



TALKING MAPS

By Jerry Brotton and Nick Millea

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Review by: Rhiannon Jakopak

In *Talking Maps*, Jerry Brotton and Nick Millea set out with the ambitious goal of exploring how maps function as a conversation between the mapmaker and user, through a recounting of the origin stories of several selected maps. The authors use in-depth research to situate maps in the historical and cultural milieus in which they were produced, while encouraging the reader to question whether these examples (and by implication, *all* maps) serve primarily as cultural artifacts—reflecting the time and place of their making—or as strictly unbiased scientific documents depicting the world. *Talking Maps* is an accessible, engaging, and casual read that would be most appropriate for readers who are relatively new to cartography and wish to know more about the cultural connotations that accompany any map.

Talking Maps walks its readers through multiple categories, functions, and styles of maps, using examples of both well-known and sometimes-overlooked maps from around the world and across centuries. The book features high-quality images of nearly 100 maps, accompanied by detailed descriptions discussing specific elements of each map, why it might have been produced, what it suggests about the time and culture of its origin, and more. The 10 chapters of the book cover a range of topics, including the changing conventions of map orientation through time, the rise of *qibla* maps (which show the devout the direction of the Kaabah in Mecca, and which became ever more important as Muslims moved beyond the Arabian Peninsula), explanations of J. R. R. Tolkien's drawings of the Battle

of Helm's Deep in the *Lord of the Rings*, and how maps were used strategically in World War II. Multiple times throughout the course of reading this book, I found myself excitedly showing whoever happened to be near me an image of a given map and sharing with them the history I had just been reading.

The authors have extensive experience with cartography, map curation, and history. Brotton is a Professor of Renaissance Studies at Queen Mary University of London and has published numerous books and articles on various topics related to history and cartography. Millea has been Map Librarian at the Bodleian Library since 1992 and has himself published numerous books and articles on cartography. The authors' expertise is on display throughout the book, which offers detailed documentation of the specific historical context of the place a map details, anecdotes about the predilections of the mapmakers, and more. These same gentlemen also curated the *Talking Maps* exhibition at the Bodleian's Weston Library (July 2019–March 2020). The Bodleian, at the University of Oxford, holds over 1.5 million maps, of which only a select few are featured in this book.

Perhaps the most compelling aspect of *Talking Maps* is the high-quality reproduction of such an impressive range of maps—from twelfth-century world maps to modern human population cartograms. The page layouts allow the reader to reference both the descriptions of the maps and the maps themselves with ease, without being



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overcrowded by too much text on a single page. The maps are printed on at least an entire page, and some maps are spread generously over two pages. The book itself is large, providing space for the maps to be reproduced in considerable detail. The authors guide the reader's attention to specific features of the maps, occasionally resulting in an exercise resembling *Where's Waldo*, as the reader searches for the mentioned features. The rich combination of context, comment, and contents that the authors provide for each map show the reader fine details that would otherwise be unknown or unsuspected, allowing for a deeper understanding and appreciation of each map.

My major criticisms of this book concern the strangely uneven selection of maps and the lack of any concluding remarks. There is such a focus on United Kingdom maps—with an entire chapter devoted to maps of Oxford—that the inclusion of other maps seems, in a way, a bit haphazard. For example, the few Islamic maps featured are mixed in with various other maps and scattered over several chapters. Perhaps the selection reflects the interests of

the authors and the location of the exhibition upon which this book was based, but it is hard to tell. The selection criteria might have been clearer if there was a summary chapter or conclusion, but the book just unceremoniously ends. This lack of a conclusion is a missed opportunity to culminate the various enlightening conversations between mapmakers, users, and societies that had been playing out throughout the book. Instead of concluding remarks about how maps through time have always been artifacts that reflect the values and interests of the cultures that produce them, the authors just leave the reader to draw conclusions for themselves. Neither of these shortcomings are devastating, but they do leave the reader with a sense of imbalance and unresolved curiosity.

All in all, *Talking Maps* is an enjoyable and informative read. With its high-quality images and accessible explanations of the special features of each map, it serves as exciting introduction to the complexities of maps, their histories, and their places in society.

