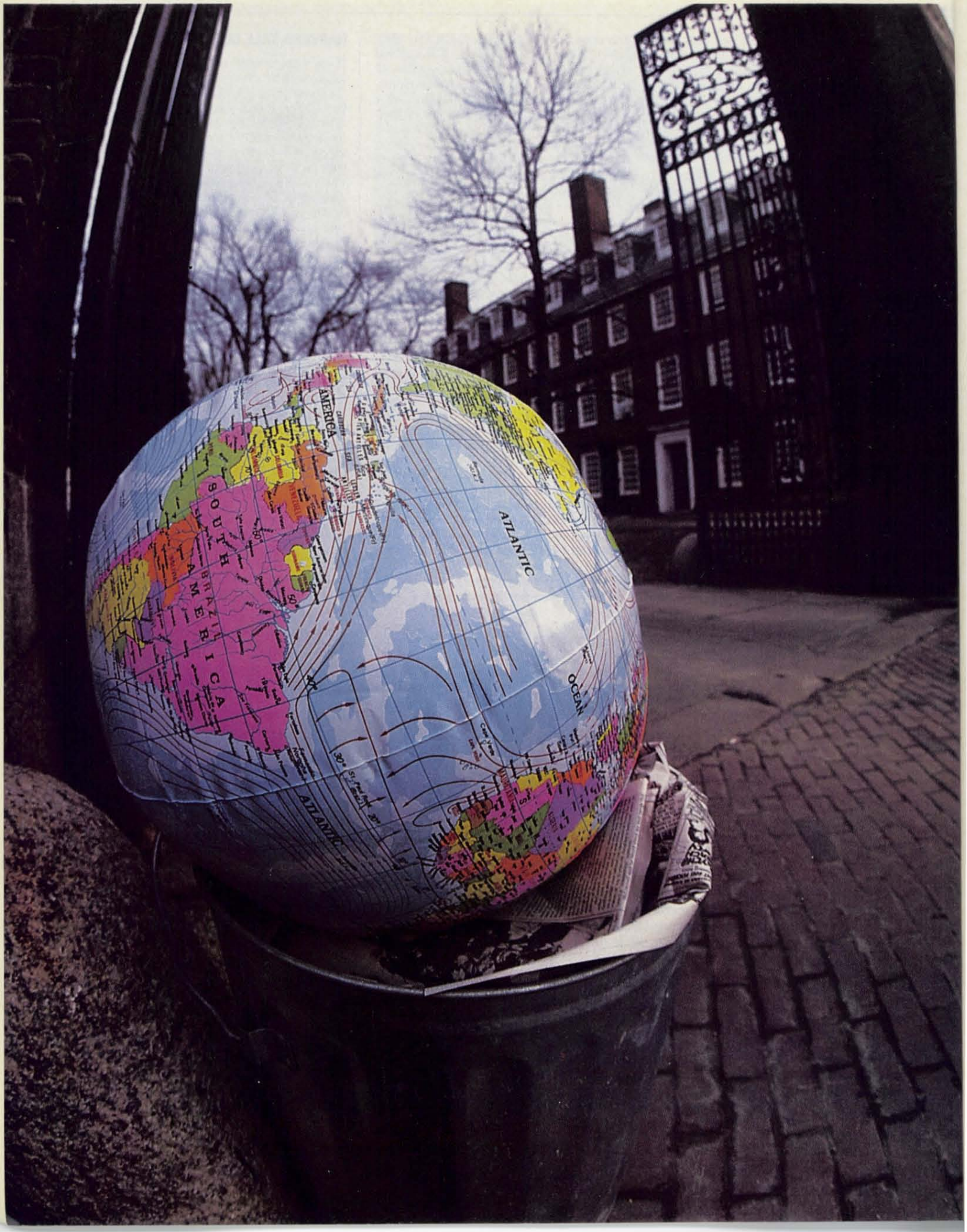
SOUTH AMERICA
BRAZIL
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HARVARD, BRING BACK GEOGRAPHY!

Academic politics put an end to an old and useful field of study—but the loss is not irreversible.

by EDWARD TENNER

The year 1988 marks two notable events in our knowledge of the earth. The first is the hundredth anniversary of the founding of the National Geographic Society. The second is the fortieth anniversary of the abolition of the geography department at Harvard. If you can slap a whole discipline in the face, Harvard did. It hurt. Jean Gottmann, long the head of the department at Oxford, later told the Rutgers geographer Neil Smith that Harvard's action was "a terrible blow" from which the field "has never completely recovered." It didn't help Harvard, either.

Fortunately, Smith and the Boston University historian Thomas Glick have been clearing away the gossip and innuendo that surrounded Harvard's purge of geography. Smith's "Academic War Over the Field of Geography" in the June 1987 *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* (to which I am indebted for both facts and issues of the event) shows how academic politics and geographers' own disagreements brought on the debacle.

At Harvard, Nathaniel Southgate Shaler (1841-1906) and his disciple William Morris Davis (1850-1934) had been giants among geologically trained nineteenth-century geographers. Davis was a memorable graduate teacher whose influence is felt in physical geography to this day. But for decades geography remained a subsidiary part of the geology department. Derwent Whittlesey, appointed in 1928, fought to expand the field as a separate area of research and to promote its historical and political side. During World War II a University committee on postwar plans called attention to the need for trained geographers and recommended that geography be further expanded and given departmental status. Shortly after the war Harvard hired two outstanding younger geographers, Edward Ackerman '34, Ph.D. '39, and Edward Ullman, A.M. '35, as assistant professors.

Geography appeared to be flourishing. Geographic skills, so often linked to economic and military power, had been invaluable during the war. America's new global role seemed to cry out for them. Yet a single tenure decision showed how precarious geography's position was. It was becoming too big (and too strongly social-scientific) to remain a part of the geology department. Yet Marland P. Billings '23, Ph.D. '27, the chairman of that department, saw human geography as a drain on the resources of geology and a doubtful discipline. In the spring of 1947 Billings opposed his own department's vote to promote Ackerman—an unquestionably gifted scholar—and urged Harvard's provost, Paul Buck, to let the geography program expire.

An ad hoc committee convened by Buck supported the promotion recommendation but was overruled by Buck and President James Conant. To the amazement of the senior faculty and the irritation and outrage of many students and alumni, they dissolved the nascent department. Derwent Whittlesey was kept on, but other geographers, including Ackerman, were to be fired. Conant turned the knife when he stated in a directive that "geography is not a university subject." Administrators argued that Harvard could not maintain programs in every field and could not expect sufficient financial support to stay in the vanguard of geographic research and teaching.

The decisive figure in the fall of geography at Harvard turns out to have been Isaiah Bowman '05, president of the Johns Hopkins University and a former student of William Morris Davis. Bowman, who had just joined the Board of Overseers,

PHOTOGRAPH BY JANE REED

sat on Buck's ad hoc committee. As Neil Smith points out, he was a vigorous promoter of geography in the Federal government and elsewhere, yet as an Overseer he remained silent and stalled all efforts to get him to intervene on behalf of geography at Harvard. His abstention doomed the department.

Bowman's reasons were partly personal. He was hostile to Derwent Whittlesey. Years before, the young Whittlesey had offended him by declining an invitation to adapt Bowman's *The New World* for the high-school market. (Whittlesey's supposed homosexuality also seems to have offended the puritanical Bowman.) It didn't help that, independently of all this, former President Abbott Lawrence Lowell had allowed Alexander Hamilton Rice '98, M.D. '04, a grandiloquent, decoration-collecting gentleman explorer, to finance a professorial chair and an "Institute of Geographic Exploration" for himself (see opposite page). In the late forties Rice was still lecturing at the institute, commuting from Newport in a chauffeured Rolls Royce.

But as Smith notes, academic issues were even more important to Bowman. He believed that historical and political geography, divorced from physical geography, was unscientific. Its spread revealed the mediocrity of the new generation of geographers, including Harvard's. Bowman seems to have hoped that he could persuade Conant to reestablish geography at Harvard on a sounder basis. But when a committee was formed in 1949 to reconsider the status of geography, Bowman's published claims for the field were dismissed by one of its members—the historian Frederick Merk—as "digressive and diffuse and disjointed." As Smith puts it, "Bowman's silence condemned Harvard geography; his words provided nails for the coffin."

PRINCIPALS IN THE FALL OF GEOGRAPHY AT HARVARD

Derwent Whittlesey fought to expand geography and promote its human side. His defeat was unexpected and crushing.

Marland Billings, geologist and department chairman, was in favor of letting the geography program expire.

Overseer Isaiah Bowman, a self-styled champion of the field, kept mum when Harvard geographers needed him.

Provost Paul Buck, backed by President James Conant, overrode an ad hoc committee's vote and scuttled the department.

President Conant added insult to injury when he stated in a directive that "geography is not a university subject."

PHOTOGRAPH OF BILLINGS, GEOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF AMERICA; OTHERS, HARVARD UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

Harvard's decision to do away with geography points to a dilemma of research universities. They cannot do everything. Funds are limited, and were especially so in 1948. They must make hard choices. They must specialize. This has long been the central dogma of American academic administration. The *Harvard Alumni Bulletin* quoted approvingly from the 1947 commencement speech of President Ernest C. Colwell of the University of Chicago: "The time has passed when a university can succeed in becoming all things to all students."

This necessary truism is in fact a half-truth, avoiding the question of what is worth teaching, and where. If some programs are starved, dissolved, and cannibalized for the sake of others, there are value judgments at work, conscious or not. Balliol's Benjamin Jowett was lampooned as declaring "there's no knowledge but I know it." When President Conant pained Bowman, his brother captain of erudition, by declaring that geography was "not a university subject," he showed how easily pieties of specialization yield rationalizations of indifference.

Geographers lost at Harvard and elsewhere, as Smith shows, in part because they could not present Conant and others with a powerful and coherent definition of their discipline. But a field of study hardly needs a consensus to be viable. Historians, art historians, and literary scholars may be almost as divided now as geographers were in 1948, yet no one suggests banishing them from the academy. I think geography has a different set of problems.

The first is the curse of the phenomena: the need to teach the most elementary facts. Recently, a quarter of Dallas high-school seniors were unable to identify the country south of the U.S. border. A North Carolina survey of *college* students revealed, among other things, that "the Soviet Union lies between Panama and Nicaragua" and that "Africa is the only country in the Americas that is larger than the United States." Only about a third of the students could place the Seine in France, a quarter the Amazon in Brazil, a fifth the Ganges in India. Dublin appeared in Ohio, Vladivostok in Germany, and Lima in Italy.

This ignorance alarms American geographers. They know their discipline has less academic support here than in any other industrial country. But they also resent the lay assumption, perhaps secretly shared by some fellow academics, that the geographer is (in G.H.T. Kimble's words) "a dealer in terrestrial bric-a-brac, whose sole function is to provide other people with the answers to quiz questions." When President Conant told the young Harvard geographer Edward Ullman about his excellent elementary-school geography teacher who had taught him where all the rivers and mountains were, the

WHEN SCHOLARS WERE GENTLEMEN . . .

Indiana Jones he wasn't. Alexander Hamilton Rice '98, M.D. '04, was a proper Bostonian, named for a grandfather who had been mayor of the city and later governor of Massachusetts (1874-1876). The young Rice began his exploring as a College junior, accompanying a party "a short way" inside the Arctic Circle. He dropped in and out of medical school to travel around the world and mounted an expedition from Quito to the Amazon.

If Rice ever practiced medicine (apart from some World War I service) he never said much about it later. Rivers became his specialty instead. He knew headwaters the way other society folk know headwaiters. In his 25th-anniversary class report we learn that he had "[e]stablished Unilla and Hilla as the N. & S. sources respectively of the Caiari-Vaupés" in 1908; ascended Rio Incrida to its source in 1913 ("till then unknown"), then found the source of the Içana (ditto). His greatest exploit was being "lost" and "found" by the Boston press: EXPLORER RICE DENIES THAT HE WAS EATEN BY CANNIBALS, read one headline.

The expedition that led him to a Harvard chair was one not to the equatorial rain forest but to the dedication of Widener Library in 1915: Eleanor Elkins Widener, the donor, and Hamilton Rice discovered each other. Although he had resembled Beefsteak Charlie as a student, he must have swept her off her feet. President Lowell presented him with an honorary degree at the same Commencement—as "explorer of tropical America, who heard the wild call of nature and revealed her hiding-place." The faculty Memorial Minute would later note his height, "powerful build, broad shoulders, narrow hips, and long, thin legs. A boxer in college, he never lost the characteristic posture and walk . . . He had a vise-like grip. His physical and nervous energy were prodigious, and his aura of tension included all near him." The local newspapers had a field day again: DR. RICE TO WED TITANIC WIDOW.

HARVARD UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

Alexander Hamilton Rice: from the Arctic to the Amazon.

The Elkins and Widener fortunes—Eleanor left him $60 million on her death in 1937, when that was a lot of money—helped finance more exploring, Abercrombie class. It included another close carnivorous encounter on the upper Orinoco with what Rice, evidently an expert on such matters, termed "so-called white Indians." "Several casualties on the cannibals [sic] side," he wrote in his class report; Franz Boas he wasn't, either.

The Rices set up housekeeping in Eleanor's 65-room Newport cottage, Miramar. Eleanor failed to secure the presidency of the American Geographical Society (AGS) in New York for Hamilton despite a promise of a $1 million endowment, according to the geographer Neil Smith; perhaps fatefully for Harvard geography, the incumbent she proposed to oust was Isaiah Bowman (see main article).

Undaunted by AGS ingratitude, Rice established Harvard's Institute of Geographical Exploration with his wife's help in 1930-31. The Philadelphia society architect Horace Trumbauer, who had designed Widener Library, left stacks for 80,000 books and ample rooms for the best in shortwave radio, an excellent map collection, and the last word in surveying and cartographic equipment.

The title of Professor of Geographical Exploration was apparently a condition of his gift, and Rice lectured majestically on how to mount an expedition. Then in 1950 he took a pleasure trip to Europe and failed to meet his classes, which were cancelled. Two years later, piqued by the decline of geography at Harvard, he withdrew his support. Harvard closed his institute and took over the building, which was later occupied by the Harvard-Yenching Institute.

When Rice died in 1956 his biography was one of the longest in *Who's Who*, thanks to membership in "an exceptionally large number of military, medical and historical societies, and . . . medals and awards which are really too numerous to mention," as he had put it in his last class report. Who can say whether he really mapped 500,000 square miles of South America, as he claimed, or whether he bought his Harvard chair, as his many detractors in professional geography claimed?

Whatever the truth, he shows what was possible when the American mind was wide open and scholars were gentlemen. He started a school for "indigenis" children in the Amazon and raised half a million dollars for Francisco Franco. Well might his classmates quote from *As You Like It* in the 1938 reunion report:

> After a voyage, he hath strange places cramm'd
> With observation, the which he vents
> In mangled forms.

wounded Ullman replied (according to Thomas Glick): "We don't do rivers and mountains any more."

Most outreach to nongeographers has come from the lay-managed 10.5-million-member National Geographic Society; the professional American Geographical Society and Association of American Geographers have 1,300 and 5,700 members respectively. The Society has begun to share some of its $400-million budget with academic geography and to support its teaching in the schools. Yet Christopher L. Slater, the U.C.L.A. geographer who coordinates the National Geographic Society's Geographic Alliance Network for research geographers and high-school teachers, acknowledges that assistant professors who work with teachers "risk having to wear the scarlet E, for Education."

Geography's second problem, evident to geographers themselves, is confusion of boundaries. Even in its more academic origins, the magazine of the National Geographic Society was established to report on "the earth and everything on it." Geography is physical, biological, social, and humanistic, pure and applied. It mixes with geomorphology, meteorology, ecol-

ogy, political science, economics, history, sociology, urban studies, planning, psychology, and philosophy—among others.

Fearing partition, geographers sometimes dream of conquest. Thomas Glick points out that in the 1920s, Clark University phased out doctoral programs in chemistry, physics, and mathematics and combined *all* the others in its Graduate School of Geography. Geography, as its historians have observed, combines a lack of a central method with an equally strong conviction of its unity as a discipline. This makes it hard to start a department and easy to dissolve one, as Stanford (1962), Yale (late 1960s), and Michigan (1981) have done. A feature of the spring 1987 meeting of the Association of American Geographers, according to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, was a seminar for department chairmen "to find out what they could do to avoid finding their departments on a university hit list."

Isaiah Bowman's refusal to help his Harvard colleagues points to a third problem: "The tendency," as the historical geographer Carl Sauer put it in 1941, "to question not the competence, originality or significance of research that has been offered to us, but the admissibility of work because it may or may not satisfy a narrow definition of geography." Where does debate end and fratricide begin? Few subjects have displayed such a magnificent range of method and ideology, from nationalist geopoliticians like the German Albrecht Haushofer to visionary anarchists like the Russian Prince Peter Kropotkin and the Frenchman Elisée Reclus. Among the Johns Hopkins colleagues of the Cold Warrior Bowman was the McCarthyist target Owen Lattimore. Rugged individualism, like diffuse subject matter, makes for good reading but not for concerted action.

If geographers cannot agree on a satisfactory definition of their own subject, lay people shouldn't try. But is it necessary to define a subject to recognize that it is worth studying? Is there a generally accepted definition of philosophy, or for that matter, of art? Do the divisions of psychology make the whole field questionable? Do the conflicts of quantitative and interpretive sociology make that discipline unworthy of representation at Harvard? Would we gain by splitting history into retrospective political science, economics, and sociology?

The best defense of geography is not what it *is* but what it *does*. If geographers have distinctive techniques to contribute to a university, and these fit with its goals, there should be a place for them. In the years since Harvard abolished geography, the field has been more influential than most people suppose. The French *Annales* historians have captivated the English-speaking academic world in the last fifteen years; Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch were indebted to the historical geographer Paul Vidal de la Blanche. Traian Stoianovich has calculated the ratio of historical geography to social history in Fernand Braudel's *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* as five to one.

The 1955 Princeton symposium, *Man's Role in Changing the Face of the Earth*, of which the proceedings were published in two volumes by the University of Chicago Press, helped lay the foundations for a new generation of environmentalism. Meanwhile Gilbert F. White was transforming land-use planning with flood-plain management and other creative approaches to water and other environmental questions. Terence Glacken's *Traces on the Rhodian Shore* remains the standard history of early environmental thought.

Jean Gottmann's *Megalopolis* awakened America to the transformation, still in progress, of the Northeast Corridor. The work of Peter Gould, Reginald Golledge, and others on mental maps has shown planners the importance of perception. Donald W. Meinig's *Shaping of America* illuminates how empire worked in the eighteenth-century Atlantic. Yi-Fu Tuan's *Landscapes of Fear* analyzes the emotions we have attached to spaces.

Meanwhile the instruments of geography have been changing. Satellite maps, computer graphics, and high-speed microcomputers now make it possible for undergraduates to perform analyses and prepare maps and graphics that would once have taken hours of their professors' time.

Geography remains strong in the western part of this country. California high schools now have a geography requirement for graduation. John Noble Wilford has reported in the *New York Times* that there are now 6,000 to 7,000 undergraduate degrees awarded in geography each year, 750 masters, and 175 doctorates—all record levels. Geography majors are now offered at a quarter of American colleges and universities.

Harvard's fired junior faculty members went on to distinguished careers, and the 25 or so graduate students also seem to have done well. One of them, George Lewis, Ph.D. '56, now an emeritus professor at Boston University, remembers his teachers as "no phonies: real people interested in the field." Lewis also recalls meeting with a "flip" McGeorge Bundy, then Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, who received Lewis and other graduate students with his feet on his desk and assured them he would establish a geography department if they brought him "a few million bucks." Today the amount for a full department would have to be tens of millions, especially if Harvard were to seek the quality it would want. Could it be raised? I can't say, but Harvard has found endowments for an extraordinary variety of subjects.

In any case, it is possible to teach geography without starting a full department; geography lends itself to affiliation with other programs as few other fields do. Already John Stilgoe of the School of Design—a landscape historian rather than a geographer as such—has contributed to the field with his studies of the American vernacular landscape and of the "metropolitan corridor" formed by the railroads. Surely room could be made gradually for individual geographers, from America or overseas, in both natural and social sciences as funds were raised.

Even a single geographer might meet the need. At Princeton Julian Wolpert, who is Henry G. Bryant professor of geography, public affairs, and urban planning at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public Affairs, has shown that geography can thrive in alliance with related subjects. He reports that his undergraduate survey course is well subscribed and has led a number of students to pursue graduate work elsewhere.

The trend toward fewer and stronger departments, while necessary in some places, has gone too far in others. It has deprived Harvard of geographers' distinctive ways of analyzing and synthesizing information about the spaces we live in. It's time for the University to admit it was wrong and find a way to bring geography back. ▽

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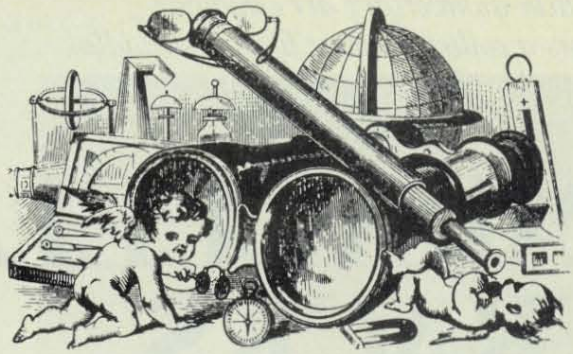
I See by the Globe . . .



An advertisement for an atlas I once read posed an interesting question as a test of the reader's grasp of geography. If a traveler went due east from Venice, what point would he reach on the Pacific coast? Well, I was not able to say, exactly, but it would have to be somewhere on the coast of China—south China. Would the reader like to have a go at it? The answer is:

MWVIPLMNABZDPBIQWVPOONOSPPTZXOVBK

You read every third letter to extract the name.

Incredible but true.

If I had been as unobservant as that about geographical relationships, what other surprises might the globe have to offer?

I began with my native city, Atlanta. It turned out that Atlanta, Georgia, is closer to Detroit, to Chicago, and to Keokuk, Iowa, than it is to Miami, Florida. Hardly a stupefying discovery, but a pleasant one. It is not that I have anything against Miami (and it is not that I haven't, either). It was a matter of gratification at the attestation to the size of the South.

There were others. Take North Carolina. If you rotated the state on its northeast corner it would reach to Boston—Boston, Massachusetts, not just Boston, Virginia. Or you could rotate it on its southwestern corner. In that case it would extend 160 miles past Boston—Boston, Indiana, that is—or all the way to Lake Michigan. Even unrotated, Virginia goes to extraordinary lengths. Would you have guessed that its western tip is 25 miles west of Detroit? Or that its northern is north of Atlantic City, New Jersey? Indeed, until Mr. Lincoln divided it in 1863, establishing the precedent for the division of Germany and Korea, it extended as far north as New York City. I must say I was astonished to find that even *West Virginia* does so.

The whole of Chesapeake Bay is north of Cairo, Illinois.

But the South goes far south, too. If you went due west from Beaufort, South Carolina, where would you hit the Pacific coast? I should have said around Los Angeles (which, as everyone knows, is east of Reno, Nevada, as San Diego is east of all but the thinnest sliver of Oregon and Washington). But no. Mexico.

And far west, too. If you went due north from Rome, Georgia, do you know in which Great Lake you would enter Canada? Superior—the westernmost.

But the Northeast has striking oddities. Consider Connecticut, a soundly New England state, even though the southwestern corner is a New Yorker's Sudetenland. Nevertheless, the entire state is south of northernmost Pennsylvania, a Middle Atlantic state. But that is not all. Also south of northernmost Pennsylvania is that *fons et origo* of Massachusetts, Cape Cod—the whole works.

Southernmost Canada is not only also south of northernmost Pennsylvania, it is within 138 miles of being as far south as the Mason-Dixon Line. (*Alors, Pepe!* Fetch ol' Mars a julep!)

New England is not only south of what you might think but also north of it. Most of Vermont and New Hampshire along with the top 110 miles of New York and virtually all Maine are north of Cape Sable, Nova Scotia.

Lovely surprises come about because of the eastward displacement of South America. By that I mean its displacement eastward from where it *ought* to be, from where we *picture* it.

It is common knowledge that the Atlantic end of the Panama Canal is west of the Pacific end, but not everyone is aware that the canal is due south of Charleston, South Carolina. Or that virtually the entire continent of South America is east of Savannah, Georgia. This has some queer consequences.

One is that Boston is nearer by sea to Rio de Janeiro than New Orleans is. "Aha," you exclaim, "he means Boston, Georgia, the Hub of Thomas County!" That, yes, but also Boston, Mass.

And—which may be equally surprising—Boston, England. Though a hundred miles north of London and the latitude of Labrador, it, too, is at least as near to Rio by sea as New Orleans is, within a few miles, anyhow.

I have saved my best till last. It is one you can bet on and clean up.

If you traveled in a straight line—that is, on the great-circle route—from Miami through Portland, Oregon, and continued on the same line out to sea, what would be the next land you would reach? You can afford to give lopsided odds on this. Almost no one allows for the size of the Pacific Ocean and for the earth's surface being spherical, not flat like the surface of a map. The Aleutian Islands, Siberia, Japan: those are the answers you can count on, in about that order of preference. The actual answer is:

APNIXSSNGERENCDOWADBVNHGIEW,
SPMEZABTREPKLDSEQZCLE

Again, please read every third letter, only this time from right to left.

Of course, to win money on the question now, you will have to consort with people who do not read this magazine. But perhaps it would be worth it if you set the stakes high enough. —*Charlton Ogburn*

Charlton Ogburn '32 is the author of many articles and books, including The Mysterious William Shakespeare, *published by Dodd, Mead and Company in 1984. He lives in South Carolina. "I See by the Globe" is reprinted from the October 1975 issue of this magazine.*