

Catherine Delano-Smith and Roger J. P. Kain, *English Maps: A History*

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If, as the authors posit in their very first sentence, “[m]aps are children of their times,” they are also orphans. Once created, whatever their genealogy, their subsequent life-experience is determined by the contexts in which they exist. Indeed, this is the central premise of Delano-Smith and Kain’s work: maps are products of their times. Adopting the revisionist perspectives of “new” history of cartography, they are concerned with the ways maps have interacted with society, the roles maps have played, and the uses to which they’ve been put. That is, a consideration of maps in their “societal and cultural context” (p. xiii), a focus on map-users as much as on map-makers, and less of a concern with map construction and reproduction.¹

To this end, the authors are unabashed in their assertion that this constitutes “the first full-length exploration of the political, religious, social and economic enmeshing of maps in the history of any nation state” (p. xiii). Certainly, their volume does position maps in the warp and woof of English culture through several themes: map literacy; consumerism; manuscript maps; professional and non-professional users; maps as specialist tools and multifaceted artifacts; their polyfunctionality and individuality; the interplay between private, national, and institutional actors; and maps as communicators of ideas as well as information (p. 5). Given the two-millennium span of this study, it may be expected that there will be a considerable variety of cartographic forms. Nevertheless, the authors emphasize that a keynote of their study is “diversity in continuity:” that is, despite changes in representation and production, all maps have continued to focus on displaying places, people, and phenomena.

Implicit in much of this is a danger to which many of us are prone in our studies of material things, technology, and human ingenuity: the fetish of the *thing in its materiality*. Oftentimes, the answers — and, usually, the most telling questions — lie beyond the *it* of our studies. As Delano-Smith and Kain put it,

[t]he basic factors of map-making do not alter much over time: surveying and production techniques, matters of style, size of output and the processes of marketing, are largely secondary to key questions such as what is mapped and why, and what for. Seen this way, what was once thought of as a Renaissance paradigm-shift in mapping turns out to have been in large part an acceleration of processes already in place (p. 5).

In another instance, they ponder what lies in the shadow of maps in that given the far from universal expertise required to produce them, and given their relative scarcity over time, how else do people express their spatiality? If, as Sack argues in his somewhat chauvinistic terminology, we are all *homo geographicus*, how else do we express it?² For the authors, “[maps] are drawn on a blank surface, not with a blank mind. They represent points of view, not simply a physical viewpoint” (p. 6). And these “points of view” are also to be found elsewhere: in the fluid boundary between maps and pictures; in the spatial allusions of text and narrative.³ Assertions and queries such as these are typical of the many clearly stated and provocative posed challenges of existing dogma and perspective that run throughout this volume as it takes on the daunting task of a survey, explanation, and critique of two millennia of English cartography from Rome to the twentieth century.

The detailed study opens with a survey of maps and the “mapping habit” (p. 8) — what a pun! — in scholastic Medieval England. By the mid-fourteenth century, however, maps had escaped the cloister and were engaged in a number of secular and practical roles. Ecclesiastical “exegetical mapping” was accompanied by itineraries, *portolan* navigational charts, exercises in political propaganda, town plans, and even theatrical stage plans.⁴ Two main points emerge: the influence on English medieval cartography of Roman, Classical, Jewish, and Arabic texts and ideas, and a variety of pre-Renaissance maps that challenge presentist perspectives on the role of cartography in the past.

Chapter three turns to the development of printed topographical maps of the nation and its constituent parts from the sixteenth century to the early nineteenth century, paying particular

attention to the emergence of the distinctively English genre of county maps and the first awakening — under the panoptical gaze and national imagination of the Tudors and their officials — of the need for maps in the service of the state. The focus of chapter four is on private estate maps depicting landed property, and the more public cadastral forms such as enclosure maps and tithe maps that are often linked to registers of personal and property data. Both of these genre demonstrate the growing commodification of land and resources and the assertion of closer control and management of both. Chapter five explores how the increased economic and administrative travel that was associated with this transformation of society generated its own spatial demands. Initially, road-maps were not the answer. Demonstrating again the importance of context, the authors throw light onto the early practices of “way-finding” and conclude that, “[a] route can be defined as a set of abstract notions, incorporating a sequence of directions between intermediate points of arrival and departure on the way to a final destination” (p. 143). Accordingly, early modern travellers had recourse to oral and written itineraries long before the advent of maps. On water, lists of successive places along coasts — *rutters* — served the same non-cartographic function as road itinerary lists along roads on land until the emergence of strip-maps in the eighteenth century.

Another orthodoxy suggesting a “Romano-medieval hiatus” is challenged in chapter six: that there are no maps of towns in England prior to ca 1480, even though they existed elsewhere throughout the Roman world (p. 179). The subsequent arrival of town maps is traced through a succession of forms: written descriptions in chronicles, and books; cartouches on county maps; plans of fortifications; maps for urban administration and town planning; and, eventually, as travel increased, guides and directories to negotiate the brain-numbing complexities of urban space.

The final substantive chapter considers the taken-for-granted use of maps in the academic, political, economic, social, and personal dimensions of everyday life in “the best-mapped country in the world” (p. 222). The close link between mapping and the “spirit of modernity” (p. 216) is demonstrated with reference to the rise of Great Britain’s national mapping agency, the Ordnance Survey, its marine handmaiden, the Hydrographic Office, and the ever-increasing use of cartography in conceptualizing and understanding modern life through the mapping of epidemiology and moral statistics, geology and agricultural land use, and diagnostic features of the social environment.

With this done, Delano-Smith and Kain reassert the need to seek historical cartographic wisdom beyond the “cartographical artefact” by turning to the contexts of their production and use to elucidate the degree to which maps are “deeply embedded in English society.” Predictably provocative to the end, the authors drive home their methodological and theoretical point in their last sentence: “modern ideas are deeply-rooted in the past and old maps are thoroughly modern” (p. 247).

A final word. Books about maps are beautiful. This one is no exception. To be sure, maps are tools, data systems, ideological statements — they are also works of art. Even the most theory-allergic student of maps and mapping — though they should have nothing to carp at in this book’s light touch — will be seduced by a plethora of illustrations (163 figures) and a bounty of lavish plates (26). Eye-catching and informative in their own right, the accompanying didactic captions complement and enhance the visual messages. Similarly, the forty pages of endnotes constitute a rich sub-text of additional facts and interpretation, while a bibliography of some six hundred references must be the definitive collection of material on English cartography.

Delano-Smith and Kain have presented us with a well researched, provocative, and thorough study that prompts us to think about, into, and beyond maps.

NOTES

1. For other recent studies of maps and their makers and users see Jeremy Black’s *Maps and Politics* and his *Maps and History: Constructing Images of the Past*, both reviewed in *Material History Review* 51 (Spring 2000): 77–79.
2. Robert D. Sack, *Homo Geographicus: A Framework for Action, Awareness, and Moral Concern* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1997).
3. For refreshing new perspectives on this see Garrett A. Sullivan, *The Drama of Landscape: Land, Property, and Social Relations on the Early Modern Stage* (Stanford: S.U.P., 1998) for literature, and Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996) for ethnohistory and “ethnogeography.”
4. For more on spatial thinking and *chorography/choreography* see Sullivan, *The Drama of Landscape* and Richard Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), especially chapter three, “The Land Speaks.”