Harm J. de Blij's 1983 *Wine: A Geographic Appreciation*
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What is This?
Abstract
Harm de Blij was one of the most influential scholars in the field of geography. Few modern geographers have accomplished more to advance a public appreciation for the field. He was known primarily for his work in geopolitics, regional geography, and environmental geography, and he published well over 100 articles and books on these subjects. He was also known for his love of fine wine. In 1983, de Blij published *Wine: A Geographic Appreciation*, a groundbreaking book and bestseller, which, in part, set the stage for the study of the geography of wine and viticulture. This paper examines de Blij’s 1983 tome, including a brief examination of the political, economic, and cultural elements of wine geography followed by a focused discussion of the book’s influence on the physical geography of viticulture. Ultimately, this paper considers the impact and legacy of *Wine: A Geographic Appreciation*, a classic in physical geography, as the subfield of wine geography continues to develop.

Keywords
de Blij, terroir, viticulture, wine, wine geography

I Introduction
1 The book

Harm de Blij begins his groundbreaking text, *Wine: A Geographic Appreciation*, with this explanation:

Viticulture (the growing of grapes) is perhaps the most geographically expressive of all agricultural industries. Not only does it involve considerations of climate and soil, and availability of water and the threat of disease, local and regional methods of cultivating the vine, and widely varying harvesting practices; the geography of viticulture also extends to the development of distinct cultural landscapes, the perpetuation of regional traditions and preferences, processes of diffusion, market competition, and even political issues. Viticulture and viniculture (the making of wine) can be studied from many viewpoints, but none provides the particular spatial perspective, so essential to both endeavors, as effectively as does geography. (de Blij, 1983: 1)

He continues (pp. 1–2), noting that ‘choosing a bottle of wine is best done with some knowledge of region and place of origin, system of classification, and environmental conditions during the...
year of production. All three of these specifics are fundamentally geographic.’ De Blij’s foundational work on the geography of wine, as noted on its book jacket, filled a niche at the time, providing an ‘unusual’ and clearly geographical (read: holistic) perspective on wine and winemaking at the time. With chapters ranging from the historical geography of wine to politics, economics, and the opportunities and challenges of physical geography related to viticulture, to the cultural landscapes of wine, de Blij’s work is comprehensive; considering wine grapes and wine production broadly and outlining wine producing regions around the world and contemporary vintages for the time.

2 The author

Harm de Blij (Figure 1), passed away on 25 March 2014 at the age of 78. He was one of the most influential scholars in the field of geography and for almost 60 years actively shared his passion for the field with his colleagues, students, politicians, and the general public. De Blij was a genuine student of the world. He was born in the Netherlands and completed much of his primary education in Europe, some during the Second World War (Michigan State University, 2014). He received his BS degree (Geology and Geography) from University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 1955, and his MA and PhD from Northwestern in 1959. He was a faculty member at both Michigan State (Hannah Distinguished Professor) and the University of Miami, and also taught at Georgetown, Colorado, Hawaii, the Colorado School of Mines, George Washington University, and Marshall University (Michigan State University, 2014). Later in his career, de Blij was awarded five honorary doctorates for his scholarly work from North Carolina State University (2001), Grand Valley State University (2001), Michigan State University (1999), Rhode Island College (1995), and Marshall University (1991).

De Blij was a holistic and integrative geographer known mostly for his work in geopolitics, regional geography, and environmental geography. He was a prolific writer, having authored, co-authored, and/or edited over 30 books and well over 100 peer-reviewed publications, but he is perhaps best known for his publications that examined the geography of current events, including the books The Power of Place (de Blij, 2008) and Why Geography Matters (de Blij, 2012). De Blij also co-authored several textbooks used in geography classrooms all over the United States, including Geography: Realms, Regions and Concepts (de Blij et al., 2012), now in its 15th edition, and Physical Geography: The Global Environment (de Blij et al., 2013).

3 Purpose of the paper

De Blij was also known for his love and appreciation of fine wine. He was an expert in...
oenology (the science of wine) and viticulture (growing of grapes) and an ardent collector of wine, and he published at least 15 articles and four books on the subject. His were not the first scholarly works on the geography of viticulture, but it was shortly after their publication that scholarship in the subfield intensified.

In 1981, de Blij published *The Geography of Viticulture*, a book publication of the Miami Geographical Society. Two years later, he published *Wine: A Geographic Appreciation*, which focused specifically on the geography of wine and viticulture. It was a bestseller during the 1980s and was awarded a medal by the International Organization of Wine and Vine (OIV) in Paris.

De Blij (1983: 3) noted that the main foci of geography include physical as well as human dimensions, a spatial orientation, a ‘focus on the natural environment, its attention to human-land interactions, and its concern with the character of regions’. As such, ‘viticulture and viniculture hold special geographic interest; the production of wine – its successes as well as failures – raises the kinds of questions that demand geographic solutions’ (p. 3). De Blij saw the geography of wine as fundamentally encompassing both physical and cultural elements, and he structured his book on the topic similarly.

The book included an assortment of maps showing both the diffusion of viticulture and the distribution of viticultural regions throughout the world. Each chapter focused on a different aspect of geography as it relates to wine and viticulture, including chapters on political, cultural, historical, economic, and physical geographic aspects. Each chapter included a number of regional examples as illustrations of each topic.

De Blij’s early 1980s publications on the geography of wine and viticulture accomplished a number of things: provided wine geographers with a framework for study (Dickenson, 1990); helped to fill a gap in the research on the many physiographic factors that come into play that may cause differences in wines produced from different regions (Kohn, 1984); and, in the process, legitimized wine and viticulture geography. This paper reflects on the contribution of his book to the subfield of wine and viticulture geography. After a brief discussion of the political, economic, and cultural elements of wine geography, the remainder of the paper focuses on the physical geography of viticulture and considers the legacy of *Wine: A Geographic Appreciation* as the field continues to develop.

## II Dimensions of wine geography

Geography straddles physical and human worlds, regional and systematic viewpoints; viticulture and viniculture succeed where human skills, talents, and initiatives exploit the opportunities offered by nature and physiographic environments. Geography and wine: A fruitful alliance! (de Blij, 1983: 7)

### I Political, economic, and cultural geographies of wine

De Blij (1983) presents wine and viticulture as an essential part of cultural development and religion in the three millennia prior to the Common Era both regionally and globally (p. 41). Wine has remained present and significant in agriculture, trade, and development ever since. Although wine played a mainly religious role for some time, its recreational and economic potential were soon tapped. For example, ‘in South Africa, vines were planted under the aegis of the Dutch East India Company’ with the purpose of ‘commerce, not ceremony’ (p. 70). Just as the imperial (and colonial) enterprise shaped landscapes and cultures more broadly (Burbank and Cooper, 2010), this was also true in relation to wine.

The linkages between geopolitics, agriculture, and economics are not discreet. ‘Geopolitics made some wine industries and broke others. Changing preferences of distant markets transformed local landscapes’ (de Blij, 1983: 53). For example, preferential tariffs by one imperial power to support domestic consumption during times of political unrest in another (i.e. the British
response to the French Revolution) could lead to changes in production or agricultural emphasis in peripheral regions (in this case, the Cape of South Africa) (p. 71). The implications of such situations can be vast, encompassing political, economic, and environmental elements.

Wine and politics (and environment) are enmeshed in other ways as well, especially in relation to regulation of the quality and geographic source of wine grapes (entailing detailed and varying systems of appellations across countries), the use of particular descriptors or names for the wines they produce (for example ‘Champagne’), and when it concerns import/export relations of the final product (de Blij, 1983). ‘Wine legislation...creates its own political geography...the world map of viticulture carries the imprints of current, recent, as well as historic political intervention’, including patterns of land fragmentation, land use, and economic relations (p. 133).

Preferences and traditions for wine production and wine grape growing have proved to be extremely durable. Even as cultural groups migrate, they bring with them their preferences for certain types of grapes and wine styles, preferred processing models, and wine-related aesthetics (p. 44). For example, de Blij describes how settlers and in-migrants to various areas of the United States brought with them their preferred grape varieties and tried to recreate the (cultural, aesthetic, agricultural) landscapes they had left using similar growing and production styles. This pattern had occurred in many areas where emigrants introduced (or further developed) wine grape growing and/or processing. This transformation of the landscape into one purposefully modified was significant to de Blij. He wrote: ‘It would be difficult to identify a more evocative embodiment of Sauer’s vision of the cultural landscape as a natural landscape transformed by human hand: nothing in the vineyard is left unaffected by viticulture’s practice’ (p. 153).

De Blij (p. 153) compared vineyards to ‘carefully tended garden[s]’ (Figure 2); however, no

**Figure 2. A carefully tended vineyard in Calaveras County, California**
matter how well tended, price and production
trends for wine grapes are not steady or predict-
able. For example, in the United States, although
eastern viticulture and enology ‘predates that of
California and the West’ (p. 63), the production
in California (and increasingly Oregon and
Washington) has vastly surpassed that of the
Eastern states (US Department of the Treasury
Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau,
2013a, 2013b). In short, wine production and all
it entails is a highly variable and uncertain indus-
try; de Blij (1983) argues that many other indus-
tries would not be able to withstand the same
levels of variability and uncertainty.

2 Physical geography and wine

The physical geography of viticulture is compli-
cated; factors including climate, weather, soil,
and slope must be considered. In fact:

environmental maps of viticultural regions . . . conceal
incredibly intricate mosaics of soil depth, composition,
structure, texture, and moisture; of temperature vari-
atations and precipitation patterns; of slope angles and
orientations; of wind directions and velocities; and
more. No two locales are exactly identical physiogra-
phically . . . [And moreover,] an apparently suitable
environment is no guarantee of viticultural success.
(de Blij, 1983: 81)

As a grape vine struggles to absorb the moisture
and nutrients it needs, ‘the vine [is compelled]
to extend its roots deeply into the soil and sub-
soil’ and herein ‘lies the character of the grape
and the complexity of the wine’ (p. 100). In
other words, ‘the capacity of the vine to grow
and thrive under existing, even adverse
physical-geographic conditions is the essence
of its character and quality’ (p. 101). A skilled
winemaker then transforms that charismatic
grape into wine. Put plainly, (great) wine is cre-
ated from human ingenuity and the hardy char-
acter of the plant.

a What is terroir? As such, a thorough under-
standing of the physical landscape is essential
to the development of a vineyard and successful
cultivation of grapes (Townsend, 2011). Ter-
roir, essentially the physical geography of wine,
has been the primary focus of a multitude of stud-
ies in the subfield of wine geography. Terroir, a
French term for which there is no perfect English
translation, encompasses the entirety of the phys-
ical geography of a viticultural region that may
potentially influence the quality and flavor of any
agricultural product, including but not limited to
cheese, olive oil, and apples, but particularly
wine (Bohmrich, 1996; Trubek, 2008; Unwin,
2012; Van Leeuwen and Seguin, 2006; Vaudour,
2002; Wilson, 1998).

Geographers, geologists, viticulturists, and
winemakers may each have their own unique def-
inition of what constitutes terroir, but, generally
speaking, it includes every feature of the climate
(microclimate, mesoclimat, and macroclimate),
weather, topography, soils, geology, elevation,
slope, aspect, wind speed and patterns, water
quality and water availability of a place, as well
as how these environmental parameters inter-
twine with local culture, tradition, agricultural
economics, and politics. In short, terroir is about
the relationship between the environmental char-
acteristics of a physical location and the flavors
that specific place imparts to a wine. There is
no one perfect terroir for grapes – though some
may staunchly argue this point – however, there
are varying terroirs from which different wines
are produced.

The success of viticulture for the production
of fine wine depends ‘on matching particular
grape varieties with specific environments’ (de
Blij, 1983: 89). Through many years of trial and
error, viticulturists have discovered, for exam-
ple, that the dry Mediterranean climate and
diverse soils of Napa Valley, California, are per-
fect for the production of outstanding Cabernet
Sauvignon wines; the cooler Willamette Valley
in Oregon is known for exceptional wines pro-
duced from the Pinot Noir grape; Chile has had
excellent results in the Colchagua Valley with
the Carmenere grape; and the dry climate and
glacial soils of the Marlborough region of New Zealand are recognized for producing superb Sauvignon Blanc wines.

**b The importance of climate.** De Blij (1983: 94) made the claim that ‘climate, grape variety, and soil are the three cornerstones of viticulture’. He maintained through his description of the physical geographical attributes of viticulture (the focus of Chapter Four of his book) that climate in particular is the most significant component of terroir. De Blij discusses, in a general sense, the Thornthwaite and Köppen-Geiger global and regional classification systems and their applicability to viticulture. He outlines the strengths and shortcomings of each classification system, describing the Köppen system as too ‘global’ a generalization but adequate in indicating ‘viticulture’s preferred environments’ (p. 83), and the Thornthwaite system as more useful because it takes into account moisture availability and can be applied to smaller regions. Regarding temperature as a critical element of climate, de Blij also explains the concepts of heat summation and the ‘degree day’, first developed by the wine scholars Amerine and Winkler (1944) as a model to classify growing environments based on daily temperature in California. De Blij compares these California classifications to other growing regions around the world.

De Blij notes that climatological generalizations such as heat summation charts and maps ‘provide a first assessment of the possibilities and limitations of viticultural regions’, including the range of varieties which may be well suited to the prevailing conditions and suggest the kinds of support the wines may need to thrive (irrigation, for example) (pp. 89–90). That being said, regions determined by ‘degree-day’ or other heat summation procedures are ‘defined by arbitrary criteria…[However,] the overall framework that emerges has validity’ (p. 88).

In fact, a number of scholarly works citing de Blij have expounded on the relationship between climate and successful viticulture. They include one by Eysberg (1987) titled ‘Viticulture in California: Cool air-conditioned valleys as the equivalent of warm sheltered “côtes”’ which offers a spatial explanation of the climate patterns associated with California’s wine regions. Eysberg found that, although the climate of California is ‘diametrically opposed to that of Western Europe’, the cultivation of high-quality grapes is made possible by the microclimates found in the cooler valleys. Shaw (1999) discusses the cultivation of grapes in the cooler climates of Quebec and Nova Scotia, Canada, locations that at one time were deemed too cold for successful viticulture. He found that the topographic variation present in these colder climate regions often provides mesoclimates ‘sufficiently benign’ for viticulture.

The renowned climatologist Greg Jones has published an impressive number of articles related to climate variability, climate warming, and viticulture, and often cites the works of de Blij in his research. His publications include ‘Climate change and global wine quality’, which describes the warming trends recorded in the world’s wine-producing regions and explains the potential impacts of warmer temperatures on viticulture, including movement of vineyards to more poleward locations (Jones et al., 2005). In ‘Climate influences on grapevine phenology, grape composition, and wine production and quality for Bordeaux, France’, Jones and Davis (2000) developed a long-term climatology of the region based on their examination of the relationships between climate and grapevine phenology.

Soil quality, regional geology, and geomorphology, by comparison, may not be the most critical elements of terroir as reasoned by de Blij, in part because grapevines tend to do well in soils deemed unsatisfactory for many other types of agriculture, but also because climate is one of the dominant soil-forming factors. However, soil drainage and texture are arguably the most important elements to consider in
vineyard location as it is generally accepted that the best wine grapes are produced on hillslopes with coarse (rocky, gravelly, and/or sandy) soils (de Blij, 1983).

A number of physical geographers have sought to better understand the role of soils, geology, and geomorphology in viticulture since the publication of de Blij’s book. For example, Watkins (1997) conducted a site suitability analysis in an effort to ascertain whether a discernible combination of soil (type, texture, depth, drainage, fertility, etc.) and other topographic characteristics (slope angle, aspect, and elevation) contributes to the successful cultivation of Zinfandel grapes in the Shenandoah Valley, California. Watkins (1997) found nine (of 15) soil and topographic variables, including slope angle, soil depth, cation exchange capacity, and runoff to be statistically significantly unique to vineyard areas when compared to non-vineyard sites. Townsend (2011) provided an illustration of the wide-ranging types of geomorphic landscapes and the role of geomorphology in unique viticultural regions of Switzerland, California, and Texas.

III de Blij’s legacy

I The continuing significance of Wine: A Geographic Appreciation

Wine: A Geographic Appreciation established the study of viticulture as the domain of geographers. De Blij’s book created a foundation on which future viticultural geographers would erect an increasingly intricate assemblage of theoretical and empirical studies that examine the historical, physical, cultural, regional, and environmental contexts within which wine is located, produced, and consumed. In his review of the English research focusing on the geographical aspects of wine and viticulture, Dickenson (1990) stated pithily that de Blij’s compendium of wine research ‘provided a firm foundation for the study of viticultural geography’. He continued:

de Blij has provided not only a model approach to the field, but made available to other students of the subject insights as to the nature of the geographic perspective, and indication as to areas needing further research by both geographers and others. (Dickenson, 1990)

Kohn (1984: 256), an American geographer and tireless promoter of geographic education, exclaimed, ‘[Wine: A Geographic Appreciation] legitimizes courses in viticulture that have been developed in a number of departments of geography over the past decade’. He also added: ‘Until the publication of this revised and enlarged text, students were dependent mainly on published materials written from the non-spatial perspective, or on a very few monographs and research articles in geography.’

Before the publication of Wine: A Geographic Appreciation in 1983, the majority of publications on the geography of wine were undertaken by continental European geographers and tended to focus on regional geographies of wine and viticulture (Dickenson, 1990). Published in their native languages, these publications remained inaccessible to many English-speaking oenophiles and budding viticultural geographers. However, since the 1983 publication of Wine: A Geographic Appreciation, a proliferation of American and English produced geographical texts and articles has emerged, exploring viticulture from a variety of research angles, including but not limited to regional geographies of wine.

A Boolean search using the terms ‘geograph* AND viticulture OR wine’ on Google Scholar returned 13,990 results. The majority of these publications (13,300) occurred after 1983 (Figure 3). Similarly, a search across numerous research databases (including Environment Complete, ScienceDirect, GeoREF, and GeoBase) using the same Boolean string returned 1826 peer-reviewed journal articles that referenced geography and wine, of which 1733 were published since 1983. Although it is difficult to measure the impact of de Blij’s book on each of these authors and their articles, many have
cited his book in their publications. A search of Google Books, a growing index of books worldwide, revealed that 340 books and manuscripts reference Wine: A Geographic Appreciation. A search of Google Scholar returned 53 unique citations for de Blij’s book. These numbers presumably are understated. Nevertheless, the topical breadth of these texts reflects the wider influence that the book has had on the field of wine and viticultural studies and highlights the extent of de Blij’s reach.

The texts and articles that reference the book explore a variety of topics that span across geographical specialties, including physical geography and its subfields. Publications that referenced de Blij’s book investigated the effects of climate on viticulture, including regional examinations of microclimates (Eysberg, 1987), mesoclimates (Peters and Gossette, 1990; Shaw, 1999, 2001), and macroclimates (Spellman, 1999). Some of the publications that referenced de Blij’s book investigate a suite of physical characteristics unique to wine-producing regions, examining a region’s physiography, soil properties, geology, and climate (Watkins, 1997). Others have studied the regional biogeography of vineyards (Peters, 1987) and the geomorphology of viticultural areas (Townsend, 2011).

2 The benefit of hindsight: Wine’s shortcomings, resolved and unresolved

While, admittedly, pointing out the ‘shortcomings’ of a book that is more than 30 years old is unfair, in light of the fact that de Blij’s Wine: A Geographic Appreciation is a classic in the field, a bit of reflection on what else the book—or the scholarship which has and will follow it—can do is warranted.

To begin, de Blij (1983) makes the strong claim that wine transforms the landscape like no other agricultural enterprise. This claim is dubious because agriculture as a whole, especially industrial agriculture, inherently leaves a strong physical imprint and has an important and purposeful ecological impact, sometimes for the public benefit and sometimes to the public’s detriment (Barrow, 2006). That being said,
we can agree that viticulture and viniculture, as well as the physical and cultural landscape changes which emerge from them, are significant.

In addition, in regards to ‘the city and vineyard’, although, as de Blij notes, populated areas near vineyards can be an asset, ‘a nearby city can also be a formidable foe’ as major cities nearby vineyards can sometimes ‘engulf’ the vineyards and turn them into suburb” (1983: 161). Although urban expansion is problematic and still occurring (de Blij writes that the ‘urban march is inexorable’), contemporary studies on amenity migration and exurbia also show prominent trends in the opposite direction – namely, in-migrants (and longer-term residents) seeking to maintain a ‘rural’ landscape and/or preserve ‘nature’, especially along the rural-urban edge (Abrams et al., 2012; Cadieux and Hurley, 2011; Cadieux and Taylor, 2013). This social pattern contradicts and complicates the monolithic ‘inexorable urban march’ narrative of the past. In fact, recent studies show how vineyards and wine landscapes are increasingly viewed as valuable amenities making them less likely to be developed – so long as there is room for development to build up around them (Gillon, 2013; Senese, 2010). There is a certain irony – and inherent challenge – related to the fact that wine regions (at least in some places and times) have come to be in competition for land with the very markets that they serve (de Blij, 1983), and this area of study is deserving of continued attention.

Finally, just as geographic information systems (GIS), geographic positioning systems (GPS), and remote sensing technologies have revolutionized the field of geography over the last 30 years, so have they changed the way vineyards are planted and maintained. Little doubt exists that a contemporary look at the (physical) geography of wine would include the role of geographic information science viticulture. These geospatial techniques allow both wine/viticulture geographers and vineyard managers to study the natural spatial variability that exists at a variety of scales, including within vineyards (down to a specific vineyard block), between vineyards, and in vineyard regions. Emerging subfields in the geography of viticulture include the use of these technologies in site suitability and locational analysis, viticultural land-use identification, and precision viticulture (Hall et al., 2002; Mathews, 2013; Proffitt et al., 2006; Tatem, 2005). Precision viticulture focuses on the use of the most up-to-date science and technologies (including but not limited to aerial photography, GPS, on-site weather stations, and high resolution soil surveys) in order to optimize vineyard performance and yield, as well as grape quality.

De Blij’s book marked the beginning of a (continuing) period of phenomenal growth of literature on the topic of wine geography. This explosion of scholarship is itself a response to the phenomenal growth of the viticulture and enology industries, and demonstrates that wine as produced, as marked on the landscape, and as a focus of study is still blooming.

IV Conclusion: the geography of wine and viticulture today

Thirty years later, de Blij’s book is inspiring the next generation of viticultural geographers. Geographers new and old continue to research the many and varied relationships between viticulture and geography. For instance, 18 papers related to the Geography of Wine were presented at the 2014 Association of American Geographers (AAG) annual meeting in Tampa, Florida, in sessions hosted by the Wine Geography Specialty Group, a group de Blij worked very hard to form. Today, membership in this specialty group exceeds 140.

For human or cultural geographers, the study of wine is still a rich area of inquiry, from investigating production – accessing the land for cultivation; growing the grapes; deciding whether to sell the grapes (or their juice) for production elsewhere or otherwise deciding to process wine
in house’; the processing, fermenting, and aging of those grapes; and finally the marketing and selling the finished product – to examining the aesthetics and/or value-systems (re)produced by vineyards and the wine industry, each of which represents a complex set of processes which exact an influence on society and environment.

Physical geographers are deploying a wide range of new research methods and techniques in their ongoing studies of wine geography. These include the study of precision viticulture, which uses geographic information systems, global positioning systems, and remote sensing technology to inform viticultural management strategies (Mathews, 2013) – for example, using geographic information systems to determine site suitability for vineyards (Watkins, 1997). Another important research agenda to emerge from the growing literature on wine and viticulture uses vineyards to monitor climate change. These include a variety of assessments based on assessing grape sensitivity to a changing climate.

Although de Blij (1983) described some ‘viticultural frontiers’ (certain parts of Australia and New Zealand, for example) with finality, the wine frontier was far from closed in 1983. Indeed, the fascination with wine has not dissipated, but actually intensified. Wine grape growing and wine production has experienced a meteoric rise as an agricultural and economic development strategy across the world, and research on ‘traditional’ as well as ‘frontier’ wine regions has grown just as quickly. Without a doubt, de Blij’s contributions to the geography of wine assisted with the legitimization of the subfield and helped to pave the way for this now robust area of study.

Acknowledgements

The authors were surprised and saddened to receive the news of Harm de Blij’s passing in March of this year. At that time, the composition of this manuscript had already been well underway and we had hoped to meet with him at the 2014 Association of American Geographers annual meeting in Tampa to discuss his thoughts on the legacy of this book. We would like to acknowledge him and his profound contributions to the field of geography. We would also like to thank David Butler for his invitation to submit this manuscript and we express our continued appreciation for his support and guidance.

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