

map libraries should add this book to their collections; the serious scholar of quantitative data graphics will place this book on the same shelf with those by Edward Tufte, and volumes by Cleveland, Bertin, Monmonier, MacEachren, among others, and continue the unending task of proselytizing for the best in statistical data presentation by example and through scholarship like that of Leland Wilkinson.

## Reference

Tufte, Edward R. *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information*. Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press, 1983.

## The New Nature of Maps: Essays in the History of Cartography

By J. B. (John Brian) Harley, edited by Paul Laxton, with an introductory essay by J. H. Andrews. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001. xviii + 334 pages, 36 illustrations, \$45.00 cloth (ISBN 0-8018-6566-2)

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A collection of seven essays by the late Brian Harley (1931-1991), *The New Nature of Maps* is an unusual book. Harley had such a book in mind but published its chapters separately in the late 1980s and early 1990s, in a variety of anthologies and academic journals, including *Cartographic Perspectives*. What he no doubt never intended was a posthumous volume that is as much about the author himself as it is his own critique of late-twentieth-century approaches to the history of cartography. Meticulously edited by Paul Laxton, a former student who inherited the role of Harley's "literary execu-

tor," *New Nature* is introduced by a lengthy and insightful critique of Harley's ideology and scholarship by John Andrews and topped off by a comprehensive list of Harley's publications, compiled by Matthew Edney, and a consolidated bibliography for the seven essays, compiled by Laxton.

In the preface, Laxton explains his rationale for putting Andrews's essay first. Brian Harley is the closest thing cartography has had to a cult figure, and even though his essays "will survive as important statements in map history . . . a critical evaluation is now both necessary and healthy" (xi-x). As a friend, critic, and frequent correspondent of Harley's, Andrews was not only "well placed" to offer an "objective" overview but readily able to contribute a shorter version of his essay "Meaning, Knowledge, and Power in the Map Philosophy of J. B. Harley," published in 1994 in Trinity College's occasional papers series.

Andrews's lively narrative and provocative opinions are a fitting complement to his subject's fluent, elegant, and at times inflammatory prose. Harley, he observes, was a "widely read" scholar who eagerly sought cartographically relevant insights in a diverse array of disciplines that included art history, literary criticism, Marxist ideology, and semiotics. But in what reads as a benevolent deconstruction, Andrews notes that "Harley considers most map makers to be less objective than they think they are," but asks, "Can the same judgment be applied to him?" (3). Probably not, one must conclude from Harley's tendency to unduly emphasize a map's minor decorative elements and to read unfriendly intent onto the map maker's use of size, centrality, color, and vernacular toponyms. Putting one's own country or continent at the center of a map—arguably an appropriate strategy for user-friendly design—thus becomes evidence of arrogant

ethnocentricity. Andrews also questions the Harleyian concept of "silences," which allows the critic to read sinister motives into what are merely "blank spaces" on a map. Is it fair, Andrews wonders, to accuse a cartographer with nothing to show of withholding relevant information? But as Harley argues later, in several of his essays, the answer at least occasionally can be a resounding yes.

Especially intriguing is Andrews's critique of Harley's use of cleverly phrased, seemingly broad generalizations. Of course, Andrews also indulges in generalities, as when he suggests "it may just be bad luck that when Harley's theories hit cartographic bedrock the results are often unsatisfying and sometimes factually incorrect" (29). Or when he observes that "a notable failure of Harley's explanations, then, is how much of their weight is borne by his contexts and how little—sometimes none—by the maps themselves" (30). And in what strikes me as the epitome of backhanded complements, Andrews asserts, "The fact remains that on a 'weak' interpretation Harley's essays may yet prove to be ahead of their time. His predecessors and contemporaries have known perfectly well that cartography works against a background of capitalism, elitism, nationalism, imperialism, and religious prejudice . . . [but] when young map historians start asking 'Daddy, what is class?' Harley's arguments will come into their own" (31). Don't hold your breath, eh?

As for the contemporary popularity of Harley's writings among humanities scholars, Andrews offers the understandable if not cynical explanation that Harley "has subjected the 'technocratic' claims of modern cartography to the kind of critical onslaught that outsiders are always glad to see leveled at any entrenched professional group" (32). Even so,

Andrews concludes that "Harley's philosophical writings deserve praise as a stimulus to thought in readers who might otherwise have remained consciously empirical" (32). And he predicts the essays' survival "as tokens of intellectual light-footedness and literary skill" (32).

Is there any reason, after Andrews's introduction, to read Harley's essays? Definitely. Not only well-written and often witty, they invite a skeptical reading certain to stimulate useful questioning on many levels, not just of old maps themselves but of scholars who purport to understand them—a broader and more thorough questioning that was, if we believe Andrews, Harley's underlying goal.

In the first essay, "Texts and Contexts in the Interpretation of Early Maps," Harley examines historians' reluctance to acknowledge maps as "social constructions" that reflect the interests and ideology of the people in power. Among his varied examples of maps that ought not be taken wholly at face value are U.S. Geological Survey topographic maps, on which a military interest in tree cover determines the placement of the green tint for woodland, and bird's-eye views of North American cities, which are "cultural texts that take possession of the land . . . proclaim a social gospel and serve to reinforce it" (45). Instead of looking only at what a map shows, Harley warns, historians would do well to "search for silences" (45), that is, for features the map author omits, deliberately or unconsciously, because of ideology. But in Harley's view, satellite images are as suspect as eighteenth-century topographic maps. "Representation is never neutral," he reminds readers, "and science is still a humanly constructed reality" (46). To reinforce this practiced skepticism, Harley invokes the work of art historian Erwin Panofsky

to suggest a trio of iconographic parallels in art and cartography. For instance, in the sense that symbolic meaning in maps is akin to the intrinsic meaning of paintings, "a Rand McNally highway map speaks to the American love affair with the automobile" (48). I'm not certain how much salience Harley's examples hold for most historians, but the essay should surely impress cartophiles with the power of maps and map makers.

"Maps, Knowledge, and Power" offers a more theoretical view of maps as a form of discourse and surveillance: ideal tools of a state intent on declaring nationhood, claiming territory, or establishing private-property rights. Under the heading "Subliminal Geometry," Harley raises the now-familiar ethnocentric worldviews of the European Renaissance and asserts that a Mercator chart centered on Europe so that "two-thirds of the earth's surface appears to lie in high latitudes must have contributed to a European sense of superiority" (66). An interesting hypothesis, perhaps, but nowhere does Harley (or anyone else for that matter) offer convincing evidence that this sense of superiority really existed or, even if it did, that carto-inflation has ever had even a minor impact on war, conquest, or diplomatic intrigue. (Ten years ago, in the smog of postmodern theorizing, I might not have said this. But see how well a critical reading of Harley stimulates questioning.)

Published in *Imago Mundi* in 1988, "Silences and Secrecy: the Hidden Agenda of Cartography in Early Modern Europe" is perhaps Harley's single most famous essay. Rejecting the term "blank spaces," favored in older texts on map history, he asserts that "silences" merit interpretation as "active human performance," a phrase borrowed from the philosopher Bernard Dauenhauer. In developing his theory of cartographic silences, Harley leans heavily on

the writings of French philosopher Michel Foucault, who "seems to have accepted the map as a tool of state measurement, enquiry, examination, and coercion" (87). If one buys Foucault's thesis that knowledge is power, it's a short deductive leap to conclude that when the state is the map author even unintentional silences can be meaningful. More intriguing are those silences presumed to be intentional for reasons of military strategy, political propaganda, or commercial advantage. In pre-eighteenth-century Europe, of course, the entire map was often secret. But at least a few intriguing instances of censorship are apparent, such as the suppression of knowledge about Terra del Fuego as demonstrated by a pair of facsimile excerpts from 1617 and 1618 versions of Willem Janzoon Blaeu's *Nova Orbis Terra*. Harley's suspicion that map authors were neither telling it all or telling it like it is (or was) led him to endorse cartographic educator Phillip Muehrcke's comment that a map is "a controlled fiction" (107).

The fourth essay, "Power and Legitimation in the English Geographical Atlases of the Eighteenth Century," evokes memories of the 1984 Library of Congress symposium on atlases, for which an industriously provocative Brian Harley mined the library's atlas collection for examples of maps as instruments of power. He didn't have to look far because atlases in eighteenth-century England often depended on powerful patrons, eager to assert social or political superiority, in particular the wealth and influence of the nobility and landed gentry. Maps and atlases legitimated the prevailing social-economic-political-class structure by portraying its relationships to landscape and territory as normal. Harley argued this thesis effectively with eleven maps, map excerpts, title pages, cartouches, and subscriber lists that reveal at-

las making as a convenient means for reinforcing claims to power at home and to colonies abroad. Convincing exhibits make this one of his least contentious essays.

Harley's penchant for borrowing philosophical or humanist buzzwords is most readily apparent in "Deconstructing the Map," in which he argues that maps are often not what cartographers assume them to be. If the notion of deconstruction is both troubling and muddled, it's partly because there's no insightfully lucid *Deconstruction for Dummies* telling us how to do it. Although the concept of understanding something by taking it apart seems straightforward in college chemistry, where it's called analysis, the process seems orders of magnitude more complex when applied to literary texts or maps for which context is largely speculation. For Harley and most literary theorists, deconstruction thus becomes an interpretative act in which taking apart looks a lot like tearing down.

One of Harley's prime targets is the "myth" of "progressive science," which those academic and professional cartographers who eagerly appended the label "science" to mapmaking and GIS seem to have bought into. It's here that I feel a strong intellectual kinship to Brian Harley, who was not impressed with the hype of disciplinary posturing and the rush to rename journals. But as I write in late 2001, his vigorous attack on cartographic rhetoric seems a bit dated insofar as it's abundantly obvious, or should be, that most maps are not the objective, value-neutral tools that some naïve map makers apparently think they are. I know what Brian was trying to say, but his closing argument that postmodernism offers a reliable way to discover meaning in maps is undermined by the feeling that needlessly complex, whimpering rhetoric has little to do with serious, fruitful questioning.

Published posthumously in 1994, the essay "New England Cartography and the Native Americans" reveals Harley at his best, in this instance as a critic of the omission, if not suppression, of indigenous settlements on colonial maps of New England. In clear and elegant prose, he describes the use of maps as weapons by colonists who not only renamed and subdivided the lands of peoples they displaced but left a cartographic legacy that Harley eloquently labels "a discourse of the acquisition and disposition that lie at the heart of colonialism" (195).

The final essay, "Can There Be a Cartographic Ethics?" begins by asking what one means by "ethics" in the context of present-day professional cartography. Here Harley challenges the notion of ethics based on traditional values, practices, and standards of conduct. One villain is the "internal standards" of a profession whose products at least occasionally promote conquest, oppression, and questionable warfare—all with serious moral impact outside the professional activities of map makers. Other villains are positivism, the "'cartographer knows best' fallacy," "introspective technophilia," and federal restrictions on cartographic content. I think I know what Brian was trying to say here—surely it was more than just another round of GIS bashing—but I wish he had been more specific about policies and practices he found abhorrent. It's important for map makers to question what they do, but I'm not sure there's much point in questioning their existence.

I knew and liked Brian Harley, and greatly appreciate his fluency with language as well as his eloquent and original insights on maps, maps authors, and map use—all of which are excellent reasons for appreciating Loxton's and Andrews's careful packaging of his most philosophically chal-

lenging writings. That said, I am curious to see how others read this book. Will they succumb uncritically to Brian's persuasive rhetoric, or be strongly influenced, as I was, by Andrews's introduction? Either way, I'm certain, they will find the experience rewarding.

## Reference

Andrews, J. H. 1994. Meaning, Knowledge, and Power in the Map Philosophy of J. B. Harley. *Trinity Papers in Geography* [Trinity College, Dublin] no. 6.