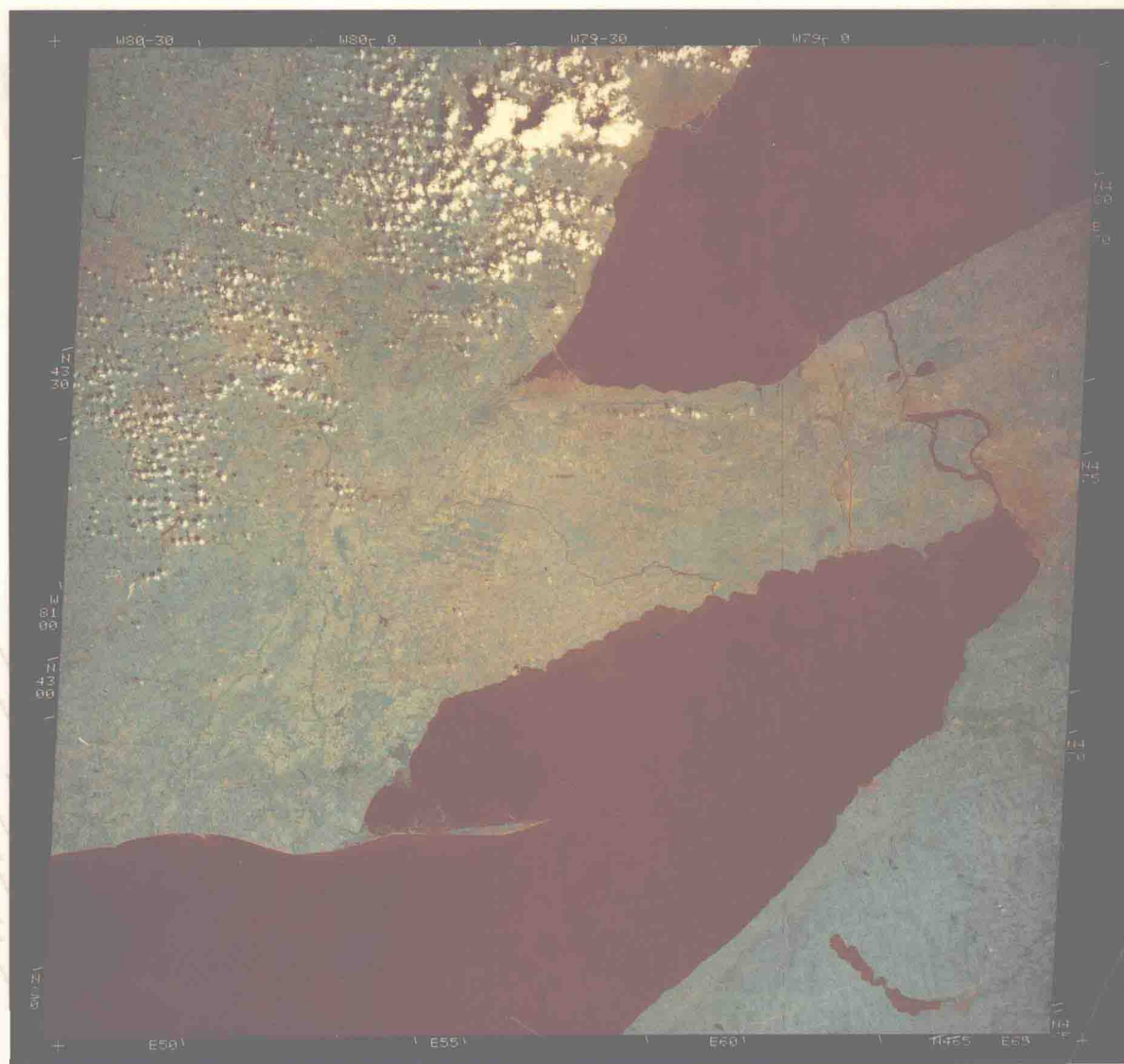


CONCEPTS AND THEMES IN THE REGIONAL GEOGRAPHY OF CANADA

revised

J. Lewis Robinson



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PREFACE

There were five printings of the first edition of this book about Canada. It has been read by thousands of university and senior high school students across Canada, and by students and the public interested in Canadian Studies in foreign countries. It has been encouraging to learn that members of an educated public will read a book of this type in the same way that they read about Canadian history, economics, or politics. A second edition became necessary to update population and agricultural statistics available from the 1986 census, and to analyze trends illustrated by these tables.

The same organization and regions have been kept in this second edition, but the physical environment section (Chapter 2) has been separated from the chapter about the evolution of rural and urban settlement patterns (Chapter 3). Each chapter has the same organization of concepts and themes, but the chapters have been extensively rewritten, with minor reorganization of some topics. The book has been slightly shortened to make it more adaptable to the one-term courses on the Geography of Canada that are now common in most Canadian universities.

As stated in the preface to the first edition, this is a book ABOUT the regional geography of Canada; it is not meant to be a complete description of Canadian regions. The book discusses concepts and themes of geography as a discipline, and uses Canadian examples to illustrate these concepts. Readers are asked to *think* about many aspects of Canada's physical environments, natural resources, and people. Many questions are raised; some of them do not have easy answers, but they are meant to indicate a geographer's approach in considering Canadian problems.

The organization of information, and the selection of themes, varies from chapter to chapter to illustrate that there need be no standard format in studying the geography of regions. Many topics are omitted in order to keep the book brief, and because regional geography should *not* be a complete collection of information about a region.

References are listed at the end of each chapter as a guide to the *type* of supporting information available. These references are not meant to be a full bibliography of regional information, nor should they replace standard bibliographic research. The references emphasize material published by geographers and refer little to the enormous number of government reports, or to the literature about Canada written in other disciplines.

For a geography book, a heresy is committed in having no pictures. A visual image of landscapes is undoubtedly important in understanding Canada's geographical patterns and environments. However, Canadian readers have access to a wide variety of pictures of Canada every day in newspapers, magazines, and on television; excellent films are available from the National Film Board and from television documentaries.

Although the distribution patterns of various phenomena are stressed in each chapter, there is a minimum number of maps and they are deliberately simple. Readers should USE other sources such as the excellent maps from the *Atlas of Canada*, provincial atlases, and other atlases prepared by Canadian publishers (see lists at the end of each chapter). Canadians have access to a wide range of maps of all types from federal and provincial map distribution offices.

There is no index. This book is not meant to be a reference volume in which information is presented about certain places which are then listed in an index. Because it is a book of ideas and concepts, it is not meant to be a collection of factual reference information. Geography should not attempt to replace encyclopedias. The topics discussed in each chapter are listed at the beginning of that chapter, and the pages noted for reference. The

themes discussed are also stated at the first of each chapter.

This book is *different* from other geography books. It tries to promote *thinking* about Canada from a geographical viewpoint rather than memorization of facts. The book should supplement other reading on Canada's history, economics, politics, etc., and the viewpoints of other disciplines.

This book is based upon more than forty-five years of reading, lecturing, and travelling about Canada. I have done field work in every region of Canada, and in that time have visited every city in Canada with more than 20,000 population, and most of the smaller places as well. These concepts about Canada have received feedback from several generations of students at the University of British Columbia and elsewhere. I am most grateful for these helpful comments, and for the kindly comments from students and faculty about the first edition.

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May 1989

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CHAPTER 1

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CHAPTER 1

CONCEPTS AND THEMES IN REGIONAL GEOGRAPHY

Canada is a large and complex country. Its geographical patterns illustrate similarities and differences in environments, peoples, and economies from place to place. Because these geographical patterns have great variety, it is difficult for one to comprehend the complexity of landscapes within Canada's large area. One of the tasks of regional geography is, therefore, to divide the nation into smaller units within which there are certain degrees of similarity, and some feeling of regional consciousness.

SOME PROBLEMS WITH REGIONS

One of the problems is to decide how many regions should be identified. We know that every valley and every settlement in Canada has its own character. One could appreciate the complexity of Canada if it were divided into hundreds of small regions, each one different from another in some way. However, regional geography must also function on a broader scale and distinguish similarities in environments, peoples, and economies over large areas. A selection of characteristic criteria to describe these features of a region is both subjective and difficult. Regions are building blocks; the concept of a hierarchy of regions is fundamental. Smaller regions should be able to be combined into large regions, and large regions should be able to be separated into smaller ones.

Regions should have some degree of similarity in selected phenomena and are defined on the basis of certain criteria. Some people define regions by statistical or political units, such as counties or census divisions — these regions may have few internal similarities in landscapes or occupations. On a larger scale, the general public probably thinks of Canada as groups of provinces, such as the Atlantic or Prairie Provinces. Such political grouping is likely to hide the differences in appearance between Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland, or the contrasts between Alberta and Manitoba.

Geographers often use physical environmental characteristics as regional criteria. Landforms or vegetation lines may be so apparent on the landscape that they make obvious regional boundaries, particularly if they separate or differentiate human activities.

Even though we accept that regions *exist*, one should remember that they are human, intellectual constructs. They exist in the minds of the persons who define, and accept, the criteria and characteristics of the region. One of the tasks of regional geography is to identify and define these characteristics more accurately. As people travel more throughout Canada they come to recognize similarities seen from place to place; thus comparing similarities from region to region may be equally as important as defining differences. Many people have a "regional consciousness" which tells them intuitively that their local area differs in certain distinctive characteristics from those of nearby or far-off regions. However, because people now move residences more frequently than a few decades ago, this regional consciousness is less strong among younger-generation Canadians.

Regional geography is *not* a collection of miscellaneous facts about a region. Older people who recall their high school geography may remember it as a dull collection of facts about almost anything in a region or country, or the memorization of places and products. Modern geography recognizes that the knowledge explosion of recent decades provides too many facts about any part of the world for the human brain to comprehend the totality of any region. A regional geographer must, therefore, develop the *art* of selecting

information and the *skill* of describing themes which characterize developments and identify trends in certain regions. If this can be achieved, regional geography may be defined as a description and interpretation of the distribution patterns of selected phenomena within a defined region.

THEMES IN REGIONAL GEOGRAPHY

By tradition, Geography has studied and interpreted certain types of phenomena more than others. Geography is not a study of "everything." Four major themes run through much geographical work and writing.

1. People-Environment Relationships

One of the centuries-old traditions of geography is the study of what used to be called "man-land relationships." Many geographers first look at the physical environment of the earth; i.e., the rocks, landforms, drainage, soils, vegetation, and climate. The terms *physical* or *natural* are often used interchangeably in geography, meaning the elements in "Nature" (natural), or the physical elements of the earth independent of man. Geographers recognize, of course, that there are other than natural environments, such as urban, social, and political; confusion may arise if these other environments are not defined.

Geography is concerned with how physical phenomena interact together, and with how people use (or misuse) their physical environments, and how human activities are influenced by them. The following chapters have frequent references to the physical characteristics of Canada and to how people in certain regions relate to these features.

2. Regional Landscapes

The continuing process of peoples' adaptations and adjustments to their physical environments results in the landscape in which they live. A landscape is made up both of the physical environment and the distribution patterns of phenomena added by people. Large areas of Canada have certain similar elements in their landscapes that give a "character" to the region and make it different from other regions.

3. Distribution Patterns

Geography is concerned with distributions. Geographers are interested in the arrangement or spacing of phenomena on the earth's surface. A word used frequently is *areal*, or areal distribution, meaning the spread of a certain element over earth space. Few elements are distributed evenly throughout the world or a country. One of the purposes of maps is to show areas of high density, or concentration, and areas of low density, or dispersal, and the ranges between these extremes.

If the first step is to describe a distribution, this should then be followed by explanation. Why is something there? Why do these distribution patterns occur or repeat themselves? This is an interesting and challenging part of geography. Explanations can be generalizations of one sentence, or may be many pages resulting from several years of research. Geography often explains and discusses distributions by looking for people-environment relationships, or to the areal associations with other phenomena. Explanations may also call on history, economics, politics, geology, or other disciplines to help with answers.

4. Changing Geographical Patterns

Distribution patterns are, of course, *not* permanent. Although the natural environment component in the landscape changes very little, man's adjustments to it change continually with the introduction of new tools and technology, or with different needs. Geography is not static. Regional geographies of Canada in the last century, or even fifty years ago, are not the same as those of today. One of the intriguing aspects of geography is to predict the regional geography of the near future; if certain areal trends continue (or change), how will a region's geography be different in ten or twenty years?

SOME GEOGRAPHICAL TERMS

There are a number of words or terms in geography which have particular meaning within the discipline. We may communicate better if they are defined and explained briefly.

1. Physical or natural environment: the elements or components of the earth; such as, geology, landforms, climate, natural vegetation, soils, water bodies. Although the term excludes people, it is recognized that they have affected most elements of the natural environment in some way.

2. Natural resource: something obtained from the natural environment and used by people. Sometimes geographers omit the adjective *natural*, and this can cause confusion, because the word *resource* alone has different meanings. Much of Canadian geography can be concerned with the distributional patterns which result from the use of our natural resources.

3. Landscape: the totality of the physical environment and human features within an observable area or region. Few people ever see or record this "totality." The use of this term recognizes the problem of *perception* — a person's mind absorbs or ignores certain elements in the landscape.

4. Areal distribution: the spread of phenomena over a defined area. Distribution indicates a geometric spacing of phenomena, and these distributions may be described by words such as *linear*, *dispersed*, *concentrated*, *even*, etc. Some geographers prefer the word *spatial*, rather than areal, referring to earth space; but other people confuse the word *spatial* on the earth with outer space off the earth.

5. Areal association: a distributional relationship or coincidence between two (or more) sets of phenomena within a defined area. For example, the areal association observed between the distribution of certain crops and types of soils, between geology and landforms, or between climates and vegetation. An areal association should be observable and measurable, and the amount of the coincidence or association should be defined. Geography is concerned with explanations as to *why* phenomena are associated in an area.

6. Geographical features: this is a vague term; to some it may mean only landforms — a mountain is therefore a "geographical" feature. Others may use the term to mean *any* feature (phenomenon) recorded on a map; in this sense all place names are geographical features. Because the term does not communicate clearly, it should be defined in context or avoided.

7. Geography and geographical: the word *geography*, and the discipline, mean different things to various people. The original Greek word meant "to write about the earth." This is somewhat inclusive! Some of the themes of geography were noted in the preceding section; to be "geographical," one or more of these themes should be central in discussion of regions.

Because geography has different meanings and emphases, the adjective *geographical* does not communicate well and probably should be avoided. For example, people have used the colourful sentence, "Canada is a geographical impossibility." Do they mean that Canada is "impossible" (difficult?) because of its landforms, or because of great distances? Do they mean that we have large areas of unfavourable (for whom?) natural environment? Do they mean that Canada is divided into regions which do not function together?

REGIONS OF CANADA

Introduction

How many regions should Canada be divided into in order to study it, both in whole and in part? How many is an appropriate number between "too few" and "too many" to describe and explain the differences and similarities within Canada?

Canadians sometimes divide the country into three vague regions known as "eastern," "western," and "northern," but these mean different things to different people. Ontario or Manitoba are east to people in British Columbia, but they are west or central to people in Nova Scotia. The north is a vague area because most Canadians live in the southern part of the country. For example, Timmins is in "the North" to residents of southern Ontario, but it is about the same latitude as Vancouver, which considers itself to be in the south. The Prairie Provinces are "the West" to people in eastern Canada, but this definition often excludes British Columbia, which is even farther west.

Some geographies have used landform (or physiographic) regions for a regional basis. These differing landform characteristics are easily seen in the landscape, and the uses of these landforms by people have differed within each region. For example, most regionalizations of Canada must consider the dominant natural characteristics of the Canadian Shield. Other physical-environment lines may be used for regionalization. For example, the northern treeline separates climate areas called Arctic and Subarctic Canada, and also separates Indian and Inuit people.

Canada may be divided by human criteria. For example, settled or occupied Canada, with higher population densities, may be discussed separately from "Northern," or less densely settled Canada. A line or zone between such regions is not clear. In most human regionalizations, French-speaking Canada is considered as different from other parts of Canada. However, high densities of French language are not entirely in the same area as a political region called Quebec.

Canada may be described in a "heartland-hinterland" framework; southern Ontario and Quebec are the heartland of the nation, and the rest of Canada is their hinterland. The combination of favourable physical environments, and high densities of people and activities in this heartland, are very different from the dispersed patterns of the hinterlands. This geographic concept of Canada is also political and economic — this is discussed more fully in Chapter 5.

As the nation becomes strongly urbanized, and the economy dominated by several large metropolitan cities, Canada can be studied as a set of urban-centred regions. This concept is useful across southern Canada, but it does not describe most of "Northern" Canada.

Most commonly, our regional grouping is by provinces. Most Canadians, for example, combine the three Prairie Provinces into one region, even though there are major differences within and among them. The Atlantic Provinces include the four east coast provinces, but the term may be confusing to those who think of the area as "the Maritimes"