

Zero Degrees: Geographies of the Prime Meridian

Charles W. J. Withers

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The prime meridian, though not a “real thing,” rules the life of everyone on the planet; it’s the place at which the world’s longitude is set at zero degrees, giving humans the ability to standardize the measures of both longitude and time. Since 1884, the prime meridian has been fixed at the Royal Observatory, in Greenwich, United Kingdom, though improved measurement technology has since adjusted it a little to the east of its original location. But imagine a time, not too long ago, when there were more than twenty prime meridians, with nations often using their own capitals to designate the zero-degree point, causing great confusion for explorers, navigators, astronomers, and others.

Professor Charles Withers, who is Ogilvie Chair of Geography at the University of Edinburgh, discusses the challenges and dangers of attempting to navigate a world with multiple prime meridians as increased globalization and advances in transportation made the seas busier and brought nations closer together. Withers reveals how, even though all could see the danger and confusion caused by reliance on multiple meridians, unravelling centuries of national practices and prejudices to arrive at agreement on a single location proved difficult, partly because it threatened to raise the importance of science over that of politics.

In 1884, after other attempts to arrive at agreement had failed, geographers, astronomers, navigators, and politicians from over twenty countries convened an International Meridian Conference in Washington, DC, to propose a single prime meridian “for the good of the world.” This was the first such conference at which delegates could cast their votes on behalf of nations.

Today’s travelers and scientists owe much to the fact that, despite difficulties (including an attempted bombing), the 1884 International Meridian Conference agreed upon and established a single prime meridian to make the world a safer, more easily measurable place.

KRISTINE MORRIS (March/April 2017)

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