Gerardus Mercator (Latinized for Gerhard Kremer) was a Flemish mathematician and geographer, born at Rupelmonde in Flanders, March 5, 1512. He studied at Bar-le-Duc and Louvain. In the latter place he established in 1554 his Geographic Institute from which was issued in 1537 the first-known of the important list of maps and globes which brought him fame. In 1552 he moved to Duisberg where in 1568 he published his first map (Nova et aucta orbis terrae descriptio ad usum navigantium accommodata) with meridians and parallels at right angles—the so-called "Mercator’s projection." This projection was later improved by Edward Wright and came into general use in the first half of the seventeenth century. Mercator died at Duisberg, December 5, 1594.

In the letter to the Bishop of Arras, a translation of which is printed below, we find for the first time the view expressed and substantiated that the Earth has a magnetic pole. Before this time, it was generally believed that the magnetic needle pointed towards the pole of the heavens or towards the Polar Star. Thus Petrus Peregrinus stated in his Epistola (Part I, Chapter X) "From the poles of the heavens the poles of the Earth receive their Virtue."

Mercator’s interest in terrestrial magnetism is shown in the following statement by Hellmann: "Since later Mercator repeatedly expressed his ideas regarding the Earth’s magnetic pole, his studies in this connection did not remain without influence on the further development of geomagnetism, as, for example, in the case of Georg Hartmann. In an explanatory document for the various globes which Mercator constructed for Charles the Fifth (1552) he devoted the first four chapters to questions like the following: The existence and position of a magnetic pole; investigation of the latitude and longitude of the magnetic pole; determination of longitude with the magnet; finding the magnetic declination at any place on the Globe—and on his world-chart he drew zero-meridians through the magnetic pole. That Mercator laid great weight on determining the position of this pole is shown by his fine picture, which was executed at the instance of his friend F. Hogenberg of Cologne in which, with a pair of compasses, he fixes the position of the magnetic pole on the globe."

A word may be added in explanation of the remarkable position obtained by Mercator for the North Magnetic Pole. He assumed that the prolongation of the axes of the declination-needles at various points on the Earth’s surface would intersect at the magnetic pole. Thus observations of the declination at two points on the Earth would suffice for determining the pole’s position. Therefore, assuming that the direction of the compass-needle followed a great circle, he utilized the two stations at his disposal, namely, the Dutch island of Walcheren (9º east) and Danzig (14º east) and found the desired position at longitude 168º west and latitude 79º north—the degrees of longitude being counted from the meridian of the Azores. This point would lie somewhat to the northwest of Bering Strait and in no wise corresponds to the accepted position of the North Magnetic Pole.1