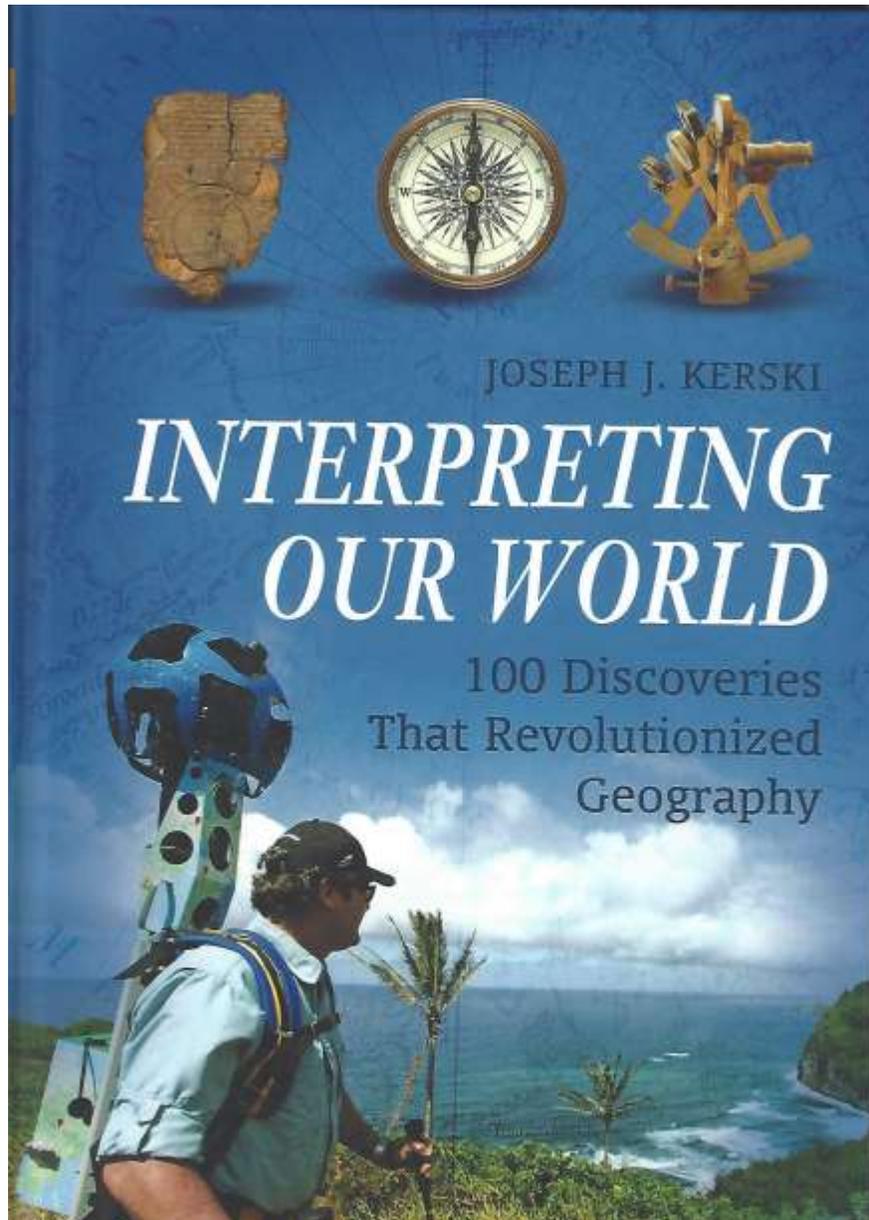


## **Interpreting Our World–100 Discoveries That Revolutionized Geography**



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Joseph Kerski, one of ESRI's education managers, has recently authored a book that is very obviously based on his personal enthusiasm as a geographer, who is tremendously proud of his profession. The book's title, *Interpreting Our World – 100 Discoveries That Revolutionized Geography*, addresses the idea that a broad range of different events at different times pushed forward the subject of geography – by geographers (in the broader sense), who interpreted these events and made meaning of them using and developing methods of geography. Therefore, the book mainly tells the coherent narration of how geographers have helped to improve the world. More or less, a story of success of geography is told, a song of praise for the geographers' profession and abilities that bring benefits to everyday life.

Nevertheless, the heading of the book, which refers to '100 Discoveries', is not a fully consistent phrase. When taking a closer look at the naming of the chapters, they come up as lexicon entries: these are not only discoveries, or, a bit more generally, events, but they are also named after people, institutions, technical objects, procedures, general geographical topics, and so on. Even if many people mentioned in the book were discoverers, the term discovery cannot be meant in a traditional sense, since among the one hundred there are also innovations (whereas we may discuss whether it is possible to discover an innovative idea) and events which just happen without the scientific intention of discovering (e.g. → War). So, we can leave this idea to discoveries *the reader can make while reading*, which is really a nice reference to how to open up a field for someone, and appropriate for an author whose work is generally dedicated to education.

Leaving this not explicitly solved question of the definition of "discoveries" as it is, indeed, as the title says, the book mainly consists of one hundred entries in an encyclopedic style from A to Z, accompanied by an introduction, a few maps that geolocate the entries, and a timeline referring to a selection of the events mentioned in the book. The entries are supplemented with text boxes, each of these presenting a kind of entry within a lexicon entry.

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## Defining Geography

One of the entries of this book is titled 'Defining Geography'. It illustrates a meta-perspective on the historic to nowadays struggle to handle such an interdisciplinary subject. Although the author does not open up the field for further discussion, the whole book is – intended or unintended – an attempt to define geography by outlining aspects that are important to the subject and its development. However, this causes problems when combining the scientific complexity of the discipline with the more applied and even popular approach the author uses.

The phrase 'seeing the world as it truly is' (p.92 → Earth in Space) still might be regarded as romantic exclamation, but a few other thoughts already in the introduction reveal a rather traditional picture of geography: 'Geographers see the world as an 'arena' where 'place and space' provide the context within which events, behaviors, and decision making occurs' (pp. xii-xiii). This reminds us of traditional container spaces (Wardenga 2002) instead of spaces socially and ambiguously constructed by human action (Paasi 1986; Werlen 1993). 'Cause-and-effect relationships' (p. xiii) furthermore ignore the contingency in complex systems that, for instance, political ecology describes (Blaikie 1995). In sum, contemporary social geography is hardly considered (despite in an entry on → Topophilia and Bradley Garrett concerning certain constructivist ideas), while approaches of spatial thinking (NRC 2006) dominate. This orientation might be explained with the author's professional background in GI technology and not in the social realm. At least, knowing his field, he quotes Pickles (1995) and his contributions to Critical GIScience as a linkage of technology and social geography. But when, for instance, the term → Time is defined, a very detailed, sophisticated portrayal of time measurement as technological challenge is provided, but there is hardly any references to classical time geography (Hägerstrand 1970) or to influential socio-geographic thoughts on time and space (Massey 1998).

## Selecting 100 Entries

One of the most complicated tasks writing this book must have been the selection of 100 entries. The author states that he waives a ranking, but still the selection is a process of appraisal. As already outlined, the entries refer not only to discoveries or, at least, events, but also to persons, inventions, and other topics. On this, the book does not state comprehensibly how the selection has been conducted. As there are some inconsistencies, it may be assumed that the author's personal interests, his knowledge and expertise, and the social/contextual/professional discourses he belongs to might have played the leading role. Consequently, the result is a very personal book, an intimate view on geography.

To open this up, a table is provided that sorts the entries concerning readers' potential interests. This is a nice idea for orientation, but the categorization seems to have strong limitations: While Walter Christaller is listed into 'Ways of Thinking'; Carl Sauer is an 'Innovative Geographer' (p. xviii). Therefore, we may ask ironically whether Christaller

was not innovative it all – which was probably not the author’s intention. The category ‘Maps’ is, again, a reference to the author’s concepts and interests as GI scientist.

One of the strengths is that the book’s subjective view brings up very interesting aspects that – of course – also have influences on everyday geographies, such as engineers (→ Brunel), architects (→ Burnham), and institutions (→ Geographical Departments, → Geographical Associations, → National Mapping Agencies). However, a partly unbalanced selection is obvious: Contemporary entries are often technology driven (→ Unmanned Aerial Vehicles) rather than inspired by social science.

The text boxes function as a kind of extension to the entries: A related term is explained, e.g. an event, an invention, or a person, which allows more flexibility. Here, some partly surprising but, in their part of the big game, influential aspects such as → The Shipping Container and → The Great Auk find their place. Some persons who have no entry of their own are considered here. The boxes also function as an instrument to encourage cross-linking, which is also provided throughout the text. Nevertheless, a visual network of the entries (granted, not a standard in an encyclopedia, but visualization is one of the strengths of GI scientists, c.f. MacEachren 1995) would have brought much more added value. Finally, again, we have to ask how the terms heading the text boxes were selected since there is no further explanation about that.

### **The Role of Persons for Geography**

The narration of the geographer, who provides a mainly positive role model, is often told within this book. When basing narrations about big ideas on persons, the problem is, as the author mentions himself, that others who also contributed are missed, and that historical fame and appraisal is often a question of fortune. So, Talbert Abrams’ spouse, supporting the field as well, remains nameless, while her husband became the ‘father of aerial photography’ (p. xiii). Kerski clearly sees this problem, since in the introduction he mentions many more names beyond the entries who have contributed to the field of geography, and among them many women, but he does not explain why he gave preference to these he chose (p. xiv). Without further explanation, a few more persons are highlighted in the text boxes. For instance, Jack Dangermond receives this honor, which is partly a little advertisement for ESRI from one of their education managers, but is, concerning the importance of the field, coherent with the book’s intention.

Nonetheless, as the author does not open up his selection criteria, one may assume, again, that selection has been relatively intuitive. Instead of arguing that women are under-represented among people of historical importance due to their marginalized position society gave them, and that this might be the reason for so few female names among the entries, he leaves his enumeration of female geographers as it is. Finally, he seeks to find common characteristics of the people chosen, opening the field to a heroic attitude, which is only partly differentiated from time to time (→ Columbus).

### **Centrism and colonialism**

It is obvious that the author tries hard to avoid a solely Western-centered view when selecting the entries; for instance, he mentions Arab and Eastern geographers (→ Al Jahiz, → Zheng He).

Nearly stereotypical for a GI manager, he situates all entries in maps, one for each part of the world. Apart from the fact, that most entries are located in Europe and Northern America, one may ask if we really want to geolocalize entries such as → Social Media or → High-Resolution Mapping (by the way, the latter is located in Mesopotamia, nowadays Iraq). In short, mapping the entries of this book does not bring many advantages as the phenomena mentioned change over time and cover multiple facets that may be located in many more points and/or areas than one single dot on the map can show.

Back to the question of centrism, one can say that the book is clearly US-centered, oriented at and produced for the US market. Many detailed examples from the US (e.g. → Geographical Societies, → Land Protection, and box: The 1900 Galvestone Hurricane, iconic pictures of US landscape and architecture such as the Golden Gate Bridge) are supplemented with a few examples from elsewhere. Concerning people, to a certain degree an old-world-new-world selection takes place: Often Europeans from its older history and US-situated persons from the newer history are chosen. However, this is mainly a result of a publicly seldom challenged Western and US practice of historiography (Melber 2010).

In effect, from time to time a surely unintended but colonial attitude comes through. While Said (cited in Schlögel 2006) clearly criticizes the colonial appropriation of space of the → Great Trigonometric Survey in India, the author's critique is much more indulged – 'The surveyors required, therefore, extraordinary tact, firmness, and patience in order to negotiate their goodwill and safe passage (...)' (p. 142) – reproducing the story of the wise and reflected discoverer; but, at least, it is mentioned: "The survey of India was controversial – many of the region's people knew that mapping the country was a precursor to dominating it (...)" (pp. 143-4).

### **Formal Aspects**

As outlined, this book is a rather personal, popular piece of work, so that it is only logical not to apply the standards of scientific writing, for instance concerning the naming of sources within the text. Most of the very few sources explicitly given in the text are listed in the reference list at the end of the book, as are the useful further reading hints at the end of each entry. Unfortunately, the author (or the lector) allows himself some minor omissions of forgotten references that appear in the text and not in the references and vice versa.

### **Aims of the Book**

Finally, one may ask, for whom this book is written. The popular character is intended: The author particularly underlines the idea that a reader, working as geography professional in higher education, can select entries from the book to give to his students (pp. xvii-xviii).

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As an educator, the author even provides tasks to ask them, for instance ranking the importance of chosen entries for the subject and discussing these rankings critically, or doing further research with external resources on selected topics.

Another aim explicitly mentioned is that this book shall show that geography is a ‘high-tech field’ (p. xviii), which is clearly one of the author’s interests, and, besides, reality concerning the subject and everyday geographies. Indeed, the term ‘Internet of Things’ appears distinctly more often in the book than ‘globalization’ (which has in contrast no entry of its own). However, the strong historical focus of the book may partly cover this message of technological progress.

With an encyclopedic character that might suggest completeness, and at the same time limited to about 400 pages, this book must be a selection and must often remain at the surface (e.g. when mentioning words such as gentrification). Thus, the educational character the author suggests is appropriate, particularly when a focus on history is desired, as the educator still has the chance to enrich the material provided with further perspectives on the enormously broad and complex subject of geography.

### **Summary**

The author’s desire to promote the subject of geography based on his own interests and enthusiasm is obvious throughout the whole book, and it is that which makes it so readable, accessible, and enjoyable. The work is clearly influenced by an interest in history (c.f. all the pictures of historical places the author personally took) and contemporary geospatial technologies. Kerski always tries hard to find a balance between popular insights into the scientific subject, applied geography and everyday practices to underline the importance of geography. At this, he maintains an often optimistic world view, inspired by his very own fascination. Notwithstanding, he mentions several controversies such as privacy issues, climate change and ambiguities of historical persons (e.g. → Columbus). However, their complexity is not examined deeply and many problems are not mentioned, for instance, land grabbing when it comes to → Agriculture. Concerning the subject, the author is careful enough to mention critical tendencies within the subject, as another benefit of geography. A critical perspective on the subject (the meta-perspective he asks for as an educator), moreover, seems to fall short compared to the will to delight.

When the reader is aware of the limitations of this book, not to misunderstand it as work on geography but rather appreciate it as a personal, occasionally inspiring perspective on geography, the reading will be pleasant and educational. Beside the formal educational purpose, another usage is imaginable: as a (less-visual) but more content-oriented coffee table book in a very positive sense of the word, something that – close at hand – one can enjoy in calm minutes of reading, a book which allows subjective journeys to the fascinating world and history of geography.

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