

REVIEWS: BOOKS AND ATLASES

THE HISTORY OF TOPOGRAPHICAL MAPS; SYMBOLS, PICTURES AND SURVEYS.
P.D.A. Harvey, Thames and Hudson, London, 1980, 199 pp. \$29.95

"Who Cares? And Why Nobody Does" was the title of a paper George McCleary and I read to a special session on the history of cartography at the 1972 annual meetings of the Association of American Geographers in Kansas City. 'Nobody' might have been an exaggeration – there were forty or fifty people in the room – but it was not an egregious one. The coterie concerned with the history of cartography is about as closed as a coven of witches, and its subject is about as compelling, not only to the broad lay population that daily uses maps, but to geographers and historians as well. Few are versed in the subject, and fewer want to be. It was our point that the reason for this dearth of interest was simply explained: there was no interest in the history of cartography because there was no history of cartography.

Even a cursory review of the standard 'histories' makes this clear; and an only slightly less hasty scrutiny makes it clear why. None of the popular histories was written by or with the support of an historian, and most of them were written by librarians, by collectors that is, and by and large *for* collectors. Lloyd Brown was first and foremost a librarian; R.A. Skelton was primarily a librarian; Edward Lynam was essentially a librarian; David Woodward is a librarian; Gwyn Walters and Helen Wallis are librarians; Mireille Pastoureau and Wolfgang Scharfe and Arend Lang are librarians; in fact, most of these – or certainly the largest single body – attending the international conferences on the history of cartography are librarians; or, if not librarians, then curators of print collections, or dealers in old maps, or wealthy amateur collectors. Not surprisingly they write for others like themselves. R.V. Tooley's long-selling *Maps and Map-Makers* is an unabashed collector's guide consisting of little more than lists of maps and map-makers chronologically arranged. Skelton's widely distributed *Decorative Printed Maps of the 15th to 18th Centuries* is a professional librarian's revision of an amateur's catalogue of his personal collection. The first line of Leo Bagrow's massive *History of Cartography* is "Map-collecting is no new growth," and the book's editor, Skelton, observes that the book is concerned "with maps as craft-products," that is, as collectables. Even ostensible non-collectors take the collector's stance, as when Norman J.W. Throver entirely excludes mapping and map-making from consideration in his mistitled recapitulation of the typical chronology, *Maps and Man*. I have no interest in impugning the value, quality or even fundamental necessity of the work of these collectors, but there is something juvenile about the centrality of the *issue of collecting* in works purporting to be history, as if the field of inquiry were still so close to its roots as to be incapable of rising above them. The history of science has long since ceased consisting of catalogues of exquisite brassbound instruments: it is time the history of cartography likewise grew up.

With *The History of Topographical Maps* the history of cartography finally has come of age, and hence the peculiarly signal importance of P.D.A. Harvey's new book. Although Dr. Harvey's credentials as a collector are quite impec-

cable (sometime Assistant Keeper in the Department of Manuscripts at the British Museum and co-author with Skelton of the forthcoming *Local Maps and Plans from Medieval England*), it is his credentials as an historian (Professor of Medieval History at the University of Durham) that sets him and his work apart from others in the arena. To the history of cartography he brings not only the historian's critical perspective on the evidential significance of "facts," but more critically the historian's imperative *to make sense of* the facts he orders. The librarian's, the cataloguer's, the annalist's, the chronologist's task is through once the things or facts or events have been laid in temporal sequence; the historian's task has just begun, for it is his burden to explain, not the things, but their relations, not the facts, but the nature of their evolution, not the maps, but the laws governing their unfolding in time. Such an undertaking cannot be attempted without a plan, without a thesis, without a theory, without a conviction that, "I know *why* the chronology of maps looks the way it does." It is the lack of this nomothetic bent that almost single-handedly explains the general lack of interest in the history of cartography, and it is none other than this nomothetic bent that Harvey brings so refreshingly to the field. Harvey is not unaware of his presumption: "A history of cartography," he writes in his preface, "can all too easily become little more than a catalogue, a set of descriptions of one map after another. I have tried to avoid this by concentrating on general problems ..."

The result of this shift in focus is that Harvey is enabled to deal with maps, rather than the maps that happen to be in a collection at hand or readily available on the market. His book, consequently, has a radically different feel from those of his predecessors. For one thing, it is free of the ethnocentricity that pervades the rest of them like the stink of rotting flesh. He neither ignores the non-Western world (as do Brown, Tooley, Skelton and most of the rest) nor relegates it to a few introductory or concluding pages (as do Thrower and Bagrow). It is a Chinese map that gloriously decorates the jacket; three of the eight color pages are devoted to non-Western work, as are nearly a quarter of the remaining illustrations; and its discussion is thoroughly integrated into the argument, not pasted on as an "Amen." For another thing, the book is without that chronocentricity that results in the consecration of the bulk of his competitors' pages to work following the 15th century. Less than a tenth of Harvey's book is turned over to post-medieval Western cartography, compared with two-thirds of Brown's and Bagrow's, three-quarters of Thrower's and nine-tenths of Tooley's. Then again, Harvey can imagine that peoples might have – and might continue to – represent the landscape for reasons other than those that motivate us. It is stimulating to hear someone talk about the roles maps might have played in sympathetic magic, for example, or geomancy or other ritual behavior. This is a book I will not be ashamed to share with my colleagues in developmental psychology, anthropology, history or cultural geography. Beyond other claims for the book there reside in these comparisons foundations for the assertion that it is the first to treat – without condescension – the cartography *of the world* in all its bewildering multiplicity. But its other claims are substantial. Harvey's thesis is

declared in his book's subtitle. It is his contention that the history of cartographic development is characterized by a basic pattern of progression from a reliance on symbols in a first stage, through the use of pictures in a second stage, to the exploitation of survey techniques in a third and final stage, at least – or especially – in the topographic maps he takes as his domain of investigation. He is careful to establish that development – history – not chronology is his concern:

Our story then is not one of a single developing tradition. It is one of changing methods of portraying landscape that seem to correspond to distinct stages in cultural development. When we speak of the progression from symbols to pictures and from pictures to surveys we are not thinking of a straight chronological sequence except in the context of a single society or culture. In the chapters that follow we shall be looking at each of the three phases of topographical mapping in turn, and we shall find ourselves moving from one age to another quite as rapidly as we move between different countries and cultures.

An important consequence of this developmental perspective is that the definition of what constitutes a map is seen to change. As Harvey reveals near the end of the book, “as the reader may or may not have noticed – we have silently adjusted our idea of what is and what is not a map as we have moved to different cultures and different ages.” It is one of Harvey's most valuable insights to have observed that maps *as such* do not really exist in Europe, for example, prior to the 15th century, although many other things that lead in time to maps – charts, plans and diagrams – do:

We can see each of them as a sort of map only because we are looking at them with hindsight, because we know what a real map is. The men who made them knew nothing of maps; to them they were simply topographical symbols, topographical diagrams, a particular sort of topographical picture. It is significant that there was no word for map in any European language until the Renaissance; there was no word for a map because maps did not exist. This does not mean for a moment that we are wrong to make use of our hindsight ... But we must recognize that many of our classifications, many of the lines of development that we have distinguished, are entirely artificial in the context of their own time.

Harvey's willingness to see these earlier forms in their dual capacities, in their own time and place for what they were then and there, as well as in the flowering of history for what they would become, permits him the luxury of avoiding the sterile debates about the nature of the map while contributing to them substantially. It is pertinent – and exemplary – that his best attempt at defining the map comes at the book's close, rather than its beginning. The result is a humanistic relevance that removes the map from the collector's clutches and restores it to that broad population interested in the relationship of man and the land.

There is, attendant on this shift, no loss of rigor. On the contrary, no general history of cartography reveals the same unwillingness to accept

without inspection the significance of a given piece of evidence. Whereas, as evidence of the existence and quality of primitive cartography, others have accepted glibly the Eskimo Wellatok's knowledge of Hudson Bay, Harvey insists that while it speaks well of Wellatok's skill, it says nothing at all about Eskimo cartography. Whereas others have been willing to acknowledge glibly the unsupported link between Babylonian and subsequent plans as casual, Harvey demands evidence or abandonment of the argument. Whereas others – quoted in his text – have been willing to make glib assertions about what must or might have been, Harvey observes that of “all these statements about early topographical maps ...” taken from the writings of cartographic historians of repute and distinction, not one can be substantiated and some are demonstrably untrue. As a careful reading of *The History of Topographical Maps* soon makes clear, the history of cartography has not only been irrelevant and uninteresting, it has been frequently – and systematically – dishonest and unreliable.

For all my praise I am not, however, satisfied with Harvey's book. I have deep reservations, for example, about his ascription of genetic primacy to symbols instead of pictures. I have real doubt about the extent to which anthropological and psychological evidence will be able to support his hypothesized sequence of development. I am not convinced he has interpreted the contemporary cartographic scene with the same insight he has shown the medieval world. And I have no doubt at all that he misunderstands the nature of modern surveying. But then as Harvey himself insists: “There is no lack of these problems and on nearly every page unanswered questions arise – unanswered but not unanswerable ... I hope that by drawing attention to the problems I have met I may arouse other people's interest or curiosity to investigate them further.” If any of the questions raised anywhere in the history of cartography are answered it will be a tribute to this book. Where its predecessors summed up the field with the arrogant assurance of a three-year old pontificating on the flatness of the world, Harvey approaches it with the humble curiosity of an adolescent recently convinced that the earth is round.

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SURVEYORS AND STATESMEN; LAND MEASURING IN COLONIAL VIRGINIA. Sarah S. Hughes. Richmond, Virginia: The Virginia Surveyors Foundation. 1979. 196 pp. 30 illus.

Surveyors and Statesmen is an excellent history of land surveying in Virginia from the time of the appointment of the first Surveyor General in 1621 until the American Revolution. This text will be of particular interest to Canadians interested in surveying and cartography because it gives a clear and extremely well-documented account of the English surveying methods as practised in the New World up to 1776. The comparatively small amount of land surveying done in English Canada before the Revolution makes it difficult to