

## Maps and History: Constructing Images of the Past

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Felix Driver

'Geography is about maps, History about chaps': a tired cliché, of course, though it tells us something about the ways in which disciplinary boundaries were constructed during the relatively recent past. Few historians today would make such a facile claim, if only because of the absurdity of the notion that only 'chaps' make history. Yet, according to Jeremy Black, many professional historians are still reluctant to take maps seriously - not just as illustrations of historical realities, but as arguments in themselves. In the words of the concluding sentence of this book, 'If historians are spatially illiterate and geographically ignorant, this will seriously affect their knowledge and understanding of the past' (p. 241). This argument clearly extends well beyond the ostensible focus of *Maps and History* on the historical atlas as a way of understanding the past. In truth, this is a Trojan horse of a book: though intended as a scholarly study of a specific genre of historical knowledge, it broaches a number of much more general questions, not only about maps in general, but about the shifting relations between history and geography.

In recent years, a number of works by influential historians have addressed 'geographical' themes: I am thinking here of Simon Schama's book on *Landscape and Memory*, Richard Grove on *Green Imperialism* or more recently David Arnold's excellent text on *The Problem of Nature*. Other works advancing a strongly geographical perspective (such as Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* or Paul Carter's *The Road to Botany Bay*) have been widely read by historians. For those labouring on the borderlands of geography and history, such books offer new possibilities of dialogue across disciplinary boundaries which appear increasingly unhelpful in addressing themes like the iconography of landscape, environmental history or the cultural geographies of empire. Of course historians have not been entirely reluctant to work with maps:

historians in my own institution, for example, have been involved in the publication of a number of illustrated atlases portraying the global history of Islam, the history of the Crusades, medieval Britain and the history of the British Empire. Interestingly, however, such works are often regarded as essentially descriptive and/or popular: intended to disseminate academic knowledge in an accessible form, rather than original contributions in their own right. In the world of RAE, they presumably count for little: icing on the cake, rather than strictly scholarly fare. As Jeremy Black's book makes clear, this state of affairs would have been incomprehensible to earlier generations of historians, and not simply because of the bizarre machinery of Research Assessment Exercises: who knows what Lucien Febvre or John R. Green might have to say about the 'geographical ignorance' of historians today?

By taking historical atlases as his primary theme, Jeremy Black hopes to make historians more critical of the processes by which such texts are constructed; and to show how an historian might find more in a map than mere illustration. He represents himself as something of a pioneer: 'There is no guide book on how to produce an historical atlas: the field is too diverse and inchoate....Equally, there is no guide as to how best to write about the subject, no developed corpus or literature to build on' (p. 133). This is something of an overstatement: the literature on historical cartography, as Jeremy Black's footnotes attest, is very substantial, though a relatively small part of it is concerned with historical atlases per se. In particular, historians working in this area are indebted to the seminal work of the late Brian Harley, and his colleagues at the University of Wisconsin: the multivolume *History of Cartography* project edited by Harley and David Woodward for the University of Chicago Press is an absolutely indispensable resource for all historians in the field (Its web site is <http://feature.geography.wisc.edu/histcart> [2]). Jeremy Black's primary focus - though he ranges much wider than this - is the 'historical atlas', a genre which proves very difficult to define. For one thing, works described as 'atlases' often contain much more than maps: indeed, in many cases charts and text make up the bulk of their contents. Moreover, distinguishing the 'historical atlas' from atlases in general, and identifying their 'historical' component, is by no means straightforward. It becomes clear in the course of his book that Jeremy Black defines an 'historical atlas' as one primarily concerned with the representation of history as an (accurate) chronology of events in time, implying a process of secular development. Thus maps which fail to distinguish accurately the different chronologies of events are for him not properly 'historical'. John Speed's maps seem to fall into this category, while topographers like John Norden and William Camden are said not to have conceived their work (initially at any rate) as history at all. Jeremy Black also complains that many other works, such as John Andrews' 1797 *Historical Atlas of England* fail to live up to their title, being largely concerned with physical and ecclesiastical topics rather than historical.

Because of his inescapably modern definition of the 'historical', Jeremy Black's book is mainly concerned with historical atlases published during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His first chapter ('Developments to 1800') is thus a breezy tour through the centuries and across continents in order to arrive at his main point of departure: the long nineteenth century. It is at this point that the book really begins in earnest: the reader is offered a panorama of atlases published throughout Europe and North America, focussing especially on Britain, France and Germany. Atlases of the classical world, and of the bible, are related to the development of archaeology and biblical scholarship (though it is acknowledged here, as elsewhere, that intellectual shifts are not always immediately reflected in the composition of atlases); military themes in French and German atlases also receive particular attention. The historical atlas was to become an essential component of an influential tradition of historical (or comparative) geography, concerned with the evolving frontiers of states. With the advent of mass schooling, the market for such atlases expanded dramatically; and the national and imperial ideologies of the nineteenth century are readily apparent in European school atlases of the period. Jeremy Black has many interesting things to say about these atlases, including the Eurocentrism of their perspective, the teleological assumptions they made, the iconography of their maps and the associations they encouraged between the history of classical and modern empires. (We learn, for example, that the use of the colour red to denote British imperial possessions dates from 1831, and was only in general usage after 1850). If the imprint of nationalism on the historical atlas is unmistakable, however, the reverse is less self-evident: Black's treasure-trove of examples raises questions about the extent to which the discourses of nationalism worked through, and even depended upon, such

imagery. This is a more challenging proposition: how might historians of nationalism consider the role of the atlas in the making of the nation?

Imperialism and nationalism are only part of the story, however: Black's reference to Wyld's Great Globe (which occupied Leicester Square from 1851 to 1862) prompts further reflections not only on the multiple sources of people's fascination with maps, but also on the relationships between maps and other images and objects. Imperial themes are undoubtedly important in understanding the history of European globe-making (the subject of a forthcoming book by the geographer Denis Cosgrove); but do they explain why Wyld's construction proved such an attraction to Londoners? What too of the anarchist Elisée Reclus' proposal that a great globe be exhibited at the Paris Exposition of 1900? Reclus was interested in the relations between humanity and the earth, and though his own work was in some respects distinctive, this theme was to be central to the disciplinary programme of geographers during this period. Jeremy Black devotes considerable attention to the role of environmentalism in historical atlases: his primary concern is with its relation to nationalism, and the extent to which the mapping of the physical landscape was an adjunct to national myth-making, as in the concept of the 'natural frontiers' of states. This concern with environmentalism is pursued into the twentieth century, where it is portrayed as becoming more diverse: while certain varieties of geopolitical thinking continued to subordinate environmental concerns to nationalist agendas, the development of geographical thought - in the work of Vidal de la Blache, Lucien Febvre or Carl Sauer for example - provoked new interest in the mapping of environmental history.

Nearly half of *Maps and History* is devoted to historical atlases after 1945. The chapter titles don't really give an adequate sense of their contents, and in one or two cases the contents are too disparate to amount to a really focussed discussion: but what is sometimes lost in terms of depth is balanced by the extent of coverage. Jeremy Black's purview extends well beyond Britain, to encompass not only West European atlases, but also the atlases of Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, indigenous peoples in North America, Australia and New Zealand, Japan and South-East Asia. The discussion of historical atlases produced in communist Eastern Europe and the USSR is particularly intriguing, though for some reason the book does not include a single visual image from the many examples in this category which were discussed. I was fascinated to learn, for example, that the *Torténelmi atlasz* published in Budapest in 1961 included maps of ninth-century slave revolts against Arab rule, economic change in early modern Serbia, the geography of Chartism and the Indian mutiny; while the more sophisticated *Atlas zur Geschichte* published in the DDR from 1973 included maps of the economy of the Roman empire and popular revolts throughout early-modern Europe. Jeremy Black presents these atlases as a product of the agenda of state socialism: while he notes their preference for social and economic themes, and their innovative focus on neglected aspects of the political and economic history of Eastern Europe, he argues that they consistently betrayed their subservience to communist and Soviet agendas. (The extent to which historians and geographers were merely puppets of their political masters is surely open to question: closer readings of these texts might yield different interpretations). In contrast, he argues that Western atlases published during this period were more diverse and less constrained, although he notes that what he calls their 'teleological approach to the past' combined with an enduring Eurocentrism left a mark even on such apparently objective works as the *Times Atlas of World History*.

While Jeremy Black is perhaps excessively harsh on the atlases produced within state socialist countries, he provides a more sympathetic account of atlases devoted to the history of indigenous peoples around the world. Here he draws upon a large body of work, notably that of Brian Harley, concerned with the absences and mis-representations in conventional atlases which effectively erased the history of native peoples from the map. In this regard, Cole Harris' first volume of the *Historical Atlas of Canada* (1987) was clearly path-breaking in its attempt to map the economic and social patterns of indigenous life before and after European settlement. While Black notes some of the problems of interpretation which such projects must face, he might also have paid more attention to the ways in which the mapping of native territories is inextricably linked with contemporary political and legal disputes over land. Anthropologists, geographers and historians have been directly involved in court cases in Canada, Australia and New Zealand involving native land claims, in which the central issue at stake is the historicity of claims to the possession of territory. The

compiling of historical maps and atlases thus constitutes a directly political intervention in this field; and one, moreover, which is fraught with difficulty, especially given the problem of translation between Western and aboriginal conceptions of space. While this issue is alluded to in *Maps and History*, it deserves more extended treatment: historical maps are pieces of evidence in the court-room as well as in the academy.

What guidance does *Maps and History* give to those who might be contemplating the publication of an historical atlas today? The answer is, quite a lot. For one thing, there is a chapter on the economics of atlas-publishing after 1945, which considers the global economy of publishing and the changing relationships between publishers, authors and markets. The substantial costs involved in producing a high-quality atlas are more than enough to make any aspiring atlas editor think twice: the three-volume *Historical Atlas of Canada*, for example, is said to have cost over 14 million Canadian dollars to produce. In this context, it is clear that compromises must be made. However, I am not sure what to make of the suggestion that 'Atlases that have a totally commercial rationale are inherently more conservative in content' (p. 143). Jeremy Black's account straightforwardly counterposes the imperatives of the marketplace and those of academic integrity: yet surely his own publishing career suggests that these are not always and inevitably antagonistic? One does not have to have a utopian view of the marketplace to hold onto the hope that historians may be able to offer interpretations - including those presented in historical atlases - which are both popular and to a degree unsettling. As Jeremy Black himself points out, the *Times Atlas* itself represents in some respects a challenge to some (if not all) dominant assumptions about global history. The notion that 'Atlases are among the most conservative of historical forms' (a statement made in the preface to the *Penguin Historical Atlas of North America* 1995) may turn out to be less appropriate in an age of computer-aided cartography and virtual publication. As Jeremy Black concludes, Brian Harley's call for 'a greater pluralism of cartographic expression' may in fact be realised not only through a greater awareness of non-Western mapping traditions, but also by recent developments in the technology of graphic representation: the virtual atlas may yet open new possibilities for the historian interested in projecting a new vision of the past.

*Maps and History* provides a broad survey of one strand in the history of atlas publishing: an overview of the history of the historical atlas and the forms it has taken in many different parts of the world, mainly since 1800. In the course of the book, Jeremy Black ranges still wider than this, drawing especially on the work of a large number of historical geographers, past and present. In this respect, I think this book has a significance beyond its particular theme: it represents a welcome attempt to open some doors that have for too long remained shut, or at least half closed, in the corridors of the academy. While I have some reservations about the definition of the 'historical atlas' which Black assumes, and occasional grumbles which stem essentially from the sweeping nature of his account, I can only applaud his contribution to the growing dialogue between historians and others interested in the way we (and others) conceive and inhabit the spaces of the earth. This is all the more welcome given his efforts here, and elsewhere, to take history beyond the walls of the academy itself: or rather, to engage with those forms of historical knowledge that are already in the public domain. As Raphael Samuel once wryly remarked, there is a lot of history to be found beyond the tea-room of the Institute of Historical Research: some of it is to be found in maps and atlases, objects which continue to fascinate as much as they instruct.

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