

# Introduction

We are all explorers. Even as tiny children we search out the limits of our world. A few years on, our imagination stretches further: fingers batting at a giddy plastic globe ... a spinning top, gaudy with colour, representing perhaps the most ambitious idea possible, the world.

Geography is a fundamental fascination. It is also a core component of a good education. Yet a lot of people are not too sure what it is. They stumble over the question 'What is geography?' Perhaps they are worried by the scale and the implications of the obvious answer. For geography is about the world. To study geography is to study the world, both near and far.

This book introduces geography as one of humanity's big ideas. Geography is not just another academic specialism. Indeed, in an age when knowledge is fragmented into thousands of disciplines, geography can seem like a throwback. Its horizons are just too wide. After examining the way geology, climatology, ecology, environmental science and a number of human sciences evolved from geography, the historian Peter Bowler suggests that 'Geography is a classic example of a subject that can disappear as a separate entity, each of its functions siphoned off by a new specialisation'<sup>1</sup>.

But geography has not disappeared. Over the last 100 years its death has been predicted, even announced, many times. But it refuses to die. It seems that the desire for splintering the world into a kaleidoscope of intellectual shards also has its limits. More than this: that certain forms of knowledge familiar to people thousands of years ago (for geography is no spring chicken) still mean something to people today. Indeed, the need for world knowledge – for environmental knowledge, for international knowledge, for knowledge of the places

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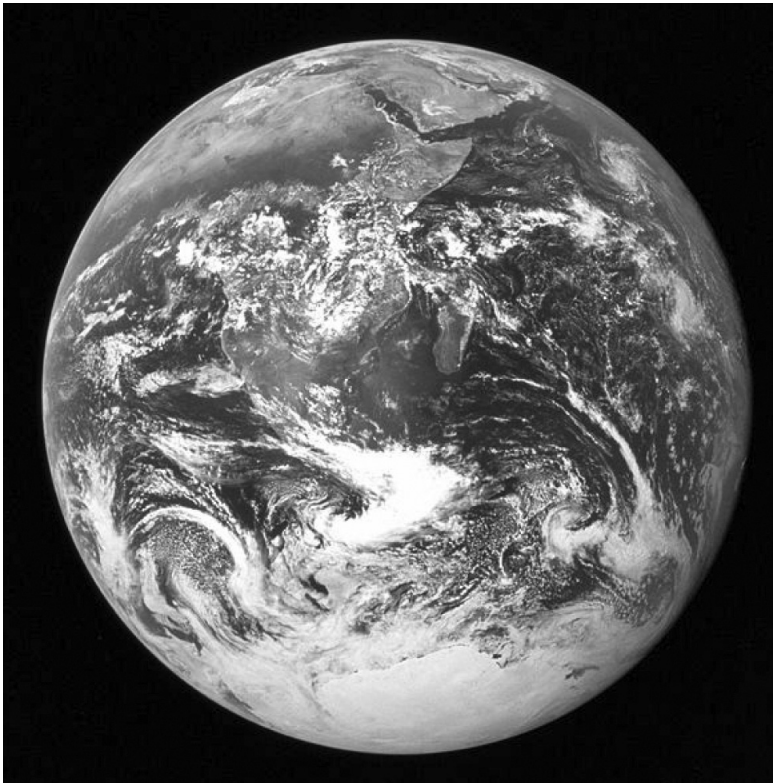
and people beyond the parochial patch called home – could hardly be more pressing, more contemporary.

Figure 1 shows geography's area of study and its symbol. The world is geography's logo. It rolls around the letterheads of countless geographical societies, magazines and departmental websites. Admittedly, it is not usually as pretty as the world seen in this photograph. This image was photographed at a distance of 45,000 kilometres from earth by an astronaut aboard Apollo 17 on 7th December 1972. Soon named 'the Blue Marble', this is a picture at once beautiful and impressive yet disconcerting in its pocketsize neatness. Set against that inky, infinite surround, we are reminded of the fragility and unity of our world. NASA archivist Mike Gentry calls it 'the most widely distributed image in human history'<sup>2</sup>. It is the first and still the only time the whole earth had been photographed by a human eyewitness, for we have never since travelled such a distance.

Our world. It is an idea that provokes another: that our personal histories only make sense against the backdrop of six billion other personal histories: that our fates are intertwined. The Blue Marble is a portrait of a modern, interdependent, geographical consciousness.

The phrase 'personal *histories*' reminds us that geography has a twin. History and geography have much in common. Both are ancient but also contemporary. Both address seemingly limitless territory yet remain lodged in our imaginations; hard to grasp but indispensable. Immanuel Kant identified geography and history as the two basic forms of human knowledge, the one addressing things and events in space, the other things and events in time; the one reaching out, the other drilling down.<sup>3</sup> History, like geography, seems to be all-inclusive, endless in depth and range. It is intellectually omnivorous. But this does not allow us to dismiss history as incoherent. We know that history is about the past and we know that the past matters. In *What is History?* E. H. Carr argued that people living in different times have thought about the utility and nature of history in different ways. 'When we attempt to answer the question "What is history?"', Carr explained, 'our answer, consciously or unconsciously, reflects our own position in time'.<sup>4</sup> Those with a geographical bent of mind will want to add, 'and our position in the world'. But this is only to broaden Carr's point, which is to insist that, even though history is universally

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**Figure 1** View of the Earth as seen by the Apollo 17 crew traveling toward the moon. This translunar coast photograph extends from the Mediterranean Sea area to the Antarctica south polar ice cap. Original caption. Courtesy of NASA

understood to be about the past, what people mean when they say 'history' is enormously variable.

Something similar can be said of geography. Across thousands of years and in many different communities world knowledge has been sought and created. But at particular times and in particular places, this project has taken on a particular shape and has been expressed in a particular language. For much of human history what we now call 'geographical knowledge' was determined by the

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demands of human survival, of the maintenance of bare life. Information on the immediate landscape, as well as of what might surround it, may have been meagre but it was essential. With the development of more complex societies geographical consciousness became more elaborate. And a recurrent theme began to emerge, namely that the world has a centre (unsurprisingly, this 'centre' was often the same place where the 'geography' was being imagined) and a more dangerous, somewhat strange, though perhaps enticingly exotic, periphery. It is not an unfamiliar model today. If we accept that the last few hundred years have been witness to the 'Westernisation of the world',<sup>5</sup> then we are also likely to see the planet in terms of centres and peripheries.

Industrial modernity shaped geography in its own image. The kind of questions increasingly associated with geography reflected this dominance. These questions turned on two interconnected themes: environmental and international change. More specifically, it is towards geography that people have turned when seeking answers to the questions, 'How and why has the environment altered?' and 'How and why do nations differ?' These questions, transformed into images, are postered across school rooms the world over. They are also well represented within television schedules and in the print media. The modern geographical agenda thrives on global diversity, on a boldly asserted cosmopolitanism. But it also asserts 'challenges' and 'problems' as central to the geography student's vocabulary. Indeed, to contemporary ears, the words 'environmental' and 'international' can seem a little bare without that pervasive suffix, 'crisis'.

It seems that the desire and need for knowledge of the world is a basic human attribute, yet the content and form of these desires and needs is changeable. Something else that is changeable is geography's audience. For much of the time since Eratosthenes (275–194 BC) coined the Greek word 'geo-graphy', or 'earth writing', 2,300 years ago, written geographies were produced for and by a small elite. Their authors assumed that ordinary people had narrower horizons; that their interests were local and insular. Today, huge swaths of the earth's population have ready access to, and an apparent eagerness for information about places, peoples and events that are thousands

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of miles from where they live. Many millions see international travel and international awareness as normal parts of ordinary lives. Tales of exotic destinations once had an aura of rarity and were often preceded by a low bow from a diplomat returning to court. Today they have become so common as to be banal. Stories of journeys to far-flung destinations are told anywhere and by anyone. We are all, more or less, plugged into our planet. Its availability and accessibility has created a mass cosmopolitanism. Our wired-up, footloose, travel-bugged, world is stage to expanding and mutating forms of global geographical awareness.

But as we imagine a world so easily spanned we also sense its vulnerability. Geography can still talk to us in the primal language of survival. To discuss environmental crisis may seem a distant, rather dry exercise. But what is being discussed is survival. International knowledge can appear a globetrotter's luxury. But our era is one of world wars and worldwide conflicts between opponents with the power to destroy the planet. International knowledge too is about survival. Talk of crisis is often overblown. But no other era has experienced the kind of pressures on the environment that we have been witness to over the past century. And in no other period have ordinary people become conscious of global conflict in the way we are today. It is a unique and terrible kind of wisdom: we know we can destroy the world.

## Why What is Geography?

There are many introductions to geography. Lots of academic overviews, lots of school textbooks. For the most part they offer summations of recent scholarship by academic geographers (if they are university books) or recent key topics in environmental or international change (if they are school textbooks). What they do not tell us is what geography is. To do that you have to step back and look at the bigger picture. Geography has an interesting institutional history (see Chapter 5). But if its story is confined to only one institutional form then it appears both random and disconnected. This much is obvious if one looks at contemporary academic geography.

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It covers everything from queer theory to quaternary science. Merely collating this vast body of activity will never lead to a plausible explanation of what geography is.

And we do need to know what geography is. Students do, journalists do, politicians do. Because they do not know. And because many of us have the nagging sense that it matters, that our world needs *this kind* of knowledge. I've taught geography in the university sector for many years now. Again and again students have asked me 'So, what is geography?'. Colleagues too, more wearily. For years I've batted the question away. 'Whatever geographers make it' was my glib response. To be honest even asking the question seemed vaguely wrong: like calling the police round to spoil the atmosphere of a care-free, interdisciplinary party. But as the issues that are so central to geography – issues of environmental and global crisis – have become ever more pressing, the luxury of evasion has become harder to afford. In an era in which geographical questions are the central questions of the day we need to know what geography is.

This little book is for anyone who wants an answer to the question posed in its title: *it is a personal statement*.<sup>6</sup> And it is full of contentious arguments. It explains what I think geography is. But I like to think it is more than that. This book recognises geography as a characteristically human enterprise. Geography is an attempt to find and impose order on a seemingly chaotic world; an attempt that is simultaneously modern and pre-modern, ancient and contemporary. The following chapters introduce us to this extraordinary ambition. Geography spans both the human and the natural sciences (Chapters 1 and 2); its obsessions mirror our urbanising, mobile world (Chapter 3); and its methods reflect the challenges of acquiring environmental and international knowledge (Chapter 4). Finally, Chapter 5 shows that geography has many institutional forms but, somehow, constantly escapes and defies them. No institutional cage is quite big enough for a desire to know the world.