Charles Patrick Daly

1816–1899

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If the name Charles Patrick Daly is not immediately recognizable as someone important or influential in the history and historiography of geography, it would not be surprising. Although Daly was president of the New York-based American Geographical Society (AGS) for 35 years in the later nineteenth century (from 1864 to 1899) and, in this position, had an impact upon American geographical knowledge and practices in numerous ways, he was and probably still is most remembered today for his career as revered Judge and later Chief Justice of the New York Court of Common Pleas, his ‘day job’. Throughout the 1870s, 1880s and 1890s, Daly was a prominent figure among the New York (and, to some extent, European) public, principally as a judge, community leader, but also as a popularizer of geography. Daly led numerous social and civic reform societies in New York City, and was a prolific writer and lecturer on a number of scholarly, literary and social issues in addition to his geographical writings. As geographer, Daly hosted popular geographical ‘spectacles’ in New York City, especially those featuring explorers returning from the field. His annual addresses on the ‘state of geographical knowledge’ for each year were widely reported on by the New York press. This essay focuses primarily on Daly’s impacts within geography via the AGS, his written works and lectures and, where appropriate, how these intersected with his civic reform work. I take as a starting observation that Daly’s influence upon geography included both the imaginative geographies of places he created for his many audiences, as well as their effects on actual spaces, locally, in New York City, but also in the American Midwest, the Arctic and the Belgian Congo among others.
Education, Life and Career

Charles Patrick Daly is a little known, although influential, American geographer of the second half of the nineteenth century. He appears in Harold Hammond's biography, *A Commoner's Judge* (1954), as a classic example of the 'self-made man'. After losing both parents at a young age, Daly worked hard and educated himself, emerging triumphantly from early nineteenth-century American mercantile capitalism as a celebrated (and wealthy) scholar, jurist, orator, historian and geographer.

Daly was born on the lower east side of New York City on 31 October 1816, the son of Irish working-class immigrant parents from Galway. His parents, Elizabeth and Michael Daly, had immigrated to the United States two years before Charles's birth. His birthplace was the small hotel his father managed, on the east side of Broadway Street (later to become the site of the famed Tribune Tower). Daly's mother died when he was three years old and his father when Charles was 12. Part of his early education took place at a local Roman Catholic parochial school; where the rest took place remains unknown. Daly left home aged 13, after his father's death, ending up in Savannah, Georgia, where he worked as an apprentice to a quill-maker. He later spent two years seafaring the Atlantic, the North Sea, the Baltic and the Mediterranean, during which time he is said to have fought with pirates off the Barbary Coast and rescued a nun off the coast of Holland. Daly came back to New York in 1832, at age 16, and began an apprenticeship to a master carpenter.

During his late teenage years, Daly joined a neighbourhood literary society, where he befriended the attorney William Soule, who urged him into his legal career. Daly worked during the day and studied at night, taking advantage of the library at the Mechanic's and Tradesmen's Society. (Throughout his life, he would cite the availability of this library as key to his many successes.) When his employer died, though legally freed from the apprenticeship, Daly stayed on as cabinet-maker to help the employer's widow. Finally, by 1836, at age 20, he accepted employment as a clerk in the New York law office of Rowley and Soule and, in 1839, he was admitted to the New York Bar, having served only three of the seven years of apprenticeship customarily required at the time for the Bar exam.

Four years later, Daly was elected to the New York State legislature. Among other noteworthy pieces of legislation as New York State assemblyman, he introduced the Bill in 1843 to establish Manhattan's Central Park. In 1844, he was appointed Judge of the Court of Common Pleas, on which he served (was elected) continuously until 1885, the last 27 years as Chief Justice. When he retired from the Bench, he returned to private law practice. He eventually died of a ruptured blood vessel, 'apoplexy', in 1899, aged 83.

Throughout his legal career, Daly made some newsworthy decisions, particularly during and in the aftermath of the Civil War. On the matter of southern trade at the ports, he advised US President Abraham Lincoln against the hanging of so-called 'privateers', arguing instead that they should be treated as prisoners of war. It was Daly's decision in the Astor Place Theater Riots case that gained him a national reputation, as the case hinged on American troops firing on American citizens, killing 22 and resulting in the imprisonment of dozens of others. Daly's decision in the case set a new precedent for criminalizing rioting – a decision that only further inflamed already tense ethnic and class conflict in the city among Irish immigrants and their native-born neighbours (most of whom were Protestant English). Charles Daly was among the Irish in New York but, in many ways, not one of them. He was one of the few Irish-born or first-generation Irish-Americans to become a successful entrepreneur or professional: only 1 per cent of New York's hundreds of lawyers at mid-century, for example, were Irish.

In addition to his geographical writing, Daly wrote several books on the history of the courts, as well as a large and eclectic assortment of works (many issued in pamphlet form) on everything from the world's fairs and markets, Jewish settlement in the United States, antiquity, New York City politics, the Civil War, Christopher Columbus, the Monroe Doctrine, botanical gardens, Shakespeare, theatre in America and poetry. Daly and his wife, Maria, attracted much attention within New York's social scene, partly because Daly was a leader or member of numerous scholarly, literary, philanthropic and social reform societies, and he gained considerable press coverage for his many addresses before them. In addition, to his well publicized role in court proceedings, Daly led several reform efforts that addressed the rights and degraded environments of poor or working-class Irish, Jewish and German immigrants. These, in turn, informed an important part of the geographical knowledge and practices he advanced in New York City and beyond.

The organizations for which Daly served as president, vice-president, executive director, board member, secretary or honorary member included the New York Historical Society, the Friendly Sons of St Patrick, the Irish political machine Tammany Hall (of which he was an on-again, off-again member and one-time vice-president), the Emigrant Aid Society, the Sanitary Reform Society, the League for the Protection of American Institutions (which worked for the separation of Church and state), the Working Women's Protective Union, the Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen and the American Jewish Historical Society, to name only a few. While Daly's interest and publications in literature, theatre and history cast him as an honoured member and lecturer before many of the city's prestigious (Anglo-centric) 'high culture' societies (such as the Century Club and Adelphi Society), he was also known as a 'friend of labour' in aligning himself with a number of civic and philanthropic organizations.

During a trip to Europe in 1851, Daly was introduced to Alexander von Humboldt – a meeting that likely sparked his interest in geography. Von Humboldt wrote of Daly to his friend Freiherr von Bunsen:

I cannot close these hurried lines without thanking you, from the bottom of my heart, for the acquaintance I made with Judge Charles Daly ... Few men leave behind them such an impression of high intellect upon the great subjects that influence the march of civilization: ... Moreover, what is uncommon in an American, and still more uncommon in the practical life of a greatly occupied magistrate, is that this highly intelligent and upright man, has a deep and lively interest in the fine arts, and even poetry.

Shortly after his return from Europe, Daly joined the American Geographical Society, which had formed only months earlier.

**CHARLES DALY AND THE AGS**

The American Geographical Society (AGS), established in 1851, is the oldest and was the pre-eminent professional geographical organization in the nineteenth-century United States. Before the National Geographical Society appeared in the 1880s, the AGS, together with the United States Geological Survey and a few universities, carried geography's only institutional power in the post-Civil War
United States. In assessing the origins and development of the AGS, Charles Daly emerges as a key figure in the shaping of the goals, practices and procedures of the AGS and thus of American geography more broadly. According to the AGS today, Charles Daly was the first individual to have launched the organization onto the ‘world stage’.

Daly was a member of the AGS for over 40 years. He quickly ascended from member in 1855 to councillor three years later, and to president from 1864 until his death in 1899. With a combination of business acumen, scholarly erudition and more than a touch of showmanship, Daly revived the society from its hiatus during the Civil War and shaped its commanding public presence, at least in New York and within geographical circles in other major US and European cities. He greatly expanded the AGS finances, membership (from a couple of hundred in the early 1860s to approximately 1,400 by 1874) and its library. The AGS library became the largest privately maintained geographical research library and map collection in the western hemisphere. Daly donated 700 volumes from his own personal library (of 12,000 volumes) to the AGS on his 75th birthday, bringing its total to 11,000 volumes by 1874. He invigorated the society’s published journal with professional articles (beyond simply reprints of lectures) and increased AGS correspondence with numerous geographical and scientific societies around the world (34 of them in 1877). He became an honorary member or fellow of many overseas societies, including the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) as well as the Italian, Berlin, Imperial Russia and Madrid geographical societies. His guest appearance at the RGS in June 1874 was widely covered by the London papers.

Late in his life, Daly also secured funding for the construction of a new building for the society. An article in the *New York Tribune* of 26 September 1897 called Daly the ‘oldest living geographer’ who had ‘saved’ the organization from dissolution when it took it over, almost single-handedly amassing sufficient funds to undertake the building project ($400,000). The society established the Charles P. Daly Medal in 1902, which recognizes ‘valuable or distinguished geographical services or labors’.

Geographical Work and Thought

While many geographical issues of the day attracted Charles Daly’s attention, his primary interest was in exploration of the ‘unknown’, particularly of those blank spaces on the map to the western imaginary, the Arctic and Central Africa. While Daly was clearly concerned with ‘social progress’ via the uplift of immigrants, working women and others of the disenfranchised, ‘geographical progress’ meant filling up the blank spaces of the map with physical description — with coastlines, temperature, wildlife, resources and so on. Such description constituted in large part the content of his work with the AGS. By this measure, Daly concluded in 1873, the world was no more than half known.

Daly’s approach to filling in the blank spaces of the world map was both encyclopaedic and Humboldtian. He spent hours poring over maps and planning the voyages of men supported by the AGS, the federal government or private entities. The AGS only directly supported one major expedition during Daly’s tenure as president — an 11-month overland (sledge) journey in search of the remains of the perished Franklin expedition led by Frederick Schwatka in 1878-80. Daly’s (and the AGS’s) influence on exploration, however, stretched well beyond this formal type of support. He was a prolific writer on geographical topics, publishing 40 papers and commentaries. He wrote on topics such as the ‘History of physical geography’ and the ‘Early history of cartography’, on exploration in the American West, and on the global ‘state of geographical knowledge’ for each year (the bibliography has a full list of his publications). He privately and publicly hosted and supported the expeditions of many famous and infamous explorers, and brought their researches to a broad audience via AGS publications and special events and meetings coordinated around their visits to New York. His geographical meetings in New York City were enormously popular, drawing crowds of 2,000 or 3,000 spectators to venues such as the New York Historical Society and Cooper Union. Daly had a keen appreciation for the potential of the popular press to advance himself and his many causes, such that scores of New York newspapers closely followed his judicial decisions, reform work, as well as his staging of these spectacular geographical events. These included newspapers such as *The New York Times*, *New York Daily Tribune*, *New York Herald*, *The World*, *New York Sun* and *The Times of London*.

Daly presided over more meetings and receptions devoted to the Arctic than any other place. His reception honouring survivors of Charles Hall’s *Polaris* North Pole attempt in 1874 was especially newsworthy due both to Hall’s death as well as to the extraordinary survival story told by those who returned. The 1878 meeting featuring the Earl of Dufferin, Governor-General of Canada and President-elect of the RGS, at which a plan was discussed to establish a permanent research station (the ‘Hogswate Polar Colony’) on the border of the North Polar Sea, likewise received substantial press coverage, as did those meetings featuring explorers of Africa such as Henry Morton Stanley and Paul du Chaillu. Such meetings typically opened with remarks by Daly, followed by speeches from each of the principals. (Du Chaillu, not incidentally, was Daly’s close friend: he came to live with Daly after Daly’s wife’s death in 1894.)

Daly’s annual addresses on the state of geographical knowledge for the year, which were given annually between 1855 and 1893, were the basis to his widespread recognition as a geographer and had considerable press coverage in New York newspapers. These addresses were typically delivered at society meetings and published in the society’s *Journal*. These popular discourses were written (and delivered) in accessible, plain language, often with any reference to the sources of information (though his sources were typically correspondence with geographical societies around the world or direct correspondence with explorers). The addresses enumerated or collated researches of the previous year, exhaustively and elaborately detailing scientific advances gained by voyages of discovery, surveys, navigational achievements and so on, but also covering practically any subject dealing with study of the Earth — geology, astronomy and meteorology — or topics simply of interest to Daly, such as prehistoric archeology and curiosities found by explorers.

Results from voyages of discovery in Daly’s lectures often appeared in the form of lists, collections of facts, an enumeration of explorer accomplishments and achievements. Daly’s speeches on expeditions and surveys are filled with an encyclopaedic cataloguing of place names, routes and descriptive detail, as well as re-tellings of the difficulties and obstructions faced by explorers and destinations achieved. In his annual speech in 1870, Daly listed 23 geographical and scientific ‘events’ for that year (and numbered them as such), including the discovery of trees of enormous height and magnitude in Australia, some 60 feet in circumference; the invention and practical use of a self-registering compass; the discovery, through the telescope, of a method for determining the proper motion of the stars; the French expedition up the Mekong river; the completion of the geological survey of New Jersey; the return of Captain Hall from the Arctic, along with interesting
mementoes of the lost Franklin expedition; and the completion of the Pacific railroad. Western American survey and expedition results also constituted in large measure the substance of these reports – their locations, progress, findings and calls for support. Thus, Daly’s annual geographical reports, widely relayed in detail to both AGS members via their own lectures and publications and the public via open meetings and a host of New York newspapers, served as an important conduit in public education and solicitation relating to Western (and other) exploration. Daly’s annual reports also enumerated facts upon social or census-type information, such as comparative resource availability or immigration and population patterns in various locations.

While Daly’s approach was often encyclopaedic – descriptive lists of accomplishments or findings – others of his speeches were more ‘synthetic’ – Humboldtian – in their attempt to integrate and analyze such findings. One such example appeared as part of his 1870 annual report, in which he spoke at length in an attempt to disprove the existence of an open polar sea. In this report, Daly integrated evidence of Gulf-stream patterns, seasonal variations in temperature and eye-witness accounts to attempt to disprove the existence of such open waters. While he had maintained, over the course of two decades, that logic and scientific evidence proved contrary to first-hand reports of explorers such as Matthew Maury, Isaac Hayes and Elisha Kane that water freely flowed at the North Pole, he nonetheless insisted that there was no evidence for the supposed warm ocean currents beyond a certain northern latitude. He was eventually vindicated on the issue.

When Daly discussed American benefits from exploration, they were cast as commercial or business in nature. Infused with the Enlightenment ideal of uniting scientific knowledge with progress, Daly overarchingly defined geographical knowledge acquired from voyages of discovery – and thus the purpose of geographical societies that supported them – as that which ultimately would be commercially useful. Indeed, the AGS’s leitmotif, from its beginning, was in support of a commercial or ‘business’ geography – the declaration ‘Geographical Exploration is Commercial Progress’ was a headline to issues of its Journal in the nineteenth century. In his 1884 annual address, Daly explained that he selected exploration of Central Africa as his topic for the evening’s speech because such exploration ‘will be followed by very important commercial results, and already indicates the necessity of adopting … a policy [based on the demands of] our future interests and that of other maritime nations’. His association with Africa exploration, particularly his avid political support for King Leopold II’s ruthless colonization plan for the Congo, was based on commercial links to be developed there.

Aside from two years at sea as a teenager, three short trips to Europe and one to the American West, Daly travelled little beyond the east coast of the United States. He might easily be characterized as an ‘armchair explorer’ who lived the life of adventure vicariously through his many friends and associates and through his staged geographical spectacles. This is not all that surprising or exceptional, as most members of the AGS were industrialists and likewise more interested in learning about exotic, far-off places than experiencing them first-hand. And, yet, if Daly was an armchair explorer, he was an influential one – perhaps mostly by advocating the support of expeditions among the privately wealthy of New York and state and federal governments, but also by influencing the way knowledge derived from expeditions was received by large public audiences.

Daly also brought the ‘Washington Letters’ to AGS publications later in his life, which outlined US federal government activities of special interest to geographers.

These ‘Washington Letters’, published from 1887 to 1900, are especially important in illuminating links between the power of geography and the power of the state, for instance in reportage of census data and the status of government-sponsored surveys.

Finally, as alluded to above, Charles Daly lived and worked during a precedent-setting era of social reform in New York City, where (mainly) bourgeois men and women who were connected to the (mainly) Protestant churches became actively involved in the spiritual as well as material uplift of targeted populations such as the urban poor. While his selected reform efforts and affiliations carried significant limitations – he was against abolition for the challenges it generated for Irish workers, and he advocated mining opportunities on confiscated Native American land in the South Dakota Black Hills, for instance – Daly clearly worked for the benefit of immigrants and used his considerable weight and influence to improve their conditions in New York City and elsewhere. Leadership in these causes resonated closely with his work as a geographer; one might easily typify him as an early city planner in these efforts.

Daly’s Influence: In the Text and On the Ground

Charles P. Daly’s contributions to geography and the AGS were intellectual, social and material. Taking the long view, the general nature of geography to Daly was as ‘field studies’. In 1871, shortly after Daly took over the AGS presidency, the name of the organization was changed from the American Geographical and Statistical Society to the American Geographical Society. This name change in part reflected a shift in the society’s focus, from the collection and analysis of geographical statistics at the interpretive ‘centre’ (AGS headquarters) towards explorers’ experiences in the field: I elsewhere term this a move ‘from hard facts to hard bodies’ (Morin 2008). As geographer, he was influential in creating both imagined and real geographies of the Arctic, the African Congo, Cuba, Central America, Ireland, the Middle East and western America for the public and his many constituents. His platform – lectures and speeches, and the savvy management of the New York press to disseminate them widely – as well as his scholarly writings, historical research and legal decisions all made material ‘imprints’ within and outside of the United States. I touch on a few of these influences here.

Charles Daly was undoubtedly New York’s most influential ‘access point’ to the Arctic and North Pole region in the later nineteenth century. As AGS president, he helped support and develop the infrastructure necessary for Arctic exploration and, in turn, commercial ventures in the region. This is evidenced by his and the AGS’s support of numerous northern expeditions: directly, the above-named Schwatka expedition but, indirectly, many others, including those of the future AGS president Robert E. Peary (1903–07), controversial discoverer of the North Pole and recipient of much of Daly’s patronage during his expeditions to Greenland and points north in the 1890s. AGS support included setting up trading stations with Inuit; pressuring the US government for support of various expeditions; providing expeditionary equipment and cartographic support; and debating travel routes, physical geography and ethnographical questions via their many lectures and publication venues.

There were many potential commercial benefits to polar exploration, many of which Daly weaved through his speeches and writings. American whalers had been in the Arctic region since the mid-nineteenth century, and related resources
being of even the poorest man'. He was also influential in establishing German colonies in the American Midwest – attracting immigrants from Germany to settle on land he personally bought and sold from the Northern Pacific Railway (NPR) company in Wisconsin and Minnesota – a company of whom he was a major stockholder. In turn, the western routes of the Northern Pacific were researched, debated, promoted and published by the AGS. AGS support and promotion of western exploration, and particularly Daly's support and promotion of the Northern Pacific Railroad, its accompanying settlements in the West and the benefits that were to accrue to Germans settling there, were all major features of what was to become the discipline of 'American geography' in the nineteenth century. Such work, conducted in the field as well as in the offices and lecture halls of the AGS – the study, debate and publication of railroad expeditions and planned routes, agricultural and manufacturing potential of the areas to be served and town siting, for instance – produced some of the most influential geographical knowledge of the western United States of the time. Charles Daly's geographical work thus clearly illustrates, among many other things, the close connections between the personal and the geopolitical in geography's story.

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Chronology

1816  Born 31 October, New York City

1839  Passes the New York Bar, became junior law partner

1843  Elected to New York State Assembly

1844  Elected Judge of the New York Court of Common Pleas, serving until 1885

1849  Rules on the celebrated Astor Place Theater Riots case

1855  Joins American Geographical Society

1856  Marries Maria Lydig; no children

1858  Elected to Council of the American Geographical Society

1864  Elected President of the American Geographical Society, serving until 1899

1871  Elected Chief Justice, Court of Common Pleas, until 1885

1885  Retired from bench at mandatory retirement age, presided over by US President Chester A. Arthur

1899  Dies 19 September, at Sag Harbor, New York