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## LAST ESSAYS

## GEOGRAPHY AND SOME EXPLORERS

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IT IS SAFE to say that for the majority of mankind the superiority of Geography over Geometry lies in the appeal of its figures. 5  
 It may be an effect of the incorrigible frivolity inherent in human nature, but most of us will agree that a map is more fascinating to look at than a figure in a treatise on conic sections – at any rate for the simple minds which are the equipment of the majority of the dwellers on this earth. 10

No doubt a trigonometrical survey may be a romantic undertaking, striding over deserts and leaping over valleys never before trodden by the foot of civilised man; but its accurate operations can never have for us the fascination of the first hazardous steps of a venturesome, often lonely explorer jotting down by the light of his campfire the thoughts, the impressions and the toil of his day. For a long time yet a few suggestive words grappling with things seen will have the advantage over a long array of precise no doubt interesting, and even profitable figures. The earth is a stage and though it may be an advantage, even to the right comprehension of the play, to know its exact configuration, it is always the drama of human endeavour that will be the thing, with a ruling passion expressed by outward action marching perhaps blindly to success or failure, which themselves are often undistinguishable from each other at first. Of all the sciences Geography finds its origin in action, and what is more, in adventurous action of the kind that appeals to sedentary people who like to dream of arduous adventure in the manner of prisoners dreaming behind their bars of all the hardships and hazards of liberty dear to the heart of man. 30

Descriptive Geography like any other kind of science has been built on the experience of certain phenomena and on experiments prompted by that unappeasable curiosity of men which their intelligence has elevated into a quite respectable passion for acquiring knowledge. Like other sciences it has fought its 35

way to truth through a long series of errors. It has suffered from the love of the marvellous, from our credulity, from rash and unwarrantable assumptions, from the play of unbridled fancy.

5 Geography had its phase of circumstantially extravagant speculation which had nothing to do with the pursuit of truth but has given us a curious glimpse of the mediæval mind playing in its ponderous childish way with the problems of our earth's shape, its size, its character, its products, its inhabitants. Cartography was almost as pictorial then, as some modern newspapers. It crowded  
10 its maps with pictures of strange pageants, strange trees, strange beasts, drawn with amazing precision in the midst of theoretically conceived continents. It delineated imaginary Kingdoms of Monomotapa and of Prester John, the regions infested by lions, haunted by unicorns, inhabited by men with reversed feet, or eyes  
15 in the middle of their breasts. All this might have been amusing if the mediæval gravity in the absurd had not been in itself a wearisome thing. But what of that! Has not the key science of modern chemistry passed through its dishonest phase of Alchemy (a portentous development of the confidence-trick) and our knowledge  
20 of the starry sky been arrived at through the superstitious idealism of Astrology looking for men's fate in the depths of the infinite! Mere megalomania on a colossal scale. Yet, for solemn fooling of the scientific order, I prefer the kind that does not lay itself out to thrive on the fears and the cupidities of men. From that point  
25 of view Geography is the most blameless of sciences. Its fabulous phase never aimed at cheating simple mortals (who are a multitude) out of their peace of mind or their money. At the most it has enticed some of them away from their homes, to death may be, now and then to a little disputed glory, not seldom to contumely,  
30 never to high fortune. The greatest of them all who has presented modern geography with a new world to work upon, was at one time loaded with chains and thrown into prison. Columbus remains a pathetic figure, not a sufferer in the cause of geography but a victim of the imperfections of jealous human hearts, accepting  
35 his fate with resignation. Among explorers he appears lofty in his troubles and like a man of a kingly nature. His contribution to the knowledge of the earth was certainly royal. And if the discovery of America was the occasion of the greatest outburst of reckless cruelty and greed known to history we may say this, at least, for it  
40 that the gold of Mexico and Peru unlike the gold of Alchemists

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was really there, palpable yet, as ever, the most elusive of the Fata Morgana that lure the men away from their homes, as a moment of reflexion will convince anyone. For nothing is more certain than that there will never be enough gold to go round, as the Conquistadors found out by experience.

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I suppose it is not very charitable of me but I must say that to this day I feel a malicious pleasure at the many disappointments of those pertinacious searchers for Eldorado, who climbed mountains, pushed through forests, swam rivers, floundered in bogs, without giving a single thought to the science of geography. Not for them the serene joys of scientific research but infinite toil in hunger, thirst, sickness, battle; with broken heads, unseemly squabbles, and empty pockets in the end. I cannot help thinking it served them right. It is an ugly tale which has not much to do with the service of geography. The geographical knowledge of our day is of the kind that would have been beyond the conception of the hardy followers of Cortez and Pizarro; and of that most estimable of Conquerors who was called Cabeza de Vaca, who was high-minded and dealt humanely with the heathen nations whose territories he traversed in search of one more Eldorado. It is said they loved him greatly; but now the very memory of those nations is gone from the earth, while their territories, which they could not take with them, are being traversed many times every twenty-four hours by the trains of the Southern Pacific Railroad.

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The discovery of the New World marks the end of the fabulous geography, and it must be owned that the history of the Conquest contains at least one great moment – I mean a geographical great moment – when Vasco Núñez de Balboa, while crossing the Isthmus of Panama, set his eyes for the first time on the ocean the immensity of which he did not suspect, and which in his elation he named the Pacific. It is anything but that; but the privileged Conquistador can not be blamed, for surrendering to his first impression. The Gulf of Panama which is what he really saw with that first glance is one of the calmest spots on the waters of the globe. Too calm. The old navigators dreaded it as a dangerous region where one might be caught and lie becalmed for weeks with one's crew dying slowly of thirst under a cloudless sky. The worst of fates, this, to feel yourself die in a long and helpless agony. How much preferable a region of storms where man and ship can at least put up a fight and remain defiant almost to the last. I must

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not be understood to mean that a tempest at sea is a delightful experience, but I would rather face the fiercest tempest than a gulf pacific even to deadliness, a prison-house for incautious caravels and a place of torture for their crews. But Balboa was charmed  
5 with its serene aspect. He did not know where he was. He probably thought himself within a stone's throw, as it were, of the Indies and Cathay. Or did he perhaps like a man touched with grace, have a moment of exalted vision, the awed feeling that what he was looking at was an abyss of waters, comparable in its extent to  
10 the view of the unfathomable firmament, and sown all over with groups of islands resembling the constellations of the sky?

But whatever spiritual glimpse of the truth he might have had, Balboa could not possibly know that this great moment of his life had added suddenly thousands of miles to the circumference of  
15 the globe, had opened an immense theatre for the human drama of adventure and exploration, a field for the missionary labours of, mainly, Protestant churches, and spread an enormous canvas on which arm-chair geographers could paint the most fanciful variants of their pet theory of a great southern continent. I will  
20 not quarrel with the old post-Columbian cartographers for their wild but on the whole interesting inventions. The provocation to let oneself go was considerable. Geography militant, which had succeeded geography fabulous, did not seem able to accept the idea that there was much more water than land on this globe.  
25 Nothing would satisfy their sense of the fitness of things but an enormous extent of solid earth which they placed in that region of the South, where, as a matter of fact, the great white-crested seas of stormy latitudes will be free to chase each other all round the globe to the end of time. I suppose, their landsmen's temperament stood  
30 in the way of their recognition that the world of geography, so far as the apportioning of space goes, seems to have been planned mostly for the convenience of fishes.

What is surprising to me is that the seamen of the time should have really believed that the large continents to the north of  
35 the equator, demanded as a matter of good art or else of sound science, to be balanced by corresponding masses of land in the southern hemisphere. They were simple souls. The chorus of arm chair people all singing the same tune made them blind to the many plain signs of a great open sea. Every bit of coast line dis-  
40 covered, every mountain top glimpsed in the distance, had to be

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dragged loyally into the scheme of the Terra Australis Incognita. Even Tasman, the best seaman of them all before James Cook, the most accomplished of seventeenth century explorers and navigators, that went forth to settle the geography of the Pacific – even Tasman after coming unexpectedly upon the North Island of New Zealand, and lingering long enough there to chart roughly a bit of the coast line and lose a boat’s crew in a sudden affray with the Maoris, seemed to take it for granted that this was the western limit of an enormous continent extending away towards the point of South America. Mighty is the power of a theory, especially if based on such a commonsense notion as the balance of continents. And it must be remembered that it is difficult for us now to realize not only the navigational dangers of unknown seas but the awful geographical incertitudes of the first explorers in that new world of waters.

Tasman’s journal (which was published not a very long time ago) gives us some idea of their perplexing difficulties. The early navigators had had no means of ascertaining their exact position on the globe. They could calculate their latitudes but the problem of longitude was a matter which bewildered their minds and often falsified their judgment. It had to be a matter of pure guess work. Tasman and his officers when they met on board the *Heemskerck* anchored in Murderers’ Bay, to consider their further course in the light of their instructions, did not know where any of the problematic places named in their instructions were, neither did they know where they themselves were. Tasman might have sailed north or east, but in the end he decided to sail between the two, and, circling about, returned to Batavia where he was received coldly by his employers the Honorable Governor General and the Council in Batavia. Their final judgment was that Abel Tasman was a skilful navigator but that he had shown himself “remiss” in his investigations, and that he had been guilty of leaving certain problems unsolved.

We are told that Tasman did not expect this arm-chair criticism; and indeed, even now, it seems surprising to an unprejudiced mind. It was the voyage during which, amongst other things, Tasman discovered the island by which his name lives on the charts, took first contact with New Zealand (which was not seen again till 130 years afterwards), sailed over many thousands of miles of uncharted seas bringing with him a journal which was of

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much value afterwards for his exploring successors. It may be he was hurt by the verdict of the Honorable Council but he does not seem to have been cast down by it, for it appears that shortly afterward he asked for a rise of salary – and, what is still more significant, he got it. He was obviously a valuable servant but I am sorry to say that his character as a man was not of the kind to cause Governors and Councils to treat him with particular consideration. Except in professional achievement he is not comparable to Captain Cook, a humble son of the soil, like himself but a modest man of genius, the familiar associate of the most learned in the land, medallist of the Royal Society and a captain in the Royal Navy. But there was a taint of an unscrupulous adventurer in Tasman. It is certain that at various times his patron the governor Anthony van Diemen and the Honourable Council in Batavia had employed him in some shady transactions connected with the Japan trade. There is also no doubt that, once, he had on his own responsibility, kidnapped an influential Chinaman who stood in the way of some business negotiation Tasman was conducting with the Sultan of Acheen. The Chinaman may have been a worthless person but one wonders what happened to him in the end, and, in any case, the proceeding is open to criticism. Then in his old age he got into some disreputable scrape which caused the congregation with which he worshipped to ask him to resign his membership. Even the Honourable Council was startled, and dismissed him from their employment though characteristically enough not actually from their service. The action of the Council fixes the character of the man better than any scandalous story. He was valuable but compromising. All these regrettable details came to my knowledge quite recently in a very amusing and interesting book, but I must confess that my early admiration for Tasman as one of the early fathers of militant geography has not been affected very much by it. Remiss or not he had in the course of his voyages mapped 8000 miles of an island which by common consent is called now a continent – a, geologically, very old continent indeed, but now the home of a very young Commonwealth with all the possibilities of material and intellectual splendour still hidden in its future. I like to think that in that portion of the Elysian Fields set apart for great navigators James Cook would not refuse to acknowledge the civilities of Abel Tasman, a fellow seaman who had first reported the existence of New Zealand in the perplexed bewildered way of

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those times, 130 years before Captain Cook on his second voyage laid for ever the ghost of Terra Australis Incognita and added New Zealand to the scientific domain of the geography triumphant of our day.

No shadow of remissness or doubtful motive rests upon the achievement of Captain Cook who came out of a labourer's cottage to take his place at the head of the masters of maritime exploration, who worked at the great geographical problem of the Pacific. *Endeavour* was the name of the ship of his first voyage, and it was also the watchword of his professional life. *Resolution* was the name of the ship he commanded himself on his second expedition; and it was the determining quality of his soul. I will not say that it was the greatest, because he had all the other manly qualities of a great man. The voyages of the early explorers were prompted by an acquisitive spirit, the idea of lucre in some form, the desire of trade, or the desire of loot, disguised in more or less fine words. But Cook's three voyages were free from any taint of that sort. His aims needed no disguise; they were scientific. His deeds speak for themselves with the masterly simplicity of a hard-won success. In that respect he seems to belong to the single-minded explorers of the nineteenth century, the late Fathers of Militant Geography whose only object was the search for truth. Geography is a science of facts and they devoted themselves to the discovery of facts in the configuration and features of the main continents.

It was a century of landmen investigators. In saying this I do not forget the Polar Explorers whose aims were certainly as pure as the air of those high latitudes where not a few of them laid down their lives for the advancement of Geography. Seamen, men of science, it is difficult to speak of them without admiring emotion. The dominating figure amongst the seamen explorers of the first half of the nineteenth century is that of another good man Sir John Franklin whose fame rests not only on the extent of his discoveries but on professional prestige and high personal character. This great navigator, who never returned home, served geography even in his death. The persistent efforts extending over ten years to ascertain his fate advanced greatly our knowledge of the Polar Regions.

As gradually revealed to the world his fate appeared the more tragic in this, that for the first two years the way of the *Erebus*



and *Terror* expedition seemed to be the way to the desired and important success, while in truth it was all the time the way of death, the end of the darkest drama perhaps played behind the curtain of Arctic mystery. The last words unveiling the mystery of the *Erebus* and *Terror* expedition were brought home and disclosed to the world by Sir Leopold M'Clintock in his book *The Voyage of the Fox in the Arctic Seas*. It is a little book but it records with manly simplicity the tragic ending of a great tale. It so happened that I was born in the year of its publication. Therefore, I may be excused for not getting hold of it till ten years afterwards. I can only account for it falling into my hands by the fact that the fate of Sir John Franklin was a matter of European interest, and that Sir Leopold M'Clintock's book was translated I believe into every language of the white races. My copy was probably in French. But I have read the work many times since. I have now on my shelves a copy of a popular edition got up exactly as I remember my first one. It contains the touching facsimile of a printed form filled in with a summary record of the two ships, with the name of "Sir John Franklin commanding the expedition" and written in ink, and the pathetic underlined entry "*All well.*" It was found by Sir Leopold M'Clintock under a cairn and it is dated just a year before the two ships had to be abandoned in their deadly ice-trap and their crews' long and desperate struggle for life began. There could hardly have been imagined a better book to let in the breath of the stern romance of Polar exploration into the existence of a boy whose knowledge of the Poles of the earth had been till then of an abstract formal kind as the mere imaginary ends of the imaginary axis upon which the earth turns. The great spirit of the realities of the story sent me off on romantic explorations of my inner self; to the discovery of the taste for poring over maps; revealed to me the existence of a latent devotion to geography which interfered with my devotion, such as it was, to my other school-work. Unfortunately the marks awarded for that subject were almost as few as the hours apportioned to it in the school curriculum by persons of no romantic sense for the real, ignorant of the great possibilities of active life; with no desire for struggle, no notion of the wide spaces of the world – mere bored professors in fact, who were not only middle-aged but looked to me as if they had never been young. And their geography was very much like themselves, a bloodless thing with a dry skin covering

a repulsive armature of uninteresting bones. I would be ashamed of my warmth in digging up a hatchet which has been buried now for nearly fifty years if those fellows had not tried so often to take my scalp at the yearly exams. There are things that one does not forget. And besides the geography which I had discovered for myself was the Geography of open spaces and wide horizons built up on men's devoted work in the open air, the old Geography, still militant but already conscious of its approaching end with the death of the last great explorer. The antagonism was radical. Thus it happened that I got no marks at all for my first and only paper on Arctic geography, which I wrote at the age of thirteen. I still think that for my tender years it was an erudite performance. I certainly did know something of Arctic geography, but what I was after really, I suppose, was the history of Arctic exploration. My knowledge had considerable gaps, but I had managed to compress my enthusiasm into just two pages, which in itself was a sort of merit. Yet I got no marks. For one thing it was not a "set subject". I believe the only comment made about it to my private tutor was that I seemed to have been wasting my time on reading books of travel instead of attending to my studies. I tell you those fellows were always trying to take my scalp. On another occasion I just saved it by proficiency in map-drawing. It must have been good, I suppose; but all I remember about it is that it was done in a loving spirit.

I have no doubt that star-gazing is a fine occupation, for it leads you within the borders of the unattainable. But map-gazing, to which I became addicted so early, brings the problems of the great spaces of the earth into stimulating and directive contact with sane curiosity and gives an honest precision to one's imaginative faculty. And the honest maps of the nineteenth century nourished in me a passionate interest in the truth of geographical facts and the desire for precise knowledge which was extended later to other subjects.

For a change had come over the spirit of cartographers. From the middle of the eighteenth century on, the business of map-making had been growing into an honest occupation registering the hard won knowledge but also in a scientific spirit recording the geographical ignorance of its time. And it was Africa, the continent out of which the Romans used to say "some new thing was always coming" that got cleared of the dull imaginary wonders