His Excellency the Right Honourable David Johnston, Governor General of Canada

Royal Canadian Geographical Society's (RCGS) Awards Ceremony
Gatineau, Wednesday, November 13, 2013

It is a pleasure to join all of you here for the presentation of a variety of awards.

Although each award is diverse in its criteria, and all of the recipients we honour today have varied backgrounds and experiences, all of these medals are related to a very important and fascinating subject: Canadian geography.

Whether it is exploration or education, whether it is Canada’s North or across provinces, the story of the land we live in is inseparable from the story of us as Canadians.

I am fortunate to have a unique perspective on Canada’s geography. As governor general, I am perhaps one of the few Canadians who can make the claim to have visited all provinces and territories, and each one at least several times.

I have seen the landscapes that make this country so special, and what I have seen is often breathtaking and inspirational. And the more I have discovered, the more I have understood Canada.

Let me quote from the Right Honourable Vincent Massey—whose name graces one of the medals here this evening—particularly his address in 1957 to the Canadian Geographical Society. He said: “...over the years our land, with its mystery and its richness, has prompted enquiry and adventure, given us wealth and shaped our thinking—created a nation in what were once thought to be empty wastes.”

He goes on to say: “Environment, we can agree, shapes and influences man, just as man moulds and changes his environment. Our people come from all parts of the world, but I think that even now our physical setting has given us qualities of our own.”

I see the diverse geology and forests and lakes and coastlines of Canada, and by talking with Canadians, I know how their surroundings influence them, how the lay of the land informs so much of their lives. We already know we have a profound impact on the environment around us, but it is Canada itself that has shaped how we have grown as a nation.

We depend so much on our land, which is why we must know and study our geography, to learn more about the environment in which we live and on which we rely.

I have experienced all this and more, and yet, in another way, I have not even begun to appreciate this country. Indeed, one could spend a lifetime travelling and still not see everything there is to see of this nation.
The award winners here today, nine in all, have made it their mission to study our geography and share our natural wonders with others.

Among the medals presented today will be, for only the second time, the Martin Bergmann Medal for Excellence in Arctic Leadership and Science, named after one of those great Canadians who helped us to better understand our country. Although he tragically lost his life while travelling in the North, his memory and his work live on in all who follow in his footsteps.

To all of you, I say thank you for your dedication to this country and for your contributions to research and education. Your efforts have helped so many Canadians understand our nation better.

Congratulations on this occasion.

Thank you.