

The Study of Maps Made by First Nations Peoples: Retrospect and Prospect

In the mid 1970s, I stumbled on the then almost forgotten fact that First Nations North Americans had long made what Euro Americans intuitively categorized as maps. Those that I was able to examine here in England fascinated me. Few others seemed to share my enthusiasm, though Herman Frills of the National Archives urged me to develop it: "Malcolm, nobody in the United States is taking serious interest in Indian maps" (ca. 1975). During the 1980s and 1990s there was to be a gradual increase in interest, mainly among a few historians of cartography with backgrounds in academic geography. Pervasive these in our writings included the ways in which First Nations' maps differed from Euro Americans', their roles in contact contexts, and their incorporation in Euro American cartography. Together, we discovered many lost or long forgotten maps though we were slow to recognize different survival states. Our collecting nets were widened by the less restrictive than hitherto definition of "map" announced by Brian Harley and David Woodward in *The History of Cartography, Vol. 1* (1987). When compared with the previous—pre World War I—cycle of interest, we certainly raised the rigor of research and presentation. We benefited from improved reprographics, as did our publications. Some of us found funds to finance work on originals.

As a group we shared a number of weaknesses. We were middle aged, white, academics, products of the post World War II years and influenced by teachers whose ideas and assumptions were formed in the 1930s. Although we did not know it, Eurocentrism permeated our thinking. We treated First Nations' maps as inferior versions of our own: usually looking for similarities and often ignoring differences. Rarely did we try to place them in the indigenous context in which they were made. Some of us assumed that the maps would eventually be placeable in a universal development sequence. Charles Darwin had influenced us more than either Karl Marx or the then new wave of French philosophers, but the word "evolution" was not, I think, used by any of us.

Perhaps because our academic roots were in disciplines not being swept by the ferment of ideas then transforming other parts of academia, our work had many shortcomings. We did not try to understand the cultural perspectives of spatial perceptions of the First Nations mapmakers. Less forgivable, we did not seek the advice of First Nations individuals who might have helped us to do so. We were slow to recognize fundamental problems that others were facing up to [e.g., Calvin Martin's (1987) *The American Indian and the Problem of History*]. Our understanding of cultural anthropology was limited. We had received little or no training in the close reading of texts. The only geometries we were aware of were Euclidean and Projective. That there were other, more appropriate geometries was beyond our awareness. We failed to anticipate the analytical potential of GIS. Least forgivable, we ignored the writings of a few reflective and

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socially aware “insiders” that could and should have widened our horizons. I think especially of Brian Harley (particularly 1988-1992), Robert Rundstrom (1990 onwards) and Denis Wood (1992 onwards).

Notwithstanding all these shortcomings and missed opportunities, by the end of the millennium we had created a platform from which others might begin a new cycle in the study of First Nations’ maps. Hopefully, the new beginning would follow in much less time than the sixty-year hiatus that had preceded our efforts. But had we done enough to stimulate a next generation? For the most part our writings had been directed at fellow historians of cartography and we seemed to have had little or no influence beyond them. There were, of course, exceptions. Because of where it was published, my first, most immature, and least considered paper is still the most frequently quoted of my contributions to the field. An embarrassment I am still learning to live with. Or should I rate it high among my successes?

There were, of course, “others” from non geography-cartography backgrounds: archeologists, cultural anthropologists, historians, lawyers, literary scholars, and etc. Mostly in the their mid careers, their contributions were, and remain, significant, but they were byproducts of dominant interests and likely to remain “one offs.” Several of these were published as chapters in G. Malcolm Lewis (Ed.) (1998) *Cartographic encounters: Perspective on Native American Mapmaking and Map Use*. These, and similar contributions enriched the 1980s-1990s corpus of research but did not initiate a new cycle.

It is against this background of a possible hiatus that I welcome the research of Renee Louis, Margaret Pearce and Julie Rice-Rollins as reported in the papers published here. Though the first products of their respective research careers, together they could well mark the beginning of a new cycle. Like my generation of “insiders”, their backgrounds are in academic geography and cartography. But there is much that is new and exciting. Unlike the previous cycle, there are Native inputs. All three developed their interest in the rigors of graduate school, rather than it emerging as a byproduct of earlier research. A glance at the bibliographies reveals their grasp of pertinent current ideas and issues.

Each author shows respect and understanding of the culture with whose maps she is concerned. The two studies involving living cultures derive much from direct experience. Having spent only one under-prepared day in the field with a Native North American (and benefiting enormously from the experience), I am impressed by Julie Rice-Rollins’ systematic interviewing of Lakota Sioux elders. My generation was fairly adept at rediscovering long-forgotten maps in archives, libraries, and museums, but none, I think, equaled her success in becoming aware of hitherto unknown maps still in Native hands.

Margaret Pearce has opened up new archival sources. But she has done far more than that. Her recognition that some maps were primarily composed of words is important and should be further explored in a range of other contexts. She has also done something hitherto rare in the history-of-cartography field: designed her research to test conclusions (concerning encroachment techniques) arising from research by others on other kinds of maps (small-scale European printed promotional maps). This kind of testing must surely replace the one-off, freestanding investigations that have given substance, but regrettably little structure to the history-of-cartography field.

Renee Louis has expressed honestly, and perhaps for the first time in print, the inner conflicts faced by a Native cartographer in trying to come to terms with Western science and Indigenous traditions. In doing so, she

has drawn on a recent literature on Native Science, knowledge, and epistemology unknown to most cartographers. Her emphasis on the importance of toponyms, stemming from a traditional oral structuring of the world, compliments Margaret Pearce's conclusions on the primacy of words over graphics. In the substantive part of her paper she reviews the practical issues faced by three groups of Hawaiians in using mapping and GIS software in the course of funded research that seeks to preserve language, culture and the environment. Hitherto abstruse issues, often associated with the past, are becoming politically significant.

I applaud these papers, not only for their content, but also for what I hope they herald: a new cycle of research on Native North American maps and mapmaking in the present, as well as the past. I have no doubt that those involved will do better research than my generation in the cycle now ending. In addition, and even more importantly, they must succeed in a task we even failed to recognize: promote an awareness among the "non mappy" of the continent-wide existence, importance, and roles of the many kinds of Native maps. To take but on recent example, it is regrettable that in his much acclaimed and innovative history of early eastern North American presented from a Native perspective, *Facing East from Indian Country* (2001), Daniel K. Richter should apparently make no reference to them. Whether from oversight, ignorance, or failure to appreciate their significance, only he can say, but my generation must take the blame. Most of what we published was directed at an already-aware readership. Almost none of it was promotional.

I welcome this evidence of a new cycle. Like me, most of my surviving co-workers of the past quarter century are running out of energy, finding it increasingly difficult to grasp new ideas, and perhaps developing post-retirement interests. I feel sure that they will be pleased that a younger generation of researchers is now emerging, that they will join me in inviting them to take over the baton, and wish them success and satisfaction if they accept the challenge. They will not be alone. Robert Rundstrom has pointed several ways ahead, and there is an emerging interest in traditional cartography on other continents.