

The Lay of the Land

Geography curricula should emphasize basic topography, place names, and map reading.

By Walter A. McDougall

My own love affair with history began with a fascination for geography. As a youngster in the 1950s, I was transfixed by atlases, globes, stories of the explorers, *National Geographic* magazines, and travel and nature programs on television.

By high school, this thirst for information about the world turned into a thirst for history, including: the origins of civilizations; the rise and fall of empires; the 'lost worlds' of South America or Africa; the flora, fauna, and human cultures that characterized different climatic zones; the patterns of politics and military strategy.

If someone had asked me then to distinguish between geography and history as distinct academic fields, I could not have done it. And I cannot do it today, any more than a blind person can explain European diplomacy without a mental image of the map. Geography is indispensable to a sound school curriculum.

We are all geographers, after all, from the moment we learn to navigate the playpen or find the bathroom and refrigerator, to the years we explore the neighbourhood on our bicycles and take a family vacation, to the careers we pursue as adults.

Whether we steer our way through the world by feel and folklore or by maps and instruments, geography is the context in which "we live and move and have our being" (to paraphrase the apostle Paul). You cannot argue with geography, as Ambassador Robert Strausz-Hupe liked to say, and geography in turn "does not argue, it simply is," as Hans Weigert put it.

Geography is fundamental to the process of true education in that it serves as a springboard to virtually every other subject in the sciences and humanities. Why are deserts and rain forests here and not there? Why do Asians eat rice and Mexicans tortillas, instead of bread? Why did the Europe

ans discover routes to China instead of the Chinese discovering routes to Europe? Why did democracy emerge in Greece and not Egypt?

Students without geographic knowledge are helpless when confronted by adult issues, whether in school or outside of it. Geography is vital to the examination of economic competition, poverty, environmental degradation, ethnic conflict, health care, global warming, literature and culture, and of course international relations.

A poll, conducted on behalf of the National Geographic Society, showed that only one-third of Americans could name a single country in NATO and that half could not name any members of the rival Warsaw Pact. The average adult could identify only four European countries from their outlines on a map and fewer than 6 of the 50 United States. One in four could not find the Pacific Ocean.

What is more, the group that performed the worst in the survey was those ages 18 to 24, a finding that would not surprise those of us who teach history in universities. It appears that many students were not even given a chance to learn much geography in their elementary and high school years.

It is time to restore an 'old-fashioned' emphasis on basic topography, place names, and map reading. For whatever your ideological preferences, the grammar of geography is conventional and grounded in reality.

The Earth, as Galileo insisted under his breath, does revolve around the sun and rotate on its axis, and that was not just his "point of view." The motions of the Earth and heat of the sun are what create climate, vulcanism, erosions, and all the features of lands and waters.

On some points we may argue, for instance whether Europe ought to have been considered a continent separate from Asia, or whether the term

Middle East is a Eurocentric conceit. But the geographical and cultural distinctions that first inspired people to invent those terms were real and are also worth understanding.

In my modern history survey, I do not expect students to know anything about the political map of Central Europe during the Renaissance, but I am crippled if they do not even know that Venice is an Italian port city, that the Alps divide Italy from the rest of Europe, that Germany lies north of the Alps, that the Austrians speak German, that the Turks were Muslim and militant, that all Europeans were still Catholic, and that Rome was the historic seat of the papacy.

If I must "go back to square one" to lay out such basics, then the best students will be bored and the poor will be paying Ivy League tuition for high school instruction. It is all very well to say that education should teach youngsters to think rather than to memorize. But unless their 'memory banks' are filled with facts and categories in which to deposit new facts, then their 'RAM' will have no data to process.

I have the pleasure of lunching one day a week with Harvey Sacherman, the president of the Foreign Policy Research Institute, and catching up on world affairs. He amazed me several years ago by predicting exactly, and weeks ahead of time, the internal boundaries that would define the settlement in Bosnia.

"I've done the map," he announced, and proceeded to trace it out on a napkin. My dream is that every teacher and student of history and geography can say proudly and knowledgeably, "I've done the map."

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