintenance. The maintenance of a CoP requires doing things together to develop a shared practice. At these in-person meetings, it is possible to engage in negotiations of meaning and ensure members offer complementary, coherent contributions to the development of the CoP. Holding regular conferences and meetings ensures there are sufficient opportunities for engaging in the pursuit of the joint enterprise required to develop and sustain a shared repertoire across generations of members.

4. Opportunities for new and emerging researchers in the CoP

The recruitment of new generations of members is an essential aspect of CoPs to ensure their practice continues. Universities across the UK provide rural geography modules for undergraduate students, many led by RGRG members, with several taught postgraduate courses on which students can develop further skills and appreciation for rural studies. A continued interest in rural geography is reflected in the number of doctoral research students currently supervised by RGRG members and office-holders, in addition to numerous articles published by doctoral students and ECRs in key journals such as *JRS* and *Sociologia Ruralis*.

The conferences and meetings described above in section 3 have long provided opportunities for new and emerging researchers to receive constructive feedback on their work and begin to network. Such opportunities are important at this stage in an academic career, when Becher

(1989. p.25) suggests the development of one's academic identity is 'at its most intense.' Reflecting on the RGS-IBG Annual Conference in the RGRG Newsletter as a doctoral student at University College Worcester in 1998, Christine Corcoran captured the importance of RGSG membership at this stage of her career:

> *"It was crucial therefore, that at this early stage of intellectual flowering, confidence should not be dented. The solution to this problem was in fact very simple. Stick to what you know… The place for me then was the Rural Geography Study Group… The following morning found me at the RGSG Postgraduate Forum… the atmosphere was relaxed and encouraging."*

Corcoran's experience demonstrates that ECR members can seek experience and grow in confidence through their participation in RGRG events, an essential element of CoPs. In this respect, conferences represent an opportunity to initiate newcomers to the discipline through sustained generational encounters.

This is a form of 'legitimate peripheral participation' whereby "individuals learn through participation in communities of practitioners in particular fields" (Tay, 2015). The newcomers can move from the periphery to a more central role via partial or casual participation, somewhat akin to an apprenticeship (Lave and Wenger, 1991). In the RGRG this can take the form of attending conference sessions organised for postgraduates or attending training sessions promoted by the RGRG, such as the annual Winter School of the Countryside and Community Research Institute (CCRI) at the University of Gloucestershire, delivering "advanced training in research methods, inter-disciplinary approaches and theoretical constructs, as well as providing an opportunity for students to present their research to a sympathetic audience. It also aims to foster knowledge exchange and debate between students, as well as between staff, external speakers and students" (CCRI, 2023). The RGRG's committee has a position of

Postgraduate Representative to provide a link to the postgraduate community. The RGSG/RGRG Postgraduate Forum, subsequently the 'New and Emerging Researchers' session, organised by PGR representatives, also offers PGRs the chance to engage in peripheral participation, as Moya Kneafsey suggests in her report on the 1996 RGS-IBG Annual Conference:

> *"The RGSG Postgraduate Forum is an excellent chance for those of us at the bottom of the ladder to get a foot on the first rung."*

Interactions at conferences gradually shape professional attitudes and values and allow researchers early in their career to access the tacit knowledge retained in the CoP. This often encourages sustained membership of the CoP, and many PGR representatives have proceeded to hold another role on the RGRG committee.

5. Supportive networks for the CoP

A major impact of the RGRG has been through its office-holders and their initiatives in the field of academic publishing allied to the role of specialist journals (notably *JRS* and *Sociologia Ruralis*), key animating individuals (see below), edited books and other networks (e.g., ESRS), and university departments featuring rural geography. Publishing allows several practices performed by the academic community to be codified, including discussing new developments in the discipline, documenting projects, and identifying gaps in competence. These activities help shape and crystallise the academic content in the CoP through the development of a shared repertoire.

Perhaps the best example of this is the work of Paul Cloke and his vital role in founding the *JRS*. Cloke was prominent in the RGRG in the early 1980s, translating his doctoral research on English key villages and rural planning into broader research on rural geography in the UK,

both presented at the Group's annual meetings and published in academic journals (Cloke, 1980; 1979; 1978; 1977; Cloke and Hanrahan, 1984; Cloke and Park, 1984; 1980). He was then the chief instigator of discussions with members of the RGRG committee and colleagues in other disciplines regarding his view that there needed to be a specialist outlet for research from across the social sciences addressing rural issues. He was keen to promote cross- and inter-disciplinary research and floated the idea of a journal that could become the 'natural' home for such work. This was strongly supported by the RGRG committee at the time, with Cloke promoting the idea to a successful conclusion through the launch of the *JRS* in 1985, published by Elsevier.

Part of the context for Cloke's initiative was the growth of interdisciplinary rural studies in the early 1980s, of which RGSG members were an integral part. So, whilst there was a growth of studies by its members, which were clearly identified as rural geography, several RGSG members were also part of the Philip Lowe-inspired creation of the Rural Economy and Society Study Group (RESSG) in 1978/9, alongside sociologists, planners, social anthropologists, political scientists, agricultural economists, and historians (Doak, 1990; Ward and Phillipson, 2021). The RESSG generally met four times a year through the 1980s, receiving grant support from the Economic and Social Research Council and the British Sociological Association. With a majority of its c100 members drawn from sociology, this group provided RGSG members opportunities to develop inter-disciplinary links and to extend the range and approaches adopted in their research. As with the RGSG's publication of monographs, the RESSG followed suit, some featuring significant contributions by RGRG members (e.g., Buller and Wright, 1990; Lowe et al., 1986; Marsden and Little, 1990), though it ceased functioning in the 1990s.

In the opening issue of *JRS*, as founding editor, Cloke (1985b) set out his hopes for the journal without attempting to be proscriptive. He noted that rural geography in the UK had become more outward looking and was engaging with a multiplicity of methods, theories and approaches as multidisciplinary perspectives took hold. Without explicitly acknowledging it, this echoed the experience of the RGSG as it too had sought to extend the remit of rural geography during the 1970s and early 1980s. In so doing, Cloke encouraged the RGSG CoP to innovate and define new territory, encouraging joint enterprise in the pursuit of knowledge.

It is interesting to note what Cloke (1985b, p.3) regarded as the key areas for rural studies at this time. He recognised that they had risen to prominence through growing societal and media awareness of "the environmental and landscape impacts of industrialised farming, intensive recreation and extensions of urban land use in the developed world." This was being translated into increasing "interest in policy and planning in rural areas, stemming from a wish to apply academic research to real world problems and their potential amelioration" (ibid). Hence, it is unsurprising that he highlighted planning and policy-making as being at the heart of papers he wished to publish in *JRS*. Moreover, he also referred to an earlier initiative taken by a member of the then RGSG committee, Andrew Gilg, who had launched the *Countryside Planning Yearbook* in 1980, which subsequently became the yearly *Progress in Rural Policy and Planning,* both of which built on Gilg's (1979) influential *Countryside planning: the first three decades 1945-76*. Other work by RGRG members at this time that helped shape Cloke's ideas, as reflected in his opening editorial, were books by Lewis (1979), Pacione (1984), and Phillips and Williams (1984).

Cloke was editor of *JRS* for 25 years and contributed greatly to the realisation of his own vision by promoting themed issues in which papers from a range of disciplines were represented.

Members of the RGRG have published extensively in the journal and many have themselves followed Cloke's vision of rural research that spanned a broad spectrum of approaches, and reflected cross-disciplinary collaborations. The close connections between the RGRG and *JRS* have been maintained via Cloke's successor as editor, Michael Woods, and his successor, Darren Smith, both of whom have been committee members of the RGRG. Continuity of vision has been pursued whilst both editors added new emphases that have helped shape the journal and continued to maintain its contemporary relevance to rural research.

While Cloke, Woods and Smith have made a major impact in their editorial roles with *JRS*, other office bearers of the RGRG have been influential through occupying similar positions in other journals. Key foci in Cloke's early work, namely planning and policy, were translated into another specialist Elsevier journal, *Land Use Policy (LUP)*, not restricted to focusing on rural issues, but proving to be an attractive outlet for many rural geographers engaged in research on policy impacts, especially including agri-environmental policies, conservation measures, resource planning, and recreational use. After it was founded one year before *JRS*, it had several editors before Alexander (Sandy) Mather, one of the instigators of the quadrennial conferences and well-known for his work on the forest transition (Mather, 1990; 1992; 2007; Mather and Needle, 2000), became editor in 1998. He remained as editor until his death in 2007, after which the then Chair of the RGRG, Guy Robinson, became editor, occupying this position for twelve years. Both Mather and Robinson followed the example of Cloke and his successors at *JRS* in seeking to open *LUP* to authors from outside the Global North. They strongly promoted submissions from China by instigating special issues devoted to rural problems in China and followed this with others dealing with rural development problems in developing countries (e.g., formalisation of land rights in the South; soil degradation in sub-Saharan Africa; sustainable development in developing countries). In this respect they diverged

from the traditional focus of the RGRG, which had been concentrated initially on the UK and then Europe, partly reflecting the fact that in the RGS-IBG there was a separate research group for Development Geographies. Hence, those working on rural development issues tended to split in two camps: one focused on the Global North and the other on the Global South.

Robinson's immediate predecessor as Chair of the RGRG, Henry Buller, was editor of *Sociologia Ruralis,* the journal of the European Society for Rural Sociology, for several years in the 2000s and 2010s, and a pioneer of a further broadening of rural geography/sociology into 'animal geographies' (Buller, 2014; 2013). That a geographer should be editor of a rural sociology journal is testament to the way in which rural geography had been transformed in last quarter of the twentieth century. It also reflected how social scientists from different disciplines increasingly were cognisant of each other's work as disciplinary silos broke down. Cloke's vision at *JRS* had a part to play in this, but also the recognition that multi- and inter-disciplinary research could bring to bear a greater range of expertise to tackle problems. This was echoed in research programs funded via the European Union, which often championed the formation of research teams representing several disciplines, and also in the UK in the case of the Rural Economy and Land Use (RELU) program between 2004 and 2013 funded by the joint research councils, DEFRA and the Scottish government to inform future policy and practice with choices on how to manage the countryside and rural economies (Harris and Lyon, 2013; Lowe and Phillipson, 2006; Lowe et al., 2013).

Following in the footsteps of Cloke et al. other office holders in the RGRG have played a part within the broader discipline of geography via their own roles as editor of flagship journals of the RGS, notably Jo Little for the *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* and Darren Smith for *Geographical Journal.* In addition, the evolving relationship between rural

geography and inter-disciplinary approaches to issues researched in the social sciences is reflected in RGRG members editing other multi-disciplinary journals, including Terry Marsden for *Journal of Environmental Policy and Planning*, Darren Smith and Aileen Stockdale for *Population, Space and Place,* and Guy Robinson for *Research in Globalization*. Inter-disciplinarity has also included the forging of links with the humanities as seen in the work of former RGRG chair, Charles Watkins, on forestry (Kirby and Watkins, 2015; Watkins, 2018; 2014).

6. Conclusion – Looking Back, Looking Forward: 50 years of the Rural Geography Research Group

This paper has explored the RGRG as a CoP in which members contribute to a shared repertoire, undertake joint enterprise to steward academic competencies, and are able to hone their academic identity through mutual engagement. The RGRG's 50th Anniversary event provided an opportunity for reflection on the group's activities and time to consider the future of rural geography. The co-created published outputs of conferences and meetings, and the written records of the RGRG's activity in biannual newsletters, allow us to look back on members' engagements with, and maintenance of, the CoP.

Looking forward, it will be important for the RGRG to continue to position itself in the context of current critical debates and wicked societal issues, such as the climate crisis and global insecurity. This may include the development of new theoretical (e.g. Wang et al., 2023) and methodological approaches (such as Hughes et al.'s (2000) development of now-common ethnographic approaches). Members should continue to build on the strong relationships developed within and beyond the CoP to contribute to innovative research, particularly regarding interdisciplinary opportunities.

The diversity of interests within the RGRG has meant that over time it has become an increasingly 'broad church,' with a wide array of different research foci represented alongside a plethora of approaches and underpinning theories brought to bear on rural topics. Over time, the early focus on agricultural production morphed into concerns that embraced the whole of the agri-food system, with RGRG members playing a leading role in pioneering research on alternative food networks, food cultures, food consumption and food chains (Ilbery and Maye, 2005; Kneafsey et al., 2008; 2021; Maye, 2013; Maye et al., 2007; Ward, 2023; Watts et al., 2005). Following several years' of Working Group activity, the Food Geographies Research Group (FGRG) of the RGS-IBG was established in 2018. Several leading members of the RGRG were part of the creation of this new research group and are now members of both groups. The FGRG aims to "raise the profile of geography as a key voice in food related research, policy, knowledge and action" (FGRG, 2023). It will be interesting to see how this new Group interacts with the RGRG, with individuals who are members of both groups potentially playing a key part in influencing how each evolves.

In a *JRS* Editorial, Michael Woods (2012: 2) suggested 'five areas that present key challenges for rural areas in the early twenty-first century', all of which have featured subsequently in discussions at conferences and meetings of the RGRG and which are key to the ongoing development of rural geography. These are the sustainable use of resources (including the global agri-food system); the resilience of rural communities to environmental uncertainties; challenges arising from the intensification and reconfiguration of global mobility patterns from, to and across rural space; new strategies for rural economic development based on the sustainable use and management of environmental resources; and redrawing of the contours of state intervention in rural societies and economies (including the consolidation of neoliberal

reforms). These embrace the topics highlighted by Clout forty years earlier but indicate the transformation that occurred in rural geography across the intervening period, with a global reach and focus, coupled with multiple philosophical underpinnings and methods. A more recent overview by Yarwood (2023) presents a further indication of both continuity and change within the content of rural geography, returning to a similar set of themes to that of Clout (1972), whilst emphasising social geographies of poverty, social exclusion, homelessness and rural 'others.'

Just as previous decades saw the group exploring new concepts within and conceptualisations of the rural, so the 2020s also offer an opportunity to reposition the rural as 'intrinsic to understanding planetary crises' (Wang et al., 2023, p.14) through interdisciplinary scholarship, proactive, responsive research, and agenda setting in critical policy areas. To do so, members should draw on the RGRG's capacities and competencies to push new developments and create a dynamic, forward-looking CoP in which the knowledge produced and shared is at the forefront of the field.

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