



GREAT LAKES IN 50 MAPS

By Alex B. Hill

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127 Pages

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Great Lakes in 50 Maps is the latest in the “50 Maps” series by Belt Publishing, a Midwest publishing house with a thematic focus on the Rust Belt of the United States. Previous atlases in the series have focused on cities—*Buffalo in 50 Maps* (CP review), *Detroit in 50 Maps*, and *Pittsburgh in 50 Maps*, among others—making *Great Lakes in 50 Maps* the first of these atlases to expand its focus to a region, and to include data from Canada as well as the US. All these atlases take the form of blog-like listicles—a series of more or less independent maps making up a sort of slide-show—albeit in print. This gives them a fun, pop-reading appeal. They are not the most thematically heavy-hitting of publications, but they do not pretend to be.

It is abundantly clear that the unique character of the Great Lakes region holds a very special place of significance for the author of this particular “50 Maps” atlas. Following a brief introduction to the region, the atlas is organized into four sections: “History and Culture,” “Ecology,” “Infrastructure,” and “Physical.” Each section contains a variety of maps pertinent to its topic—ranging from simple thematic or reference maps that emphasize general facets of geography—such as “Islands” (94)—to more unique characteristics, such as “Pumpkin Production” (102). For the most part, the maps follow the minimalist aesthetic of other Belt Publishing atlases, consisting of simple gray base maps overlaid with one or two thematic datasets. Color is generally reserved for the thematic data, and there are rarely more than one or two

colors on a page. Each map is accompanied by a short, two to four paragraph description, sometimes providing context—such as “Shipwrecks” (42)—while at other times—as in “Lake Depths” (57)—simply reiterating whatever information can be read from the map. On occasion, the text helpfully describes the origin and/or processing of the mapped data; “Lighthouses” (80), “Blue Space and Mental Health” (62), and some others, do this well. These brief descriptions connect the visualizations to broader data infrastructures, positioning this atlas as the product of a vast network of sources, not to mention a tremendous amount of work on the part of its author. The five reference maps in the back of the atlas show detailed bathymetry, borders, and populated places for each of the Great Lakes.

As with most atlases, some maps stand out more than others, both thematically and cartographically. The map of “Sugar Maples” (70), for example, shows the density of these trees throughout the region, while the text describes the significance of maple sugaring to local Indigenous peoples, as well as touching on climate change risks. I found the use of soft greens to be visually pleasing, and the map is clear in its symbolization, showing density by the color of raster pixels. “Lake Monsters” (44) is a charming addition to the “History and Culture” section, and the icons used for different categories of lake monster make for a fun and unique classification scheme. “Lighthouses” (80) makes excellent thematic use of the *firefly* symbol style, depicting each lighthouse as a glowing point atop one of the few dark basemaps in the atlas. Perhaps my favorite map,



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however, is the two-page spread beginning on page 90, which proposes a driving route around the Great Lakes for a fully electric vehicle. This map, more than the others, provides a truly unique perspective on the Great Lakes in a way I'd never encountered.

While I am glad the atlas begins with a map of "Indigenous Names" (22), it is one that is unfortunately difficult to read. It contains many tiny place labels attached to barely visible circles atop what appears to be a population density layer. Even more confusingly, there are also larger labels that seem to indicate areas associated with various Indigenous groups, although the map fails to make the relation between these two label categories clear. It does not help that the Indigenous lake names are for the most part covered by other labels. The overall result is disappointing, considering how intertwined Indigenous names are with an understanding of place. More egregious, however, is the "Treaty Lands" (24) map on the following page. The map shows a jumble of overlapping polygons indicating native land ceded and reserved through treaties with the US government. While the map itself is fine—though does lack a legend—the map's description bafflingly presents the settler colonization of America as a nuanced, both-sides issue, and, strangely, emphasizes the differences between the rhetoric and actions of the fifth and seventh American presidents: James Monroe (1817–1825) and Andrew Jackson (1829–1837). I wished there had been some mention, by name, of Indigenous participants in treaty negotiations, instead of the presidents who oversaw some of the notoriously violent resettlement and removal policies. Frankly, I was disappointed by these maps, particularly because their themes are so important to how we understand the Great Lakes today.

On a cartographic design level, I was also disappointed by a lack of consistency. Many atlases establish a consistent visual vocabulary and grammar across the entire map collection. This language can be subverted where appropriate—at times to dramatic effect—but *Great Lakes in 50 Maps* seems to modify its symbolization standard almost at random. Most of the maps in the atlas contain the same three base layers: a dashed line representing the boundary of the Great Lakes watershed, polygons of "Rust Belt States" in light gray, and a darker gray polygon representing the "Rust Belt / Megalopolis" layered atop them. On most of the maps, the border of the watershed is black, but it is red on some—for example on "Start-Ups" (48) or "Lake Monsters" (44)—for no obvious reason. As a

cartographer who looks for, and teaches students about, the intentional use of visual language to communicate meaning, I find the result frustrating. If the symbol schema for the three features that appear on almost every map in the atlas had been kept consistent, then those base-map features would not need to appear in the legend on every map. This would, in turn, leave space in the legend for each map's thematic data; something that is missing from too many of them. The lack of thematic legends on so many maps is very frustrating. It is true that sometimes descriptions of thematic features can be found in the accompanying text, but not always—and when it is not, it requires the reader to consult the data sources index in the back of the book, or, as a last resort, to just guess.

There are also issues with occlusion from overlapping data, in addition to the already mentioned problem with obscured lake names on the "Indigenous Names" (22) map. The "Islands" (94) map uses graduated circles to show islands, based on their size, throughout the lakes. However, stretches of the coastline with a lot of small islands essentially become solid patches of black ink, completely occluding larger islands. Other graduated symbol maps struggle with the same problem, such as "Invasive Species Risk" (64), which has so much overlap among the partially transparent circles that it is very difficult to distinguish individual points. A white stroke around the edges of the circles might have been helpful, or some aggregation of close-set points. The handling of transparency, in general, is another source of consistent visual difficulties. In "Population Density" on page 37, a partially transparent county-level choropleth map is overlaid atop two shades of basemap gray (the Great Lakes states layer and the Rust Belt / Megalopolis layer), making it difficult to distinguish between the various shades of the choropleth, depending on whether or not they are atop the states, the megalopolis, or Canada (represented in white). For this map, the use of a single background layer, with one color, would have been preferable. The lake reference maps at the back of the atlas use bathymetric contours but they are not labeled, nor is there a note about their interval. In Lakes Huron, Michigan, and especially Ontario, the lines are so tightly packed that it is difficult to discern lake depths at all. Hypsometric tinting, and the addition of a legend, would have drastically improved the readability of these maps.

The role of Canada in this atlas is also confusing. After all, a large portion of the Great Lakes watershed is located there. While some maps, such as "Wetlands" (52), contain

data from both countries, others curiously omit Canada altogether. I am struck in particular by the “Football Proximity” (46) map, which shows every National Football League (NFL) team in the Rust Belt states, yet covers only *one* of the four Canadian Football League (CFL) teams located within the Great Lakes watershed—and that one was only mentioned in the description! Except for the CFL team locations (which is public knowledge) I suspect that data availability issues are likely to have contributed to the paucity of atlas information about the Canadian side of the border. Still, it is hard not to assume that the publisher’s focus on the Rust Belt played a significant role. Whatever the reason, this silence is unfortunate, as it weakens an atlas ostensibly about the Great Lakes watershed as a whole.

Overall, I was disappointed by the lack of visual coherence between maps, and by other general inconsistencies throughout the atlas. These were particularly frustrating because most of the maps are visually quite simple, and a few small edits would have made a big difference. Moreover, the simple style also undercuts the significance and majesty of the lakes themselves, which are often depicted in white, falling to the bottom of the visual hierarchy. Some maps, such as “Football Proximity,” as

previously mentioned, do little to articulate or complicate the unique character of the region. I understand the “50 Maps” atlases are often produced on short timelines, and I want to acknowledge how challenging it would have had to have been for a single person to produce all the writing and maps contained within. That said, I have enjoyed other atlases in this series more, including *Detroit in 50 Maps*—also by Alex B. Hill—which is a far more visually cohesive and striking atlas, and Vicky Johnson-Dahl’s *Buffalo in 50 Maps*. It is disappointing that this Great Lakes atlas seems so rushed.

I was both excited and honored by the opportunity to review *Great Lakes in 50 Maps*, and keenly felt the disappointment I have expressed upon reading it. I came to this review as a cartographer, instructor, researcher, and—most relevantly—as an atlas lover. When I read atlases, I focus on both individual maps and the ways in which they do or do not coalesce into a larger visual story. I am also currently a resident of the Great Lakes region, and, although I do not live within the Great Lakes watershed, I have spent a good deal of time on the shores of Lakes Michigan and Superior. I believe the lakes to be special, worth celebrating and protecting.

