

VAN LOON'S GEOGRAPHY

THE STORY OF THE WORLD
WE LIVE IN

WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY

Hendrik Willem van Loon.

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*Ten years ago you sent me a letter and today you get your answer.
What you wrote (I am quoting from the original) was this:*

“ . . . Yes, but how about geography? No, I don't merely want a new geography. I want a geography of my own, a geography that shall tell me what I want to know and omit everything else and I want you to write it for me. I went to a school where they took the subject very seriously. I learned all about the different countries and how they were bounded and about the cities and how many inhabitants they had and I learned the names of all the mountains and how high they were and how much coal was exported every year, and I forgot all these things just as fast as I had learned them. They failed to connect. They resolved themselves into a jumble of badly digested recollections, like a museum too full of pictures or a concert that has lasted too long. And they were of no earthly value to me, for every time I needed some concrete fact, I had to look it up on maps and in atlases and encyclopedias and blue books. I suppose that many others have suffered in the same way. On behalf of all these poor victims, will you please give us a new geography that will be of some use? Put all the mountains and the cities and the oceans on your maps and then tell us only about the people who live in those places and why they are there and where they came from and what they are doing—a sort of human interest story applied to geography. And please stress the countries that are really interesting and don't pay quite so much attention to the others that are merely names, for then we will be able to remember all about them, but otherwise . . . ”

And I, eager as always to oblige when I receive a command from your hands, turn around and say, “My dear, here it is!”

HENDRIK WILLEM VAN LOON.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE	3
AND THESE ARE THE PEOPLE WHO LIVE IN THE WORLD WE LIVE IN	
CHAPTER TWO	9
A DEFINITION OF THE WORD GEOGRAPHY AND HOW I SHALL APPLY IT IN THE PRESENT VOLUME	
CHAPTER THREE	13
OUR PLANET: ITS HABITS, CUSTOMS AND MANNERS	
CHAPTER FOUR	48
MAPS. A VERY BRIEF CHAPTER UPON A VERY BIG AND FASCINATING SUBJECT. TOGETHER WITH A FEW OBSERVATIONS ON THE WAY PEOPLE SLOWLY LEARNED HOW TO FIND THEIR WAY ON THIS PLANET OF OURS	
CHAPTER FIVE	68
THE SEASONS AND HOW THEY HAPPEN	
CHAPTER SIX	72
CONCERNING THE LITTLE SPOTS OF DRY LAND ON THIS PLANET AND WHY SOME OF THEM ARE CALLED CONTINENTS WHILE OTHERS ARE NOT	
CHAPTER SEVEN	81
OF THE DISCOVERY OF EUROPE AND THE SORT OF PEOPLE WHO LIVE IN THAT PART OF THE WORLD	
INTERLUDE	85
JUST A MOMENT BEFORE WE GO ANY FURTHER WHILE I TELL YOU HOW TO USE THIS BOOK	

CHAPTER EIGHT	89
GREECE, THE ROCKY PROMONTORY OF THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN WHICH ACTED AS THE CONNECTING LINK BETWEEN THE OLD ASIA AND THE NEW EUROPE	
CHAPTER NINE	102
ITALY, THE COUNTRY WHICH DUE TO ITS GEOGRAPHICAL SITUATION COULD PLAY THE ROLE OF A SEA-POWER OR A LAND-POWER, AS THE OCCASION DEMANDED	
CHAPTER TEN	121
SPAIN, WHERE AFRICA AND EUROPE CLASHED	
CHAPTER ELEVEN	136
FRANCE, THE COUNTRY THAT HAS EVERYTHING IT WANTS	
CHAPTER TWELVE	154
BELGIUM, A COUNTRY CREATED BY SCRAPS OF PAPER AND RICH IN EVERYTHING EXCEPT INTERNAL HARMONY	
CHAPTER THIRTEEN	161
LUXEMBURG, THE HISTORICAL CURIOSITY	
CHAPTER FOURTEEN	162
SWITZERLAND, THE COUNTRY OF HIGH MOUNTAINS, EXCELLENT SCHOOLS AND A UNIFIED PEOPLE WHO SPEAK FOUR DIFFERENT LANGUAGES	
CHAPTER FIFTEEN	171
GERMANY, THE NATION THAT WAS FOUNDED TOO LATE	
CHAPTER SIXTEEN	182
AUSTRIA, THE COUNTRY THAT NOBODY APPRECIATED UNTIL IT NO LONGER EXISTED	
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN	187
DENMARK, AN OBJECT LESSON IN CERTAIN ADVANTAGES OF SMALL COUNTRIES OVER LARGE ONES	
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN	192
ICELAND, AN INTERESTING POLITICAL LABORATORY IN THE ARCTIC OCEAN	

TABLE OF CONTENTS

xi

CHAPTER NINETEEN

196

THE SCANDINAVIAN PENINSULA, THE TERRITORY OCCUPIED BY
THE KINGDOMS OF SWEDEN AND NORWAY

CHAPTER TWENTY

209

THE NETHERLANDS, THE SWAMP ON THE BANKS OF THE NORTH
SEA THAT BECAME AN EMPIRE

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

216

GREAT BRITAIN, AN ISLAND OFF THE DUTCH COAST WHICH IS
RESPONSIBLE FOR THE HAPPINESS OF FULLY ONE-QUARTER OF
THE HUMAN RACE

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

240

RUSSIA, THE COUNTRY WHICH WAS PREVENTED BY ITS GEO-
GRAPHICAL LOCATION FROM EVER FINDING OUT WHETHER IT
WAS PART OF EUROPE OR OF ASIA

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

262

POLAND, THE COUNTRY THAT HAD ALWAYS SUFFERED FROM
BEING A CORRIDOR AND THEREFORE NOW HAS A CORRIDOR OF
ITS OWN

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

266

CZECHOSLOVAKIA, A PRODUCT OF THE TREATY OF VERSAILLES

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

270

YUGOSLAVIA, ANOTHER PRODUCT OF THE TREATY OF VER-
SAILLES

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

273

BULGARIA, THE SOUNDEST OF ALL BALKAN COUNTRIES, WHOSE
BUTTERFLY-COLLECTING KING BET ON THE WRONG HORSE
DURING THE GREAT WAR AND SUFFERED THE CONSEQUENCES

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

277

ROUMANIA, A COUNTRY WHICH HAS OIL AND A ROYAL FAMILY

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

279

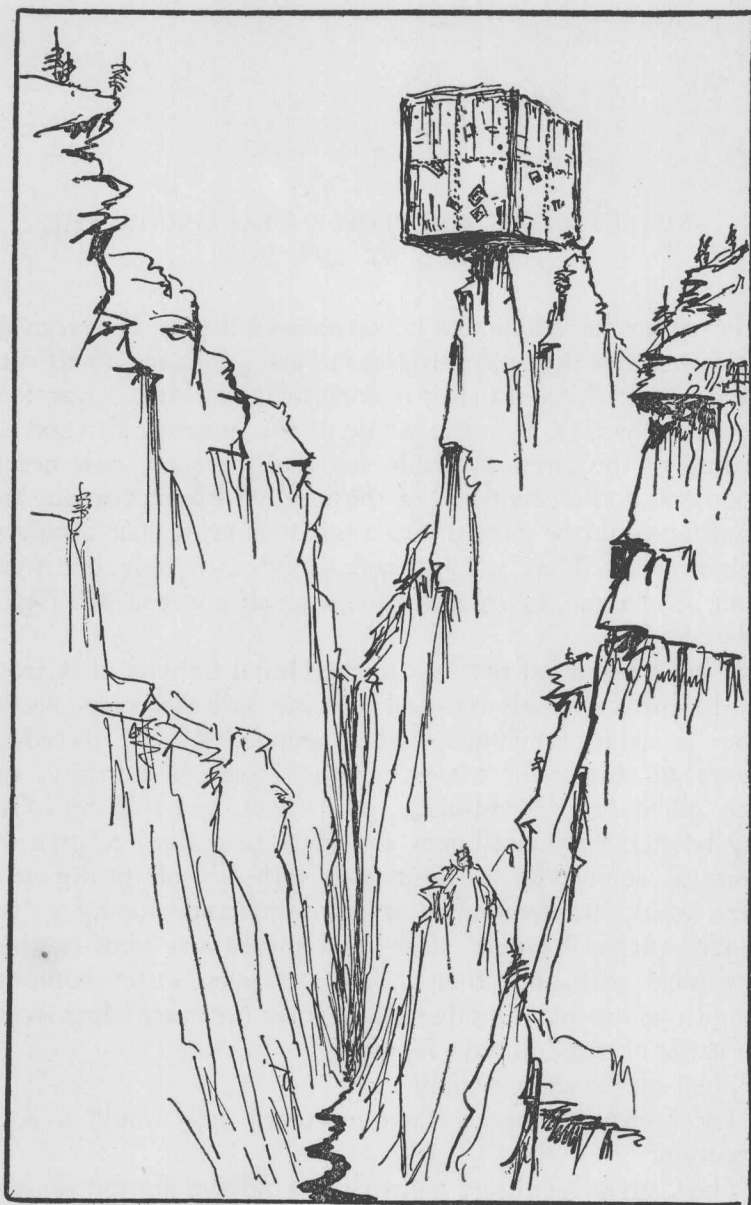
HUNGARY, OR WHAT REMAINS OF IT

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE	282
FINLAND, ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF WHAT HARD WORK AND INTELLIGENCE CAN ACHIEVE AMID HOSTILE NATURAL SURROUNDINGS	
CHAPTER THIRTY	284
THE DISCOVERY OF ASIA	
CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE	289
WHAT ASIA HAS MEANT TO THE REST OF THE WORLD	
CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO	291
THE CENTRAL ASIATIC HIGHLANDS	
CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE	300
THE GREAT WESTERN PLATEAU OF ASIA	
CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR	317
ARABIA—OR WHEN IS A PART OF ASIA NOT A PART OF ASIA?	
CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE	322
INDIA, WHERE NATURE AND MAN ARE ENGAGED IN MASS-PRODUCTION	
CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX	335
BURMA, SIAM, ANAM AND MALACCA, WHICH OCCUPY THE OTHER GREAT SOUTHERN PENINSULA OF ASIA	
CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN	341
THE REPUBLIC OF CHINA, THE GREAT PENINSULA OF EASTERN ASIA	
CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT	359
KOREA, MONGOLIA AND MANCHURIA, IF THE LATTER STILL EXISTS WHEN THIS BOOK IS PUBLISHED	
CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE	364
THE JAPANESE EMPIRE	
CHAPTER FORTY	379
THE PHILIPPINES, AN OLD ADMINISTRATIVE PART OF MEXICO	

TABLE OF CONTENTS	xiii
CHAPTER FORTY-ONE	383
THE DUTCH EAST INDIES, THE TAIL THAT WAGS THE DOG	
CHAPTER FORTY-TWO	391
AUSTRALIA, THE STEP-CHILD OF NATURE	
CHAPTER FORTY-THREE	402
NEW ZEALAND	
CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR	406
THE ISLANDS OF THE PACIFIC WHERE PEOPLE NEITHER TOILED NOR SPUN BUT LIVED JUST THE SAME	
CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE	409
AFRICA, THE CONTINENT OF CONTRADICTIONS AND CONTRASTS	
CHAPTER FORTY-SIX	454
AMERICA, THE MOST FORTUNATE OF ALL	
CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN	495
A NEW WORLD	
A FEW FACTS	505
INDEX	507

VAN LOON'S GEOGRAPHY

"History is the Fourth Dimension of Geography.
It gives it both time and meaning."



I

AND THESE ARE THE PEOPLE WHO LIVE IN THE WORLD WE LIVE IN

IT SOUNDS incredible, but nevertheless it is true. If everybody in this world of ours were six feet tall and a foot and a half wide and a foot thick (and that is making people a little bigger than they usually are), then the whole of the human race (and according to the latest available statistics there are now nearly 2,000,000,000 descendants of the original Homo Sapiens and his wife) could be packed into a box measuring half a mile in each direction. That, as I just said, sounds incredible, but if you don't believe me, figure it out for yourself and you will find it to be correct.

If we transported that box to the Grand Canyon of Arizona and balanced it neatly on the low stone wall that keeps people from breaking their necks when stunned by the incredible beauty of that silent witness of the forces of Eternity, and then called little Noodle, the dachshund, and told him (the tiny beast is very intelligent and loves to oblige) to give the unwieldy contraption a slight push with his soft brown nose, there would be a moment of crunching and ripping as the wooden planks loosened stones and shrubs and trees on their downward path, and then a low and even softer bumpity-bumpity-bump and a sudden splash when the outer edges struck the banks of the Colorado River.

Then silence and oblivion!

The human sardines in their mortuary chest would soon be forgotten.

The Canyon would go on battling wind and air and sun and rain as it has done since it was created.

The world would continue to run its even course through the uncharted heavens.

The astronomers on distant and nearby planets would have noticed nothing out of the ordinary.

A century from now, a little mound, densely covered with vegetable matter, would perhaps indicate where humanity lay buried.

And that would be all.

I can well imagine that some of my readers will not quite like this story and will feel rather uncomfortable when they see their own proud race reduced to such proportions of sublime insignificance.

There is however a different angle to the problem—an angle which makes the very smallness of our numbers and the helplessness of our puny little bodies a matter of profound and sincere pride.

Here we are, a mere handful of weak and defenceless mammals. Ever since the dawn of the first day we have been surrounded on all sides by hordes and swarms of creatures infinitely better prepared for the struggle of existence than we are ourselves. Some of them were a hundred feet long and weighed as much as a small locomotive while others had teeth as sharp as the blade of a circular saw. Many varieties went about their daily affairs clad in the armor of a medieval knight. Others were invisible to the human eye but they multiplied at such a terrific rate that they would have owned the entire earth in less than a year's time if it had not been for certain enemies who were able to destroy them almost as fast as they were born. Whereas man could only exist under the most favorable circumstances and was forced to look for a habitat among the few small pieces of dry land situated between the high mountains and the deep sea, these fellow-passengers of ours considered no summit too high and found no sea too deep for their ambitions. They were apparently made of the stuff that could survive regardless of its natural surroundings.

When we learn on eminent authority that certain varieties of insects are able to disport themselves merrily in petroleum (a substance we would hardly fancy as the main part of our daily diet) and that others manage to live through such changes in temperature as would kill all of us within a very few minutes; when we discover to our gruesome dismay that those little brown beetles, who seem so fond of literature that they are forever racing around in our bookcases, continue the even tenor of their restless days minus two or three or four legs, while we ourselves are disabled by a mere pin-prick on one of our toes, then we sometimes begin to realize against what sort of competitors we have been forced to hold our own, ever since we made our first appearance upon this whirling bit of rock, lost somewhere in the darkest outskirts of an indifferent universe.

What a side-splitting joke we must have been to our pachydermous contemporaries who stood by and watched this pinkish sport of nature indulge in its first clumsy efforts to walk on its hind legs without the help of a convenient tree-trunk or cane!

But what has become of those proud and exclusive owners of almost 200,000,000 square miles of land and water (not to mention the unfathomable oceans of air) who ruled so sublime by that right of eminent domain which was based upon brute force and sly cunning?

The greater part of them has disappeared from view except where as "Exhibit A" or "B" we have kindly given them a little parking space in one of our museums devoted to natural history. Others, in order to remain among those present, were forced to go into domestic service and today in exchange for a mere livelihood they favor us with their hides and their eggs and their milk and the beef that grows upon their flanks, or drag such loads as we consider a little too heavy for our own lazy efforts. Many more have betaken themselves to out-of-the-way places where we permit them to browse and graze and perpetuate their species because, thus far, we have not thought it worth our while to remove them from the scene and claim their territory for ourselves.

In short, during only a couple of thousands of centuries (a mere second from the point of view of eternity), the human race has made itself the undisputed ruler of every bit of land and at present it bids fair to add both air and sea as part of its domains. And all that, if you please, has been accomplished by a few hundred million creatures who enjoyed not one single advantage over their enemies except the divine gift of Reason.

Even there I am exaggerating. The gift of Reason in its more sublime form and the ability to think for one's self is restricted to a mere handful of men and women. They therefore become the masters who lead. The others, no matter how much they may resent the fact, can only follow. The result is a strange and halting procession, for no matter how hard people may try, there are ten thousand stragglers for every true pioneer.

Whither the route of march will eventually lead us, that we do not know. But in the light of what has been achieved during the last four thousand years, there is no limit to the sum total of our potential achievements—unless we are tempted away from the path of normal development by our strange inherent cruelty which makes us treat other members of our own species as we would never have dared to treat a cow or a dog or even a tree.

The earth and the fullness thereof has been placed at the disposal of Man. Where it has not been placed at his disposal, he has taken possession by right of his superior brain and by the strength of his foresight and his shot-guns.

This home of ours is a good home. It grows food enough for all of us. It has abundant quarries and clay beds and forests from which all of us can be provided with more than ample shelter. The patient sheep of our pastures and the waving flax fields with their myriads of blue flowers, not to forget the industrious little silk-worm of China's mulberry trees—they all contribute to shelter our bodies against the cold of winter and protect them against the scorching heat of summer. This home of ours is a good home. It produces all these benefits in so abundant measure that every man, woman and child could have his or her share

with a little extra supply thrown in for the inevitable days of rest.

But Nature has her own code of laws. They are just, these laws, but they are inexorable and there is no court of appeal.

Nature will give unto us and she will give without stint, but in return she demands that we study her precepts and abide by her dictates.

A hundred cows in a meadow meant for only fifty spells disaster—a bit of wisdom with which every farmer is thoroughly familiar. A million people gathered in one spot where there should be only a hundred thousand causes congestion, poverty and unnecessary suffering, a fact which apparently has been overlooked by those who are supposed to guide our destinies.

That, however, is not the most serious of our manifold errors. There is another way in which we offend our generous foster-mother. Man in the only living organism that is hostile to its own kind. Dog does not eat dog—tiger does not eat tiger—yea, even the loathsome hyena lives at peace with the members of his own species. But Man hates Man, Man kills Man, and in the world of today the prime concern of every nation is to prepare itself for the coming slaughter of some more of its neighbors.

This open violation of Article I of the great Code of Creation which insists upon peace and good will among the members of the same species has carried us to a point where soon the human race may be faced with the possibility of complete annihilation. For our enemies are ever on the alert. If *Homo Sapiens* (the all-too-flattering name given to our race by a cynical scientist, to denote our intellectual superiority over the rest of the animal world)—if *Homo Sapiens* is unable or unwilling to assert himself as the master of all he surveys, there are thousands of other candidates for the job and it oftentimes seems as if a world dominated by cats or dogs or elephants or some of the more highly organized insects (and how they watch their opportunity!) might offer very decided advantages over a planet top-heavy with battle-ships and siege-guns.

What is the answer and what is the way out of this hideous and shameful state of affairs?

In a humble way this little book hopes to point to the one and only way out of that lugubrious and disastrous blind-alley into which we have strayed through the clumsy ignorance of our ancestors.

It will take time, it will take hundreds of years of slow and painful education to make us find the true road of salvation. But that road leads towards the consciousness that we are all of us fellow-passengers on one and the same planet. Once we have got hold of this absolute verity—once we have realized and grasped the fact that for better or for worse this is our common home—that we have never known another place of abode—that we shall never be able to move from the spot in space upon which we happened to be born—that it therefore behooves us to behave as we would if we found ourselves on board a train or a steamer bound for an unknown destination—we shall have taken the first but most important step towards the solution of that terrible problem which is at the root of all our difficulties.

We are all of us fellow-passengers on the same planet and the weal and woe of everybody else means the weal and woe of ourselves!

Call me a dreamer and call me a fool—call me a visionary or call for the police or the ambulance to remove me to a spot where I can no longer proclaim such unwelcome heresies. But mark my words and remember them on that fatal day when the human race shall be requested to pack up its little toys and surrender the keys of happiness to a more worthy successor.

The only hope for survival lies in that one sentence:

WE ARE ALL OF US FELLOW-PASSENGERS ON THE SAME PLANET AND WE ARE ALL OF US EQUALLY RESPONSIBLE FOR THE HAPPINESS AND WELL-BEING OF THE WORLD IN WHICH WE HAPPEN TO LIVE.

II

A DEFINITION OF THE WORD GEOGRAPHY AND HOW I SHALL APPLY IT IN THE PRESENT VOLUME

BEFORE we start out upon a voyage, we usually try to find out more or less definitely whither we are bound and how we are supposed to get there. The reader who opens a book is entitled to a little information of the same sort and a short definition of the word "Geography" will therefore not be out of order.

I happen to have the "Concise Oxford Dictionary" on my desk and that will do as well as any other. The word I am looking for appears at the bottom of page 344, edition of 1912.

"Geography: the science of the earth's surface, form, physical features, natural and political divisions, climate, productions and population."

I could not possibly hope to do better, but I shall stress some of the aspects of the case at the expense of others, because I intend to place man in the center of the stage. This book of mine will not merely discuss the surface of the earth and its physical features, together with its political and natural boundaries. I would rather call it a study of man in search of food and shelter and leisure for himself and for his family and an attempt to find out the way in which man has either adapted himself to his background or has reshaped his physical surroundings in order to be as comfortable and well nourished and happy as seemed compatible with his own limited strength.

It has been truly said that the Lord hath some very strange customers among those who love Him, and indeed we shall find our planet inhabited by a weird and extraordinary variety of