



**REGIONAL GEOGRAPHY OF  
THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA**  
SECOND EDITION

**TOM L. McKNIGHT**





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# REGIONAL GEOGRAPHY OF THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA

Second Edition

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# PREFACE

Regional geography has recently passed through a period of relative disfavor. Its critics, encouraged by the quantitative revolution in many fields of learning, including geography, have found fault with its alleged lack of precision and methodological rigor. This is not the place to debate such charges, but the author of this book is a strong adherent of the conviction that regional geography meets a basic need in furthering an understanding of Earth's surface and that no surrogate has yet been devised to replace it.

The complexities of human life on Earth are much too vast and intricate to be explained by multivariate analysis and related mathematical and model-building techniques. Such models may be useful, but any real understanding of people and their earthly habitat requires that words, phrases, photos, diagrams, graphs, and especially maps be used in meaningful combination. Conceptualization and delimitation of regions are critical exercises in geographic thinking, and the description and analysis of such regions continue as a central theme in the discipline of geography; some would call it the essence of the field.

It is a fundamental belief of the author that a basic goal of geography is *landscape appreciation* in the broad sense of both words, that is, an understanding of everything that one can see, hear, and smell—both actually and vicariously—in humankind's zone of living on Earth. In this book, then, there is heavy emphasis on landscape description and interpretation, including its sequential development.

The flowering of civilization in North America is partly a reflection of the degree to which people have levied tribute against natural resources in particular and the environment in general. From the Atlantic to the Pacific and from the Arctic to the Gulf, people have been destroyers of nature, even as they have been builders of civilizations. Overcrowding of population and overconsumption of material goods have now become so pervasive that reassessment of goals and priorities—by institutions as well as by individuals—is widespread. Reaction to environmental despoliation is strongly developed, and ecological concerns are beginning to override economic considerations in many cases. In keeping with such reaction, environmental and ecologic issues are frequently discussed in this book.

Canada and the United States have a common heritage and have been moving toward similar goals. These factors, along with geographical contiguity and the binational influ-

ence of mass media, have produced both commonality of culture and mutual interdependence. Nevertheless, there are clear-cut distinctions between the two countries, and there is a particular concern among many Canadians to define a national character that is separate from both psychological and economic domination of the United States. These national interests and concerns, however, do not mask the fact that the geographical "grain" of the continent often trends north-south rather than east-west; thus, several of the regions delimited in this book cross the international border to encompass parts of both countries.

A renewal of interest in regional geography has become apparent, and nowhere is this more clearly shown than in the increase in publications dealing with aspects of the regional geography of the United States and Canada. There are more journals and more journal articles, and special publications of great significance have appeared. Perhaps most important, the output of state, provincial, regional, and city atlases continues unabated. The chapter-end bibliographies of this book are overflowing with references to useful recent publications; indeed, the bibliographies could easily have been expanded severalfold.

This volume is based significantly on its long-established predecessor, *Regional Geography of Anglo-America*, which flourished through six editions, beginning in 1943, with C. Langdon White and Edwin J. Foscue as senior authors. One of the more popular features of the previous book was the use of boxed vignettes that permitted a more detailed discussion of specific issues and topics. The use of boxes, or vignettes (titled "A Closer Look"), has been expanded in this, the second edition of *Regional Geography of the United States and Canada*, and about half of them are written by guest authors on an invited basis.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author has leaned heavily on many geographers and colleagues in associated disciplines. A great many people, including several students, have contributed thoughts, ideas, information, and critiques of value. Accordingly, the number to whom I am grateful is so large that only a general acknowledgment is possible. To three groups, however, my special thanks are due.

Twenty-one noted geographers contributed sprightly and insightful vignettes. Their names are listed following the Contents.

Several geographers went beyond the norms of collegiality in providing helpful suggestions and comments. Chief among these were:

**John Hudson** of Northwestern University  
**J. Lewis Robinson** of the University of British Columbia

Other colleagues commented critically upon specific chapters or issues of importance. These include:

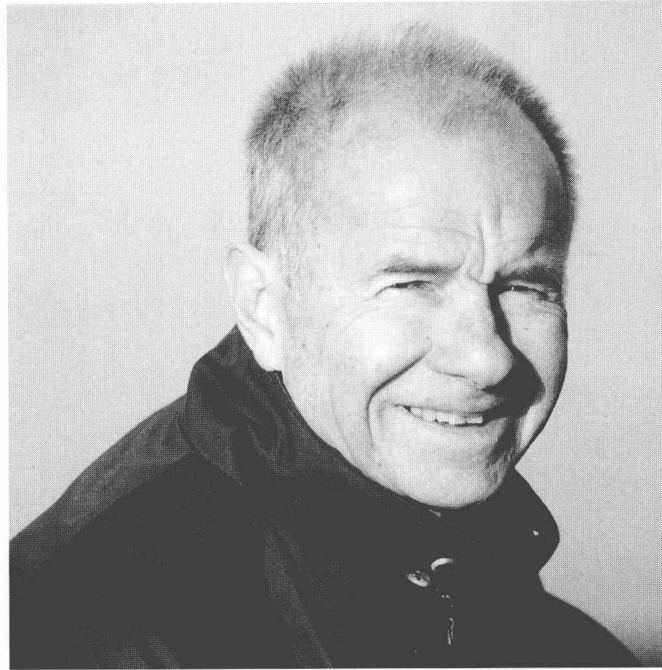
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Tom L. McKnight  
*Los Angeles*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Tom McKnight was born and raised in Dallas, Texas. He started out to be a geologist, but discovered geography through the tutelage of Edwin J. Foscue, and soon shifted his interest to the “mother science.” His training includes a B.A. degree (geology major, geography minor) from Southern Methodist University, an M.A. degree (geography major, geology minor) from the University of Colorado, and a Ph.D. degree (geography major, meteorology minor) from the University of Wisconsin. He has been lucky enough to live in Australia for extended periods on eight different occasions. Most of his professional life has been based at U.C.L.A., but he has also taught temporarily at nine American, three Canadian, and three Australian universities. He served as Chair of the U.C.L.A. Geography Department from 1978 to 1983. His favorite places are Australia, Colorado, Yellowstone Park, and Dallas.

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# The North American Continent

# 1



Two of the world's largest countries—the Dominion of Canada and the United States of America—occupy the northern third of the Western Hemisphere. Their burgeoning populations, rapidly diversifying societies, and dynamic economies present a fascinating human tableau on an expansive and diverse continental landscape.

## CONTINENT, SUBCONTINENT, OR CULTURE REALM?

The Western Hemisphere can be grossly subdivided in various ways (Fig. 1-1):

1. Two continents—North America and South America;
2. Three subcontinents—North America, Middle America, and South America;
3. Two culture realms—Anglo-America and Latin America.

Commonly in the past Canada and the United States were referred to jointly as *Anglo-America*, for their predomi-

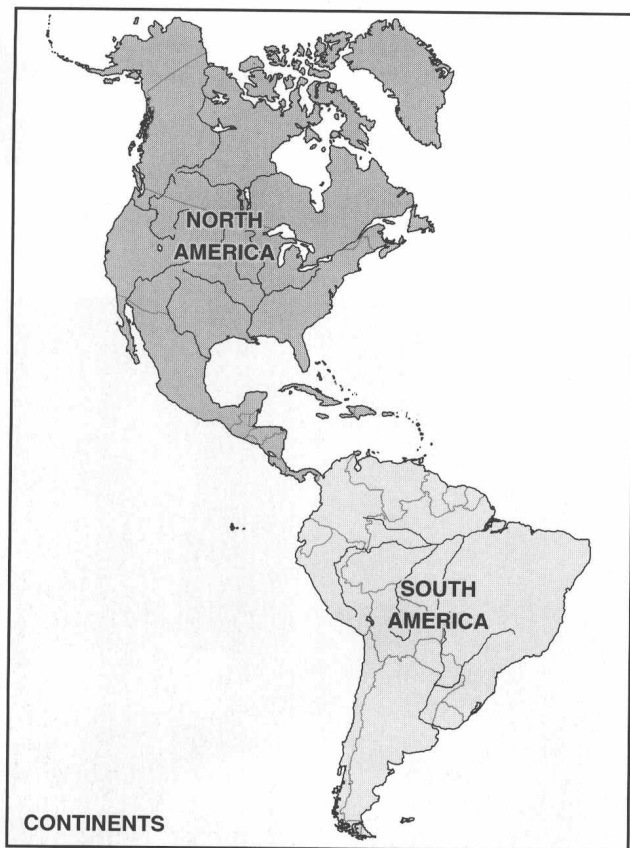
nant ancestry was English, and most of the economic and political institutions of both countries derived from this heritage. More recently, however, the term Anglo-America has become increasingly anachronistic due to the rapidly growing components of both population and culture that are non-Anglicized.

For simplicity's sake, in this book we will refer to the United States and Canada jointly as the *North American subcontinent*.

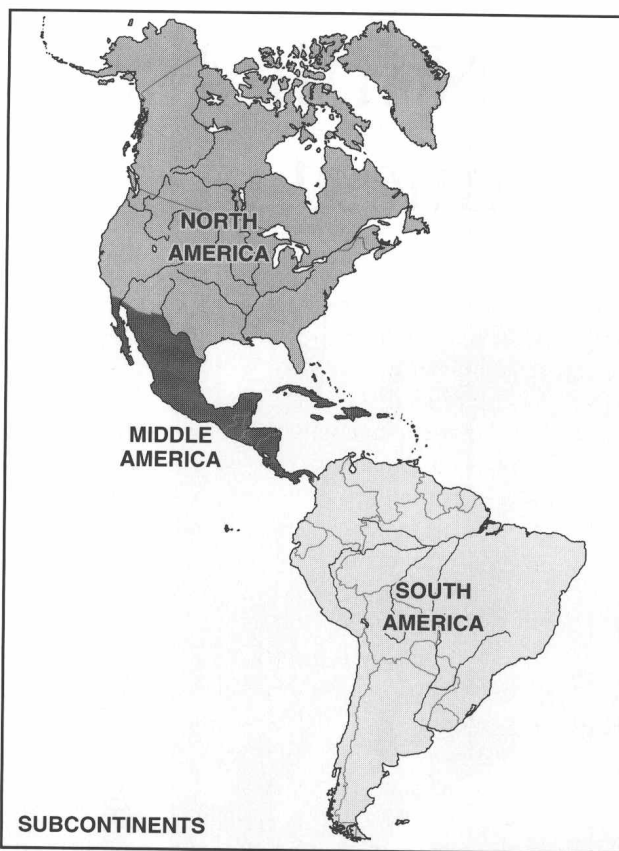
## CONTINENTAL PARAMETERS

North America, as defined here, encompasses an area of nearly 7.5 million square miles (19.4 million km<sup>2</sup>), which is larger than each of the seven recognized continents except Asia and Africa. It sprawls across 136 degrees of longitude, from 52° west longitude at Cape Spear in Newfoundland to 172° east longitude at Attu Island in the western extremity of the Aleutians. Its latitudinal extent is 64 degrees, from 83° north latitude at Ellesmere Island's Cape Columbia to 19° north latitude on the southern coast of the Big Island of Hawaii.





(a)



(b)



(c)

**FIGURE 1-1** Major subdivisions of the Western Hemisphere: (a) continents (b) subcontinents (c) culture realms.

## A VIEW FROM SPACE

The subcontinent is roughly wedge shaped, with its broadest expanse toward the north. The great bulk of North America is thus in the middle latitudes, with a considerable northern extension into the high latitudes and only Hawaii reaching into the tropics.

If we were to view the entire subcontinent from an orbiting space station on a clear day, certain gross features would appear prominently. Perhaps the most conspicuous configuration is the irregular continental outline; some extensive coastal reaches are relatively smooth, but by and large the margin of the continent is irregular and embayed and there are numerous prominent offshore islands (Fig. 1-2).<sup>1</sup>

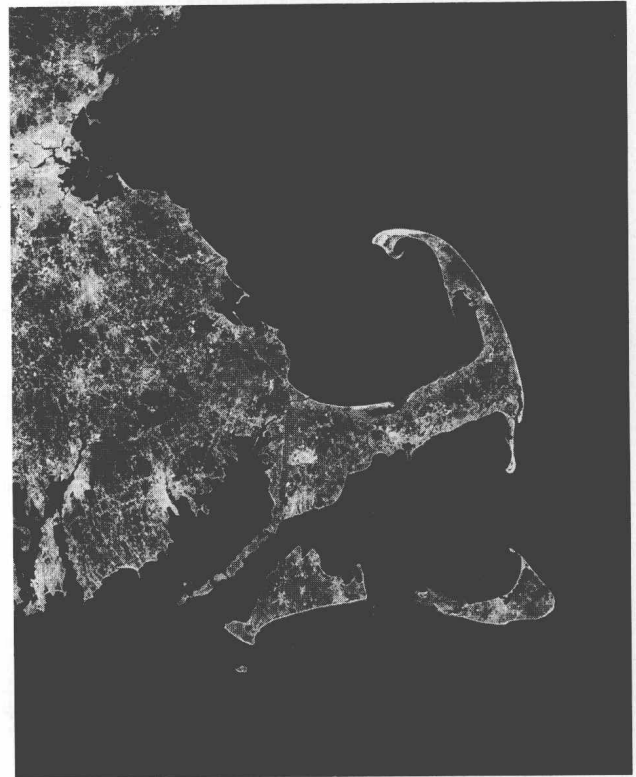
The most notable indentation in the continental outline is Hudson Bay, which protrudes southward for some 800 miles (1280 km) from Canada's north coast. Despite its vastness, however, Hudson Bay is relatively insignificant in its influence on the geography of North America. Its surface is frozen for many months, and even the open water of summer supports only one sea route of importance and has minimal climatic effects on the surrounding lands.

Much more significant geographically are two extensive oceanic areas whose margins impinge less abruptly on the continent; both the Gulf of Mexico to the southeast and the Gulf of Alaska to the northwest constitute gross irregularities in the continental configuration that have major climatic influences and considerable economic importance. Other coastal embayments that might be conspicuous from the viewpoint of a satellite include the Gulf of St. Lawrence, the Bay of Fundy, and Chesapeake Bay on the east coast; and Puget Sound, Cook Inlet, Bristol Bay, Norton Sound, and Kotzebue Sound on the west.

More than 70,000 islands are another feature that commands attention in the gross outline of the subcontinent. Easily the most prominent island group is the Canadian Arctic Archipelago, an expansive series of large islands to the north of the Canadian mainland that constitutes more than 14 percent of the total area of Canada. The largest islands of the archipelago are Baffin and Ellesmere, and 9 of the 10 largest islands of the subcontinent are in the group (Fig. 1-3).

Four other sizable islands are clustered around the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Prince Edward Island is a Canadian province, the island of Newfoundland is part of the province of the same name, Cape Breton Island is part of Nova Scotia, and Anticosti Island is part of Quebec.

<sup>1</sup> The coastline of the high-latitude portions of the subcontinent is much more uneven than that of other sections. For example, Alaska has more coastline mileage than the other 24 coastal states combined.



**FIGURE 1-2** The irregular nature of the eastern coastline of North America is evident in southeastern Massachusetts and eastern Rhode Island. Cape Cod is composed of a complex of glacial moraines and sandy, current-built bars, spits, and hooks. From east to west the conspicuous islands are Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard. Cape Cod actually is separated from the mainland by the smooth curve of Cape Cod Canal, which extends from Cape Cod Bay to Buzzards Bay. Lighter tones distinguish the Boston urbanized area in the upper left of the photo and a portion of metropolitan Providence at the head of Narragansett Bay (*Landsat* image).

The islands off the east coast of the United States are small and sparsely populated, with one major exception, namely, Long Island, whose 1400 square miles (3600 km<sup>2</sup>) support a population in excess of 7 million. The other coastal islands of the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico are nearly all long, narrow, low-lying sand ridges. Although there are a great many such islands, most are so close to shore and so narrow as to be indistinguishable from our theoretical high-altitude viewpoint.

The island pattern off the Pacific Coast is quite uneven. Only a few islands are found off the southern portion of the coast and of these only the Channel Islands of California en-



FIGURE 1-3 Some important place names in North America.

compass much acreage. The coast of British Columbia and southern Alaska, on the other hand, is extensively bordered by islands, many of which are large. Most notable is Vancouver Island, which constitutes the extreme southwestern corner of Canada. Other major islands on this coast include the Queen Charlotte Islands of British Columbia, the Alexander Archipelago of southeastern Alaska, Kodiak Island of southern Alaska, and the far-flung Aleutian group.

### THE COUNTRIES

The material in most of this book is presented by regions. As a prelude, it is well to look briefly at the nations as entities,

noting a few general facts to serve as a context for regional analysis.

### The United States of America

The total area of the United States is 3,615,200 square miles (9,363,400 km<sup>2</sup>), a figure exceeded by only three other countries—Russia, Canada, and China. The 1996 population was about 266,000,000, which ranked third among the nations of the world, after China and India.

The United States is a federal republic with a division of power between federal and state governments. Both levels of government have a threefold administration: executive, legislative, and judicial branches. There are 50 states, which

vary greatly in size and population. The 48 "old" states, excluding Alaska and Hawaii, are collectively referred to as the *conterminous states*.

The states are subdivided into local governmental units called counties,<sup>2</sup> with the following exceptions: in Louisiana the units are called parishes; in Maryland, Missouri, Nevada, and Virginia there are cities that are independent of any county organization and thus constitute, along with counties, primary subdivisions of these states; and in Alaska the populated parts are subdivided into boroughs. Altogether, there are about 3100 counties and county equivalents in the United States.<sup>3</sup>

The national capital is the District of Columbia, which is territory on the northeastern side of the Potomac River that was ceded to the nation by the state of Maryland.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the 50 states and the District of Columbia, the United States governs a number of small islands in the Caribbean Sea, the most important of which is Puerto Rico, as well as Guam, American Samoa, Midway, and Wake Island in the Pacific Ocean.

### The Dominion of Canada

Canada is the world's second largest country, with an area of 3,851,800 square miles (9,976,200 km<sup>2</sup>). It is not densely populated, however, and its 1996 population of about 30,000,000 ranked only 31st among the nations of the world.

The governmental organization of Canada is a confederation with parliamentary democracy that combines the federal form of the United States with the cabinet system of Great Britain. The cabinet system partially unites the executive and legislative branches of government; the prime minister and all, or nearly all, the cabinet are members of the House of Commons. The reigning monarch of Great Britain is also the head of the Canadian state and is represented by a governor-general whose duties are formal and rather perfunctory.<sup>5</sup> The prime minister is the active head of the govern-

ment. Members of the House of Commons are elected by the people of Canada. Members of the Senate, on the other hand, are appointed for life by the cabinet. The House of Commons is the dominant legislative body, with many more powers than the Senate.

The Canadian confederation contains 10 provinces and two territories. The easternmost provinces of Newfoundland, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island are often referred to as the Atlantic Provinces; the latter three are collectively called the Maritime Provinces. Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, the three provinces of the western interior, are known as the Prairie Provinces. The other three provinces, Quebec, Ontario, and British Columbia, are not normally considered members of groups. Most of northern Canada is encompassed within the Yukon Territory and the Northwest Territories. The various provinces and territories have different systems for administering local government; each is usually subdivided into counties or districts, which may be further fragmented into minor civil divisions.

The national capital of Ottawa does not occupy a special territory but is within the province of Ontario, adjacent to its border with Quebec. The creation of a federal district (analogous to the District of Columbia) was first officially proposed in 1915 and has been discussed in varying degrees of seriousness ever since, but with no formal action. Nevertheless, a planning district, called the "National Capital Region," has been designated. It comprises some 900 square miles (2300 km<sup>2</sup>) and is divided about equally between Ontario and Quebec. Indeed, in some quarters the capital is now referred to as "Ottawa-Hull," since Hull is Ottawa's principal suburb on the Quebec side of the boundary and contains the offices of numerous government agencies.

### AMICABLE NEIGHBORS

In the early years of their separate political existence, the United States and Canada battled against each other five times, most seriously in the War of 1812. For well over a century, however, neighborliness has prevailed, and their common 5525-mile (8840-km) boundary is rightly referred to as "the longest undefended border in the world."

Americans and Canadians are alike in many ways, both as a people and as a society, although the differences are sometimes notable and often are emphasized by commentators. Life in the two countries is so similar that citizens of nei-

<sup>2</sup> Counties vary greatly in size and population. Delaware has the fewest, with 3, whereas Texas has the most, with 254.

<sup>3</sup> The total number of counties is not static, for new ones are added from time to time. In 1981 a new county—Cibola—was created in northwestern New Mexico, and in 1983 La Paz County was carved out of Yuma County in southwestern Arizona.

<sup>4</sup> The District of Columbia was created in 1790 when Maryland and Virginia both ceded territory for its establishment. Virginia reannexed its ceded land in 1847, however, so the present District of Columbia consists entirely of land that was originally part of the state of Maryland.

<sup>5</sup> Despite the "patriation" of the Canadian Constitution in 1982, Canada is still a constitutional monarchy and the roles of the queen and the governor-general are unchanged. What is changed is that the Constitution (previously

called the British North America Act) has been expanded, principally by the addition of a Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and removed from the legal control of the British Parliament and placed wholly in Canadian hands.



ther country experience "culture shock" when visiting the other. Indeed, the movement of people through the 130 border-crossing stations is of enormous magnitude: In the mid-1990s Canadians crossed into the United States on about 40 million occasions annually, and the reverse flow amounted to about 33 million annual excursions.

Of at least equal significance as an indicator of an amicable relationship is the amount of commerce between the two countries, which is the most voluminous two-way trade in the world. Each is the other's best customer. In recent years more than \$170 billion worth of goods and services were exchanged annually. This total undoubtedly will continue to rise as a result of the U.S.-Canadian Free Trade Agreement, promulgated in 1989, which will eliminate all tariffs between the two countries within a decade.

This is not to say that there are no problems between these neighbors. Significant contentious issues—such as acid rain, Great Lakes pollution, and commercial fishery allotments—continue to strain the relationship.

Despite the similarities of the people and their institutions, it probably is inevitable that tension between these continental neighbors will persist, simply because they are unequal partners; one is 10 times as large (in population and

economy) as the other. Canada has always had to face the problem of building a nation in the shadow of a giant. Or, as ex-Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau is purported to have said, "Occupying a continent with the United States is like sleeping with an elephant; no matter how benign the beast is, its slightest wiggle shakes the bed."

This inequality certainly influences attitude. According to a major 1989 public opinion poll, about half the Canadian respondents characterized Americans in negative terms, whereas less than 5 percent of the American respondents felt negatively about Canadians.

Simply stated, it is probably fair to observe that many Canadians view the United States with concern, but most Americans are indifferent to Canada. Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood has noted that what separates the two countries is the world's longest one-way mirror. Canadians gaze south, obsessed with fascination and sometimes fear of the American colossus, but Americans rarely bother to look north. The comment attributed to Chicago mobster Al Capone encapsulates the American viewpoint: "Canada? What street is that on?" Such a statement is not snobbish; it simply represents the inconsistent interest in, and knowledge of, world affairs that is so prevalent in the United States.

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