

Henrik Willems van Loos.

VAN LOON'S
Geography

THE STORY OF THE WORLD



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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.

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 WORLD GEOGRAPHY AND HOW I SHALL AP-
PLY 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 FASCI-
NATING 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

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

	PAGE
THE HUMAN TOUCH	10
ONLY ROUND OBJECTS GIVE ROUND SHADOWS	17
ECLIPSE	17
OUR SPEED THROUGH SPACE IS MUCH FASTER THAN THAT OF THE FASTEST CANNON-BALL	18
THOSE FEW SPECKS—AND THAT IS ALL WE KNOW OF OUR UNIVERSE	20
THE TIDES	21
THE LAYERS OF ATMOSPHERE	22
THEY KEEP US WARM LIKE SO MANY BLANKETS	23
THE SUN HEATING THE EARTH	26
RAIN	27
RAINSTORMS AFTER ALL ARE ONLY LOCAL AFFAIRS	29
THE CRUST OF THE EARTH IS AS FULL OF HOLES AS A SPONGE	32
WHY NOT MAKE YOUR OWN EARTHQUAKES?	33
THE RISE AND FALL OF ALL MOUNTAINS	35
THE GLACIERS IN AMERICA	37
THE GLACIERS IN EUROPE	38
IF THE HIGHEST MOUNTAINS SHOULD GET DUMPED INTO THE DEEPEST PART OF THE OCEAN!	41
HUNDREDS OF MILLIONS OF YEARS AGO THE CONTINENTS SEEM TO HAVE BEEN VERY DIFFERENT FROM TODAY	43
THE GULF STREAM IN YOUR KITCHEN	45
HOW MAPS BECAME MAPS	49
A ROMAN MAP	51
POLYNESIAN WOVEN MAP	52
MEDIEVAL MAP	53
CHURCH-TOWER NAVIGATION	58
THE ZONES	69
ARE OUR PROUD CONTINENTS PERHAPS ISLANDS OF SOME LIGHTER MA- TERIAL WHICH FLOAT ON THE HEAVIER SUBSTANCE OF THE EARTH'S INTERIOR AS PIECES OF CORK WILL FLOAT ON THE WATER IN A BASIN?	73

ROCKALL—THE TOP OF A SUBMERGED CONTINENT IN THE NORTHERN ATLANTIC	74
MOUNTAINS AND SEAS MAKE EXCELLENT NATURAL BOUNDARIES	77
FROM ANIMAL TO MAN	83
COMPARE THE PROPORTIONS OF GREENLAND AND SOUTH AMERICA ON A GLOBE AND ON A FLAT MAP AND NOTICE WHAT A DIFFERENCE THAT MAKES!	86
GREECE	91
THE MEDITERRANEAN	94
ITALY	103
THE IBERIAN PENINSULA	122
A SPANISH CANYON	124
GIBRALTAR	127
FRANCE	138
THE GEOLOGY OF THE ÎLE DE FRANCE	144
THE ÎLE DE FRANCE EXPRESSED IN THE FORM OF SAUCERS	144
THE RHINE, THE MEUSE AND THEIR DELTA	147
PARIS	149
FROM MAN TO MOLE	156
COAL IN THE MAKING	159
HEAT	160
SWITZERLAND	164
THE MOUNTAIN PASS	165
THE CONQUEST OF THE BARRIERS	168
GERMANY	176
DENMARK IN RELATION TO NORWAY AND SWEDEN	189
ICELAND	194
THE BARREN SOIL OF THE MOUNTAINS	198
NORWAY	199
AND THE GULF STREAM DID IT	201
LOOK AT A MAP OF THE ARCTIC AND THIS IS ALL YOU SEE	203
A POLDER	210
LOCKS	214
THE ATLANTIC, IRELAND, ENGLAND AND EUROPE	217
ENGLAND, SCOTLAND AND IRELAND	218
THE FACTORY CONQUERS THE FARM	224
GREAT BRITAIN IS A COUNTRY OF LIGHTHOUSES	225
ENGLAND ENJOYS THE ENORMOUS ADVANTAGE OF BEING SITUATED IN THE HEART OF THE LAND-MASSSES OF OUR PLANET	229

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

xvii

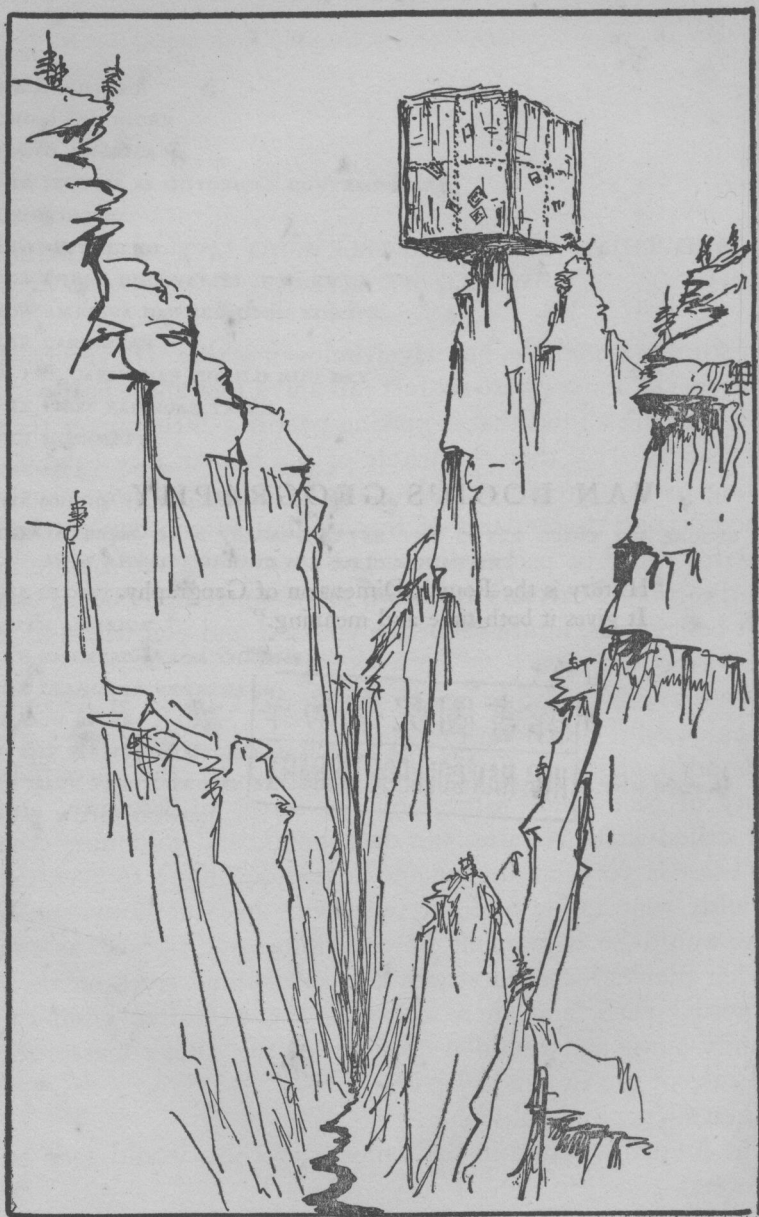
	PAGE
IRELAND	235
EUROPE	242
THE RUSSIAN LANDSCAPE	244
THE OLD RUSSIAN TRADE-ROUTE	246
THE OLD RUSSIA	249
THE NEW RUSSIA	251
EASTERN SIBERIA	254
THE GREAT RUSSIAN PLAIN	258
ASIA	285
THE HIGH PLATEAU OF TIBET	293
THE MOUNTAIN GAP	296
THE LAND BRIDGE FROM ASIA TO EUROPE	303
JERUSALEM	308
THE DISTANCE BETWEEN THE HIGHEST MOUNTAIN TOP AND THE LOWEST OCEAN DEPTH IS $11\frac{1}{2}$ MILES OR $\frac{1}{700}$ OF THE EARTH'S DIAMETER	313
INDIA	323
RICE	326
INDIA IS FULL OF INDIANS	329
THE BIG CHINESE RIVERS	343
THE CHINESE WALL IS THE ONLY STRUCTURE MADE BY HUMAN HANDS THAT WOULD BE VISIBLE BY THE ASTRONOMERS OF THE MOON	345
THE GRAND CANAL IN CHINA	351
JAPAN	367
THE OLD JAPAN	372
THE NEW JAPAN	374
THE DUTCH EAST INDIES COMPARED TO EUROPE	385
JAVA	388
AUSTRALIA	393
AUSTRALIA'S ISOLATION	395
AUSTRALIA IS FOUND	398
THE PEARL DIVER	399
NEW ZEALAND LOOKS VERY MUCH LIKE NORWAY	404
THE CORAL ISLAND	407
AFRICA	411
ON THE WAY TO THE SLAVERY COAST	415
THE DELTA OF THE NILE	417
THE WATER-HOLE	420
THE NILE	425
AFRICA	427

	PAGE
OASIS	431
KILIMANDJARO	436
CONGO AND NIGER	439
NORTH AMERICA	455
THE SEQUOIA AS HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARY	458
GREENLAND	460
NEWFOUNDLAND	461
THE THREE DISCOVERIES OF AMERICA	463
HOW AMERICA DAWNED UPON EUROPE	467
THE CARIBBEAN	469
IF THE CARIBBEAN SHOULD RUN DRY	470
THE FIRST RAILROAD TRACK	473
THE MISSISSIPPI	475
YOSEMITE	476
THE SOIL OF THE PLAINS	477
THE INTERIOR OF A VOLCANO AFTER THE OUTER CRUST HAS ERODED AWAY REMAINS BEHIND AS A SOLID MOUNTAIN	479
THE OLDEST MOUNTAINS ARE BY NO MEANS THE HIGHEST	482
SOUTH AMERICA	483
THE RAILROAD ACROSS THE ANDES	486
THE LLANOS OF VENEZUELA	488
AMAZON RIVER	489
IF THE STRAITS OF MAGELLAN SHOULD RUN DRY	492
WE HAVE FERTILIZED BY FAR TOO MANY OF OUR FIELDS IN THIS WAY	499
WHAT IS THE ANSWER?	501



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.