

Anne Buttimer (Cork, 1938 - Dublin, 2017):  
*Obituary*

On 15 July 2017, bad news circulated among geographers: Anne Buttimer had left us. What is first important to stress is that this mourning did not concern only geography in Ireland, but worldwide, as Anne was first and foremost an international, transcultural, cosmopolite and multilingual geographer, known all over the world for her original research, her command of a number of languages, her kindness and her humanity.

Born in County Cork to a family of farmers, Anne considered that her origins and links to her land inspired her interests for daily life of popular classes and for “accountability and social justice” (Maddrell, 2009: 753), as she considered social processes as collective ones rather than individualistic – i.e., related to elites. After her studies at University College Cork, Anne entered the Dominican order as a nun in 1958, and was allowed to complete her PhD in geography at Washington University in Seattle, in 1965, in the context of an educational programme promoted by her religious order. Her works focused on the concept of “social space”, taking inspiration from the French tradition of the *Géographie humaine*, one which was completely unknown in the Anglo-American circuits at that time. Anne’s monograph on this subject (Buttimer, 1971) is considered a milestone in studies on the history and philosophy of geography. It is not coincidence that, in 1968, Anne was one of the founders of the IGU Commission on the History of Geography, in collaboration with Philippe Pinchemel (1923-2008), one of the key figures for cultural and historical geography in France (Robic, Tissier and Pinchemel, 2011).

If emigration to the USA is a classical trajectory of “Migrant Ireland” (Gilmartin, 2015), the following international experiences lived by Anne

witness the outstanding originality of her life and career, characterised by teaching and research appointments “in Belgium, Canada, France, Scotland, Sweden ... the USA” (Alcoforado and Jones, 2015: 186) and of course in Ireland, where she finally established herself as the Chair of Geography at University College Dublin. In 1965-66, Anne could improve her knowledge of the French-speaking world with a fellowship at the University of Louvain, in Belgium. From 1968 to 1970, she held a lectureship in Glasgow, where she started an experience that will be fundamental for her following career, namely a social fieldwork where, “through interviews in working-class households, she gained insights into people’s life experiences” (João Alcoforado and Jones, 2015, p. 186). In her own terms: “I looked at three very specific aspects of everyday life, one was how people imaged – perceived – space in their new environments (this was the era of ‘mental maps’ and environmental perception). The second one had to do with networks of interaction, where people travelled, how far away, how far away is too far away?” (Maddrell, 2009: 747). From that moment, daily life experience, dwelling and relations between humans and their life-space became paramount elements for building her problematics.

A lecturer at Clark university from 1970 onwards, Anne started to exert an important influence on geographers deceived by positivism and the “quantitative revolution”. According to Tom Mels, Buttimer’s early work “revolted against the dehumanisation and abstract space in positivist science” (Mels 2010: 93). Together with authors such as David Ley and Yu-Fi Tuan, she was deemed one of the leading figures of “humanistic geographies”, though she always refused the label of “humanistic” and any other classification, as she declared to dislike “-isms at all” (Maddrell, 2009: 753). Anyway, her early influential role in the Anglo-American critical and radical debates is witnessed by her

1974 pamphlet *Values in Geography*, published by the AAG and commented by Edward Soja, James Blaut, Edward Gibson, Thorsten Hägerstrand and Yi-Fu Tuan. In this text, Anne argued for the centrality of autobiographical topics by presenting first her “positionality”: “What interest could it conceivably be to the average American geography student, particularly to those who have never lived outside the United States, to hear about the value conflicts and dilemmas faced by a native Irish girl, sent to this country to be a Dominican sister, who has become involved in social contexts as varied as Cork, Leuven, Glasgow, Seattle, Paris, Lund and Worcester?” (Buttimer 1974: 2). The commentaries of the invited discussants were sometimes critical, for instance by positing a lack of radicalism in Anne’s analysis of class structures in society. Yet, the tone of the conversation witnesses how “Sister Annette”, at the age of only 36, already represented a scholarly tendency discussed by the tenants of radical and critical geographies. Moreover, in this document Anne expressed her own ideas of “critical approaches” to geography not only by addressing the problems of lower classes (her work was sometimes associated with the “geographical expeditions” led by William Bunge) but also through her own critique of the institutions a scholar must deal with, including state and church. “The only way I can overcome my aversion to the hypocrisy I find in some of these structures – academic, ecclesial or national – is by realising that I belong to them only because of a caring commitment to certain persons whom I cherish ... Because I value truth and love, I can, for the present at least, overlook the institutional trappings of each” (Buttimer, 1974: 3).

In an important interview with Avril Maddrell, Anne stated that: “I often considered 1976 as both a ‘midsummer’ and a ‘watershed’ year in my life” (Maddrell, 2009: 748). That year, after a Fulbright Seminar on “Nature, space and time: knowledge and experience” held in Lund, Anne decided to relinquish her vows with the Dominican order, and settled in Lund to work at the Dialogue Project in collaboration with local geographers such as Hägerstrand. In Sweden, Anne got married and worked to this scholarly endeavour until 1988. The Dialogue Project was based on interviews and

collective discussion which involved “over 300 people from 35 different countries” (Buttimer, 2001a), and focused on autobiographical experiences for “using autobiography to aid intra- and interdisciplinary understanding” (Maddrell, 2009: 744). These interviews, which are all recorded and in great part available in the IGU Channel,<sup>1</sup> confirm Anne’s interest for life experience, in this case intended as a “catalyst for cross-disciplinary communication”, addressing “a design and strategy for promoting inter-disciplinary communication about problems and issues of shared concern ... the history of geographic thought and practice ... human creativity and milieu” (Buttimer, 1986, p. 6). This work was conceived “to look across boundaries in a climate that furthers reflection and self-understanding” (Buttimer and Hägerstrand, 1980: v) in the spirit of “caring for knowledge” (Ibid., p. 5). Breaking barriers of discipline, culture, language and identity was clearly a leitmotif for Anne’s work all along her career.

In 1988, the Dialogue Project ended. After holding invited lectureships in Austin and in Paris-Sorbonne, Anne moved to Ottawa to teach at the local Geography Department. When UCD advertised a vacancy for a Chair in Geography in 1991, Anne seized the occasion to come back to her country. There, she established herself as the Chair of Geography, serving as Head of the School of Geography and chairing an important European research project on “Landscape and life: appropriate scales for sustainable development” (LLASS) which involved scholars for all over Europe and led to the publication of a collective book (Buttimer, 2001b). After her retirement, she continued to collaborate with the School of Geography as an Emeritus Professor. Her small office was a bulk of treasures for colleagues interested in archives and in epistemology, and until December 2016 her weekly presence was the reassuring landmark of the continuity and vitality of a humane science, one which always remained extraneous to technocracy, opportunism and other academic and non-academic vices.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC1WzSi-02jYP3QgseHxKB3g>



Figure 1. Federico Ferretti and Anne Buttimer at the Interactive Map Workshop with Philippe Rekacewicz, University College Dublin (UCD), March 1<sup>st</sup> 2016. [Tine Ningal - UCD School of Geography]

At UCD, Anne left important archives which are waiting to be inventoried and brought to the disposition of everybody, as her last wishes state. If her books and journals show the depth and width of her intellectual interests, her correspondences show the worldwide extension of her scholarly networks, including what is today called the “Global South”, one of the centres of interest for the Dialogue Project, as witnessed for instance by a letter from Brazilian radical geographer Milton Santos (1926-2001). Coming back to Brazil after having being exiled for 13 years by the military dictatorship, Milton wrote to Anne giving his “warm approval to [her] initiative” (the Dialogue Project) and saying that he “already talked to some colleagues who are ready to collaborate”<sup>2</sup>. It was accordingly the case with Bertha Becker (1930-2013), a geographer from Rio de Janeiro and close Santos’s friend, interviewed by Anne

few years later. Santos also shared with Anne his pessimistic thoughts about the “alienation” implied by university institutions and reaffirmed the need for activism, what also confirms Anne’s interest for critical and radical approaches to geography in the 1970s.

I can’t mention here all the outstanding amount of publications, translations, prestigious memberships, prizes and honours that Anne was attributed in her career. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that Anne was the first woman appointed as the president of the IGU in 2000-2004 and that she received the Vautrin-Lud 2014 Prize at the International Festival of Geography in Saint-Dié-des-Vosges, commonly considered as the “Nobel Prize for Geography”. Most importantly, this prize was an acknowledgement of her links with the French-speaking area and her influence and popularity there, also thanks to her perfect command of French (it was also the case with Swedish, German, Spanish, Italian ...). In the same year, Anne received the 2014 AAG Lifetime Achievement Honours, “in recognition of her five decades of distinguished

<sup>0</sup> Dublin, UCD School of Geography, Anne Buttimer correspondence, Folder Latin America, São Paulo, M. Santos to A. Buttimer, 3 March 1978.

and prolific scholarship as well as extraordinary dedication, service, and perseverance in the name of the geographic profession. In addition to being a stellar research scholar, Anne has served the field in a number of capacities, recently as President of the International Geographical Union (IGU) and most as Vice-President of *Academia Europea*, the first geographer to be so elected. She has also played an active role in the AAG, serving on Council, on the *Annals* editorial Board, and on the Long-Range Planning Committee” (AAG Newsletter, 2014).

A full appraisal of her scholarly contribution has still to be done. Nevertheless, it is possible to stress some keywords which can clarify her commitment, first of all humanism, multilingualism, cosmopolitanism, and international networking. Today, her contribution to humanistic geographies is considered paramount in the textbooks on geographical thought, which define Anne as one of the key figures in the emergence of “humanistic geography” (Cresswell, 2013: 97), though she refused this label as stated above. According to Mels, “her association with humanism in geography can be traced back to an early interest in phenomenology and existentialism, and a concomitant focus on human experience, lifeworld, and dwelling” (Mels, 2010: 91). In one of her most famous books, *Geography and the Human Spirit*, Anne argued that: “Neither humanism nor geography can be regarded as an autonomous field of inquiry; rather, each points toward perspectives on life and thought shared by people in diverse situations. The common concern is terrestrial dwelling; *humanus* literally means ‘earth dweller’” (Buttimer, 1993: 3). It is also worth noting that Anne was among the first critics of positivism, but always refused to be identified with post-modernism or post-structuralism, considering these definitions as insufficient to cover her problematics; yet, her contribution can be considered as one of the more effective challenges to essentialism and positivism, one which accordingly exerted an influence on what was then called “cultural geography”.

Finally, Anne was one of the most prominent women in geography at a time where women were still very few in this field. This raises pertinent questions on issues of feminism and gender in

her works, a topic addressed by Maddrell with her interview. In this text, one of the entry points to deal with gender issues is again the autobiographical one: Maddrell importantly argues that this implied the need to: “bring contextualised autobiography and gender analysis together, illustrating the specificities of Buttimer’s own biography and professional life ... including both overlap and tension between aspects of humanist and feminist thought and practice. While aspects of Buttimer’s work show sensitivity to gender, e.g. her urban research in Glasgow in the late 1960s and recording women’s work in her interview-based geographical thought publications, this is a result of her emphasis on the human rather than women. This may have seemed out of step with 1970s and 1980s feminism, but arguably has more resonance with the more recent ... destabilisation of gender” (Maddrell, 2009: 742). If, in the interview, Buttimer clarified that she never addressed gender topics in the sense of “declared” feminist geographers, the topics of gender difference and more widely the inclusion of women and members of ethnic minorities in geography were surely not extraneous to her work.

Biobibliographical and epistemological work on Anne’s career and archives is just beginning. Her intellectual legacy does not affect only Ireland, or geography: it concerns all humankind, as she would have loved to hear.

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