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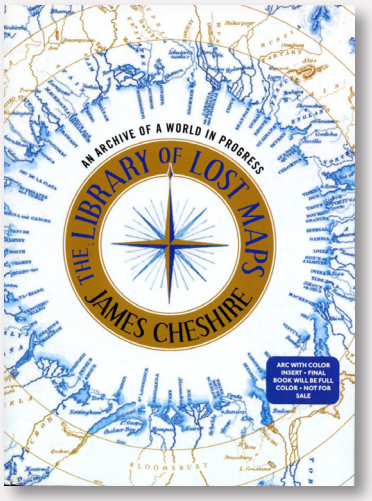

THE LIBRARY OF LOST MAPS: AN ARCHIVE OF A WORLD IN PROGRESS

By James Cheshire

Bloomsbury Publishing, 2025

414 pages, including maps

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Review by: Arden Benner, Trimble Maps

Like many of you, I have never set foot in the University College London (UCL) Map Library. I've never browsed its shelves, opened the drawers, or sorted through the piles of antiquated maps that are older by decades than most of us. After reading *The Library of Lost Maps*, however, I have a sense of nostalgia for this room I've never entered and whose (now retired) librarian I've never met. *The Library of Lost Maps* is not so much a book documenting a miscellaneous bunch of maps, as it is a novel about a library. It reads as if it were a memoir of the library itself, with the author James Cheshire taking on the role of dutiful biographer. Each chapter introduces a freshly rediscovered map pulled from the back of a drawer that was last opened who knows how long ago, and walks us through its background, reception, and acquisition by the archive. Through this framework we are introduced to a cast of characters (that is to say, actual cartographers) whose methodologies and motivations bring us outside the walls of UCL and into the mapmaker's own time and territories.

We are also introduced to their creations. Chapter by chapter, we're presented with map after map: maps created for war, maps documenting discovery, and plenty of maps that inspired change. Each is framed as the product of one or more cartographers' intent to persuade the reader of a particular worldview: "Cartographers have tremendous power to conjure lasting impressions of the world as they see it, but the consequences of their work often rest in the hands of decision makers using their creations" (244). From Cuba to Antarctica, the maps Cheshire pulled for this project cover almost two hundred years and countless miles.

Chapter One, "Welcome to the Map Library," opens with Cheshire's personal introduction to the long-forgotten map collection—squirreled away in a dusty basement map room—that he only entered almost ten years into his time at UCL. His comprehensive description of this surprisingly cavernous library that has spent the last twenty years unstaffed ranges from its contents—"Bulging out of 440 bespoke wooden drawers and stacked on the shelves of tens of glass-fronted cabinets were thousands of maps and hundreds of atlases" (9)—right down to the pervasive scent of aging paper. He takes particular care in describing the condition of each map he examines; some in much better shape than others.

Institutional map collections around the world are seeing declining numbers of visitors. Similarly, it is also becoming more and more rare (especially in the age of virtual classes) for teachers to reference bulky and delicate physical materials that can be accessed more quickly and easily on-screen via a Google search. Many of the maps stored in the UCL Map Library seem not to have seen the light of day for decades, and we are left to wonder what will become of these primary resources if their repository is ultimately deemed to have outlived its purpose. "Part of the problem with the present is that our attitudes change and what we value now may not be what we value in the

future, and the dull and ordinary of today may become highly valued curiosities tomorrow" (48).

Cheshire has pulled dozens of maps from the depths of the library—and tangentially mentions many others—integrating images of several into the margins and page spreads throughout the book. The marginal illustrations are a cool feature: some are maps on postage stamps or book covers; others are inset maps or other details from larger maps; and some are just library acquisition stamps. Sometimes the marginal maps are constrained to—occasionally shoehorned into—the page fly, and sometimes they shoulder the text body out of the way to take the room they need (Figure 1).

Each of the twelve chapters focuses on one or two maps that often share a common purpose, creator, or methodology. No map, as we well know, is created in a void—each and every map in the library came into being within the social, political, and cultural contexts of its making—and the author recounts those contexts, as well as the story of each map's rediscovery in the library, to drive the narrative forward. He spins us a tale about the cartographers and their backgrounds, sponsors, and motivations.

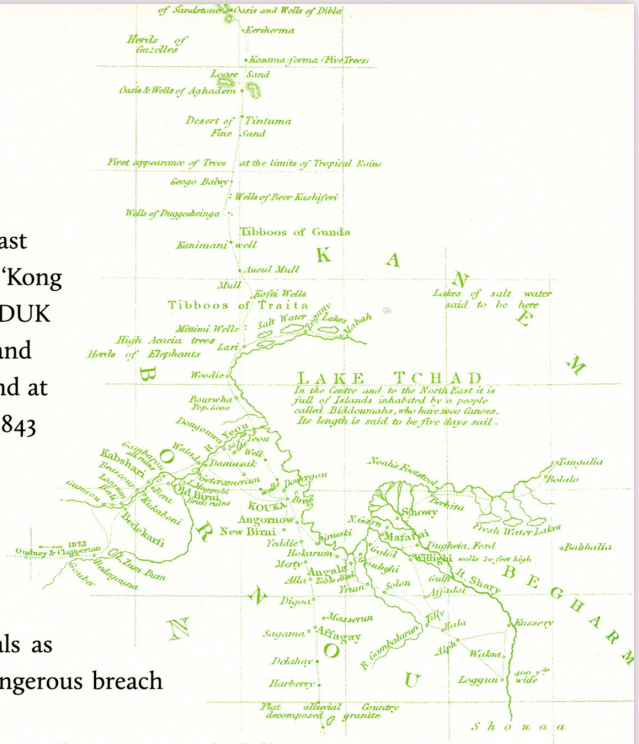
previously have been out of reach.[27]

They weren't perfect, not least with the appearance of the mythical 'Kong Mountains' (see Chapter 1) on the SDUK maps of the African continent, and Beaufort did sail a bit close to the wind at times by copying from other maps. In 1843 the committee of the SDUK wrote to Beaufort seeking permission to credit him on the maps and to ask that he disclose his sources, to which he replied: 'The early maps were ... mere copies of such materials as were accessible to us without any dangerous breach of copyright.'[28]

Elsewhere in Africa the SDUK maps offer some wonderfully vague but enticing labels including 'High Acacia trees' just to the north of 'Herds of Elephants' and the 'Loose Sand' marking a transition to 'Herds of Gazelles'.[29]

Quibbles aside, there is no doubt that Beaufort wanted the maps to be the best they could possibly be for the era. He could have compromised and produced the maps as cheap copies at bargain basement prices, justifying his efforts as still giving the working classes something they would not ordinarily have, or perhaps that such a class could not appreciate the artistic or scientific qualities imbued in the maps.

Would a coal miner or textile worker really notice or complain that their map is lacking the latest border or a recently named peak or river? It was a sign of respect to these workers that they were not offered compromises. It was also an indication of how seriously the SDUK took geography and enabling everyone to see the world beyond their horizons.



Map 35 [Extract]

West Africa II: Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (1839)
37.5 × 29.5cm

Figure 1. A marginal map on page 127. The region around Lake Chad in central Africa as it was "known" by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge in 1839. Notice the labels for "herds of elephants" and where salt water lakes are "said" to be.

One of my favorites appears in Chapter Four: "Bloomsbury." Francis Beaufort was a cartographer appointed to the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (SDUK)—an early nineteenth century group dedicated to public self-education in Britain. He served on its Map Committee, the mission of which was to make informative and topical maps available to the general public at moderate prices, an undertaking aided by the then-new and revolutionizing steam-powered printing press. Literacy rates were on the rise in the 1830s, and SDUK maps were a window into parts of the world to which many working, and even middle class, Britons had never before been exposed. In this regard, Cheshire quotes the 1840 president of the Royal Geographical Society: "Words following words in long succession, however ably selected those words may be, can never convey so distinct an idea of the visible forms of the earth as the first glance of a good Map" (128). Beaufort spearheaded the fifteen-year Map Committee project, publishing and disseminating over two hundred and twenty-four individual maps that, taken together, constituted a comprehensive atlas of the world. Cheshire speaks to Beaufort's dedication to prioritizing cartographic accuracy and quality over profit; he notably refused to compromise on function or design, no matter how uneducated or poor his audience may have been. Reading about this, it struck me how even today we are still fighting for the right to public knowledge, open resources, and quality, affordable education—almost two hundred years later.

The Library of Lost Maps, both the novel and the actual place, are evidence that there is value still to be found in the aging paper maps of yore, but, as the author writes, we shouldn't let our love for them halt our progress. In the modern day—where artificial intelligence is a looming force—these documents are essential to understanding where we have come from and how much we've grown. We too often take for granted the sophistication of our geographic education and how frequently we are exposed to news of events in the far-flung corners of the world. Just a few generations ago, the average person knew only hearsay about cultures thousands of miles abroad, and understood distant geographies only as vague shapes and labels on maps. Now that so many of us coexist with a smartphone in our pocket, maps may have changed forever, but even that would not diminish the value of the maps collected in the Library. They will continue to exist as they were when they were first created; acting as primary records of what once was instead of what currently is. As interesting, evocative, or even quaint as these maps may be, moving forward we are equipped with technology at our fingertips about which our cartographic predecessors may only have dreamed. Likewise, we can reach further and faster; what we create can be available globally in an instant. In Cheshire's words: "The technology will continue to evolve and, although big business has seen the value of maps, more and more people will appreciate that because such rich data is available, maps do not have to be the preserve of state actors or people with significant resources. Instead, they can be used to counter narratives and revolutionize how those in power are being held to account" (350). Today, maps are regularly made and shared to expose injustice, delineate food deserts, quantify climate change, demonstrate the extent of social inequity, and a myriad of other issues. Maps are integral to change: a fact *The Library of Lost Maps* emphasizes in chapter eleven, "Maps Go Digital."

Cheshire intersperses *The Library of Lost Maps* with bursts of levity, and more than once I caught myself smiling while I read—whether it be at the petty antics of nineteenth-century cartographers or a mystifying "herd of elephants" label on an early map of Africa. I found the book to be an easy and entertaining read, one that I think will be equally attractive to map hobbyists and established geographers. The UCL Map Library clearly contains a multitude of unique and historically important maps, and this novel highlights a well-chosen selection of them. The visuals are vibrant and frequent, and the anecdotes are well researched and recounted as if heard firsthand. Nonetheless, the limits of its scope are clearly defined. It is important to note that this book is specifically about the Map Library at University College London, and is not intended as a comprehensive guide to the history of mapmaking. Maps and cartographers from Europe—and particularly from the United Kingdom—predominate. Maps of London, for example, vastly outnumber maps of Asia within the book's examples. It is unclear if this circumstance simply reflects the overall makeup of the collection, or only the authorial selection from it, but the absence of cartographers from elsewhere in the world is noticeable. All the same, I would recommend this book to anyone interested in maps, geography, or to those who have nostalgia for print media.

From beginning to end, *The Library of Lost Maps* is a journey through almost two centuries of cartography, with something in it for everyone—beautiful maps, historical intrigue, and even a fake mountain range. The novel

contemplates what it has meant, and still means, to be a cartographer: the importance of the integrity behind our work and the optimism that comes with knowing that maps, even ones far past their publishing date, can outlast us all. I finished it feeling pride in my work as a cartographer, respect for the cartographers like Francis Beaufort that came before me, and inspired to create visuals that someone may someday want to add to a library of their own. Readers should approach *The Library of Lost Maps* with the expectation and anticipation of great maps ahead. They should also note that visits to the University College London Map Rooms are by appointment only, and—their **website** tells us—"are primarily for Geography Department and UCL staff/students." You can email geog.office@ucl.ac.uk for more information.

I will end this review with something James Cheshire wrote in his final chapter: a simple statement that I think will stick with me. "I now know that no two maps are the same because as soon as a map is held in someone's hands it transforms" (357).