



CARTOGRAPHY: THE IDEAL AND ITS HISTORY

By Matthew Edney

University of Chicago Press, 2019

309 pages

Softcover: \$30.00, ISBN 978-0-226-60568-5

Review by: Jack Swab, University of Kentucky

THIRTY YEARS AFTER J. B. Harley's *Deconstructing the Map* (1989) changed the study of maps, Matthew Edney's *Cartography: The Ideal and Its History* sets out to deconstruct the larger enterprise that is cartography. In it, Edney powerfully argues that the very concept of cartography—the historical systems of thought that undergird the study, creation, and practice of maps, and that comprise a paradigmatic *Ideal*—is not only ill-suited but detrimental to the modern study of maps. Focusing on this ideal allows Edney to show that cartography, in all of its various forms and modes, has been obsessively preoccupied with its own output (the map); thus missing a much larger picture. The result, he argues, is that cartography as an endeavor has become moribund—stuck in an intellectual rut of its own design—in essence analyzing itself to find its own solutions.

In *Cartography*, Edney traces the development of the conceptual cartographic ideal from its inception in the eighteenth century, through its integration into popular Western culture in the late nineteenth century, its formalization in twentieth century academic cartography, to its slow decline in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It would be wrong, however, to assume that this book is a chronological retelling of the history of cartography. Rather, the work takes a Foucauldian approach: it is a systematic study of cartography as a productive and intellectual endeavor. Towards this end, Edney argues that cartography as an intellectual endeavor is dying, and that

it has been dying for quite some time. While the prognosis he delivers is distinctly negative, he does not rush to issue cartography's death certificate, as have other scholars such as William Rankin (2016), Denis Wood (2003), and Timothy Barney (2015) over the past fifteen years. Edney argues that it is not the map itself that is dead, but rather that cartography, as an endeavor rooted in a specific history and tradition, is no longer relevant to today's world. This powerful statement, sure to attract as many critics as it does supporters, is the culmination of the author's more than thirty years of study and writing about maps.

In his book's six chapters, Edney argues the need for a new paradigm of map studies, one that systematically dismantles cartography and analyzes its underlying characteristics. In Chapter 1, he sets the scene, introducing his conception of modern cartography, its limits, and how his postulated ideal of cartography has left the discipline in an intellectual rut. Chapter 2 explores how sociocultural critiques of the ideal have addressed some of its problematic aspects but failed to address it in its entirety. Chapter 3 identifies and examines a variety of preconceptions Edney sees as integral to the cartographic ideal that have long dominated thinking about maps and regulated other facets of cartography as well—who, for example, is qualified to call themselves a cartographer, what topics can legitimately be studied, how maps should be examined, etcetera. All of these preconceptions, he argues, are completely wrong and therefore hinder our ability to fully understand maps.



© by the author(s). This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.

Chapter 4 uses a traditional history of cartography framework to examine how the ideal came to dominate discourse, lodging itself invisibly in society. The discussion in Chapter 5 is centered on the ways in which a single innovation, the numeric scale ratio (1:24,000 for example), was co-opted by the cartographic ideal—fundamentally tying all potential maps and map-like objects to their scalability, often in problematic ways. Finally, Chapter 6 summarizes the argument that it is time for scholars to move on from cartography into a new, more flexible paradigm.

Edney points out that much of the power wielded by the cartographic ideal is rooted in its control of terminology, and he makes a considerable effort to carefully define, clarify, and explore a whole slew of map-related terms. Much of his overall argument rests on deconstructing these terms and exploring the ambiguities and flaws in their definitions—he argues, for example, that the perceived differences between maps, charts, and plans are reflective of the limits of the ideal. By overturning the received vocabulary and pointing out the contradictions in them that traditional cartography has failed to acknowledge or address, Edney clarifies and advances his argument for the obsolescence of the ideal. His expansion, creation, and rearticulation of various cartographic terms also provides him a language for envisioning future map scholarship.

While the author illustrates his points with historical maps, the framework he lays out is applicable to the study of *all forms* of geographic information, not just finished maps. The approach he advocates requires scholars to think about mapping primarily as a process—one where each individual decision comes to bear on the “final” product and ultimately on its impact on the world. This approach borrows heavily from the field of the history of the book, as well as those of visual arts, critical cartography, critical geography, history, and social theory. But, Edney argues, marrying these diverse viewpoints with cartography, as it is traditionally perceived, raises questions that cartography and the history of cartography cannot properly answer. To remedy these issues, Edney proposes an abandonment of *cartography* for a new field termed *map studies*. As he envisions it, map studies encourages a holistic view of the map as geographic information, one that is specifically grounded in the people, places, and technologies that create maps and other forms of geographic information. As such, it also asks scholars to consider different formats—ones that

go beyond the traditional visual map to include textual, performative, and gestural maps, among others (236).

If we accept the proposition that cartography is either dying or dead, and that a new intellectual understanding of maps is on the rise, then it follows that the map community is also in some form of transition. Yet one of the weaknesses of this book is that it is difficult to ascertain where exactly in this transition we are or where Edney feels we are. While the map community has certainly moved on from many of the problematic preconceptions listed in Chapter 3, one is left unsure of what it means for cartography to have moved on from some of these preconceptions without having rejected the ideal. In other words, one is left wondering about changes in the ideal itself. Certainly, the past few decades have seen an immense amount of scholarship—in critical cartography, critical GIS, critical data studies and science; along with more practically oriented efforts to diversify the map community and make it more inclusive—that has both challenged and overthrown many of the preconceptions Edney had identified as integral to the ideal. If the cartographic ideal is a monolithic intellectual system that the map community labors under, unaware of what they are supporting, then how is it that some of these preconceptions are no longer central to cartography? Although Edney does provide some cover for this—arguing that sociocultural studies of the map have often run up against and critiqued parts of the cartographic ideal—there seems to be a mismatch between the idea of the cartographic ideal and the practice of cartography as conceived of by individuals. Then again, while this could be part of the whole point of the book, it is never explicitly stated or explored. Perhaps it is supposed to be up to future map studies scholars to determine and articulate their own understandings of this transitional period in the study of maps.

The book’s construction is first-class, with wide margins for copious notes and annotations. Edney has heavily cited and footnoted his sources, as the bibliography of forty pages illustrates, and his twenty-eight-page index provides a highly useful resource. The figures in the book are only in black and white, often on a half or quarter page, but they are sufficient for the thoughts Edney is advancing. For an academic text, the book is surprisingly accessible and free of excessive jargon, although the general public might still find it a bit too verbose for their tastes. Finally, the examples from map history are well integrated into the

text, and with Edney's larger argument, without bogging the reader down in unnecessary details.

In light of the numerous attacks on cartography, Edney's *Cartography: The Ideal and Its History* may perhaps be the nail in the coffin of cartography as we now know it. It would be an understatement to say that the book makes an important contribution to our understanding of maps as an intellectual endeavor. Edney's work lays out a plan for what map studies might become (and perhaps is already becoming) in a period of cartographic fervor both in and out of the academy. Simply put, all those interested in the future of the map, of map studies, and cartography should purchase a copy of this book, read it intently and with an open mind, and take its ideas seriously.

REFERENCES:

- Barney, Timothy. 2015. *Mapping the Cold War: Cartography and the Framing of America's International Power*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Harley, J. B. 1989. "Deconstructing the Map." *Cartographica* 26 (2): 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.3138/e635-7827-1757-9t53>.
- Rankin, William. 2016. *After the Map: Cartography, Navigation, and the Transformation of Territory in the Twentieth Century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wood, Denis. 2003. "Cartography is Dead (Thank God!)." *Cartographic Perspectives* 45: 4-7. <https://doi.org/10.14714/cp45.497>.

