This is a book about the Enlightenment understood geographically. Historians, literary scholars, and others have debated its “what,” “when,” and “why.” Until now, relatively little attention has been paid to the “where” of the Enlightenment. This book aims to correct that by offering an account of the Enlightenment as a geographical phenomenon.

Admitting that the Enlightenment is a topic of enormous significance commanding the attention of many disciplines, scholars do not agree on its definition or its significance. Neither, as it happens, did eighteenth-century contemporaries. Even so, the Enlightenment is commonly thought of as a historical phenomenon, a matter of ideas, and is as commonly examined at the national scale—the French Enlightenment, the Enlightenment in America, and so on. Recent work from a variety of quarters has challenged such thinking and begun to consider the Enlightenment as geographical in several respects. Geographers have traced connections among the Enlightenment, the practices of geographical knowledge, and the nature of Enlightenment geography. Historians have sought to understand the Enlightenment “above national context” and have explored questions of Enlightenment sociability. Historians of science have recognized the geographical nature of the sciences in the Enlightenment. Literary researchers have pointed to the key role of travel and of translation in making the Enlightenment “move,” in “mediating” the Enlightenment in different social communities.

This book is an attempt to bring these and other ideas together. It is, in one sense, a synthesis of existing work, one in which I have relied on the work of modern others in a variety of disciplines as well as on texts and other works produced in the Enlightenment. In another sense, it is an argument, a proposal that to think about the Enlightenment not simply as
an intellectual movement and moment in time but as something that hap-
pened in place and over space is to enlarge our understanding of it and to be
more faithful to the nature of its making. The focus in what follows is with
material in the natural and human sciences, with relatively little being said
about literature, religion, and politics as central features of the Enlighten-
ment. But I contend that my arguments about the geographical nature of
the Enlightenment extend to these aspects of the intellectual dimensions of
the Enlightenment just as much as they do to the sciences.

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