

Review essay

Reinventing the map collection: new journeys through (un)known worlds of London and America

Mapping London: Making Sense of the City. By SIMON FOXELL

London: Black Dog Publishing, 2007. 278 pp. £39.95 ISBN 978 1 906155 070

Mapping America: Exploring the Continent. By T HOWELLS AND D MCCORQUODALE

London: Black Dog Publishing, 2010. £24.05 ISBN 978 1 907317 088

Publishing map collections in sophisticated hardcover books may appear an unimaginative project given so many similar projects in recent years. While the accessibility of all kinds of maps has become easier with the internet, the demand for map collections in book form seems to persist. With its mapping series, Black Dog Publishing has joined this trend. They started off in 2007 with *Mapping London: making sense of the city*, followed by books on England (Foxell 2008) and New York (McCorquodale 2009) (then their remarkable project, the EU ROMA Gypsies; Orta 2010) and now they have continued this with *Mapping America: exploring the continent*. This review takes a comparative view of the first and the latest book published in this series, the books about London and America. The review does not intend to evaluate the whole series, but is aimed at a comparative view of the two specific works. It takes these two examples as exemplars to evaluate how far this series succeeds in a new attempt to give a comprehensive overview of the state of maps and mapping for the selected areas. Other works in this series follow a similar approach, but shall not be discussed in detail in this review.

Maps can help us to make sense of a place, be it of a place that we know, or a place completely unknown to us. An example of a city as diverse and complex as London presents some challenge. Perhaps making sense of a place or an area is the ultimate reason why we need and want map collections.

Mapping London is the work of architect Simon Foxell, who compiled a collection of more than 150 maps that explore the city's history and character. It is divided into four sections which set a loose framework for this book: rather than following a linear historic timeline, the sections emphasize different thematic

aspects that contribute to the diverse geographies of London. Each section contains a general explanatory text that puts the maps into an order as viewed from a common perspective and creates story lines around them. The perspective refers to developments in cartography and mapping as well as important developments in London's urban form. Each single map is accompanied by a brief explanation and bibliographical details on the map itself, its creator and its origins. This allows the book to be enjoyed as a well elaborated assortment of some of the most remarkable maps of London's history with some concise but very valuable information on each of the works.

The first section concentrates on *change and growth of London* and comes closest to what is a short outline of London's history told in maps. It contains a selection of the most significant maps that have been created of London throughout the centuries: a detail from the Copperplate map with its beautifully detailed depictions of houses and people is shown here as well as more precisely surveyed maps from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. Eighteenth century maps by John Rocque tell a story of a city that is increasingly gaining an obsession with itself and may be an indication for the early roots of today's image of London. Panoramic views and a more random selection of thematic maps ranging from demographics to the physical environment – outlining the evolution of mapping in the nineteenth and twentieth century – round off this section. It is this section of the book which gives the most comprehensive picture of the city.

Serving the city is the title of the second section which uses maps to investigate the structure and functioning of London. A large part is dedicated to an analysis of the changing political boundaries and structures, including a perhaps slightly too extensive part on visionary maps from various epochs. An impressive example of how a supposedly simplified draft of urban structure can be a very meaningful way of making sense of the city is JH Forshaw's and Patrick Abercrombie's 'County of London Plan', a social and functional analysis from 1943. The map also marks a post-war change in the approach to analysing and visualising London in its wider

metropolitan extent. This particular section also includes the theme of transport, which is successfully depicted not only in maps showing the underground network (featuring of course Henry Beck) but also in all other means of transport. Not all of these depictions are from the present: a map of 1857 London toll gates and a cycle map from around 1900 are just two examples of the gems in this collection. Incidentally these are topics that became relevant again in recent years and are nowadays turned into new maps again, which unfortunately are not featured in this book. And finally, this section also explores other aspects of infrastructure and the related field of health, which inevitably features John Snow's 1855 map of cholera cases.

The third section on *living in the city* takes a more individual perspective that describes London from the perspective of working, living and being in the city, a very broad sweep that contains maps such as one of the 2007 marathon which is squeezed between a map of the British Empire Exhibition 1924 and the procession for the Coronation of George III in 1761, as well as various tourist views. The common theme does not create a consistent story, resulting in a very heterogeneous and fragmented chapter. Nevertheless there are many interesting and perhaps also less known perspectives on London in here.

The final section on *imagining London* is even more heterogeneous and fragmented, containing visions and concepts of London. While Ebenezer Howard's Garden Cities of To-Morrow from 1898 finds a good home in the second section, most other maps in here take more unusual perspectives, such as the London Monopoly game board and maps created from an artist's perspective. The section and the book closes with an exploration of current trends in digital mapping, leaving the future (map) visions of London to the imagination of the reader.

This compilation of maps is very powerful in enhancing and perhaps also re-adjusting our image of London. A non-Londoner's mental map of the city gets a clearer picture of the paths (thankfully devoid of the underground train line as guiding line), edges (what can be more striking than the Thames, but we know this already!), districts (drawn in perfection by Forshaw and Abercrombie), nodes (there is much more than Westminster), and landmarks (reduced to all their simplicity on London's Children's Map). All these elements from the maps of over six centuries come together and achieve what the book's subtitle suggests: making sense of the city, making sense of London, and many of which we can still learn from in the current political and economic state of the city. Perhaps map makers should look back and re-draw some of the maps, such as Charles Booth's social survey from over 100 years ago.

Making sense of a diverse city such as London is challenging enough but now consider the task of trying to make sense of a whole country. Editors Frank

Jacobs and Fritz Kessler attempt to do this, following a similar concept as *Mapping London*, by presenting a selection of more than 120 maps from the United States in *Mapping America*. The book covers a history of mapping over four centuries and traces the exploration of a whole continent since its discovery by its European colonisers right up to its current state. Like the London book, it is divided into four major sections which are precluded by two substantiated essays from the editors discussing the role of maps and mapping in America.

America's discovery itself, as Jacobs points out, was a huge cartographic blunder, and it took quite some time until the continent was mapped in a geographically more accurate way. It was Martin Waldseemüller's Universalis Cosmographica map of 1507 that first mentioned the toponym America – with North America still being an insignificantly small stretch on the globe. And it still took centuries for America to be mapped more accurately: Jean Javier's L'Amérique Septentrionale map from 1782 still bears the idea of a large inland Sea of the West in the northwestern region. It is one of the examples showing how long it took for America to emerge on the map and to figure in (European) people's minds.

Telling stories, as Kessler claims, is one of the specific roles that maps can take. It is the story of discovery which is told via the maps shown in the first section of the book, *Discovering the continent*. The discovery of America is also the story of the emerging federal states and the formation of the United States as an emerging power on the world map.

Understanding the history of the States is one approach to understanding America, but there is much more to making sense of today's society: it is the environment beyond the borders and frontiers of discovery, the social and physical space which is described in the second section of the book, *Describing the continent*. It starts with physical and environmental issues that characterize the United States – geology, disasters and hazards, animals and agriculture. The beautifully detailed map of state birds, created by Raynor Ganan in 2009, is one of the great maps that show that contemporary mapping does not always have to be done using GIS technology. These maps are followed by an extensive part on demographic issues, ranging from maps on native Americans to the results of the 2008 presidential election. This section corresponds to the section in the London book on rebuilding London from various times. Although it is lengthy, it contains some interesting and sometimes provocative maps. Some topics are unusual, but nevertheless do display serious issues, such as a map of active hate groups. A contemporary gem and nice in its simplicity is Emily Wick's map of state mottos.

The third section focuses on *navigating the continent* which, given America's size and also its history of exploration, is a subject that deserves its own

chapter. It is interesting to see historic postal roads displayed alongside maps from today's road network, where the editors have done an excellent job of picking some extraordinary maps. The modern development of America's road network is not only represented with the first post-war Rand McNally road map – iconic for the USA as a nation of cars – and several maps dealing with Eisenhower's Interstate system (a Harry Beck inspired version is included and makes a nice link to the London book), but also with Ben Fry's more recent All Streets visualisation that demonstrates today's capability of computer-aided visualisation. Mass transit and air travel complement this section and closes with the iconic 'View of the World from 9th Avenue', Saul Steinberg's famous cover of *The New Yorker* from 1976. This is a reminder of one's individual perspective on the world, a refreshing view in a time where distances are said to be less important, and a valuable element in this section filled with maps illustrating interconnectivity.

Similar to the London book, the last section assembles a range of more conceptual maps which are titled *imagining the continent*, and they do so in a more unusual way. In this book, this is done more consistently as the selection is much more diverse, exploring meanings, feelings and odd thoughts about America. For example, there is a series of maps from Kim Baranowski's *Mappa Mundi* series which give information related to paranoid conspiracy theories a geographic display in the style of classroom maps. Topics shown here cover reported sites of alien abduction or potential targets of hostile nuclear attacks. The monster map of the states, showing presumably indigenous monsters (with names strikingly similar to each state name), demonstrates a way of how maps can be simplistic – sometimes even mad at first glance – and in educational terms still very valuable while at the same time also appealing to children.

The sheer range and diversity of the maps contained in this book make summing it up an impossible task. The selection resembles the colourful, sometimes strange and contradictory melting pot of today's America; a more visionary look at the future is again left to the reader.

So what do we learn from these books? The maps and the choice of sections are explorative journeys through the history and evolution of London and America. The pictures and stories that these maps tell help to make sense of both places and help us gain a better understanding of their contemporary conditions. They do not attempt to create future scenarios of how these places will look; this is a job left to the reader. A final section on the future, a conclusion to such a journey through history, is something that is missing from both books. Readers are left abandoned to their own devices.

The two books take the safe and slightly conservative route of map collection books, which is not

entirely a bad thing. At the same time they provide a good example of why it is still worth publishing new map collections if they are edited with careful dedication. Most readers who are interested in the places presented may be attracted by the variety of maps in these publications. The added value of taking the reader on a journey through the history of these two places, as well as through the history of mapping, makes the books valuable additions to the library of map enthusiasts as much as they will be to those who are interested in the places themselves.

Both authors manage to present a very balanced selection of maps from the past and present, neither being too focused on historic maps, nor putting too much emphasis on the wide variety of contemporary (often digital) worlds of mapping. Sometimes the selection appears slightly random and is not always consistent within the storyline of the sections, but this does not spoil the joy of following the journey through the exploration of the place depicted in the books.

The presentation of the maps is as good as it can be in this format: large maps are either clipped or down-sized, but the format is large enough in most cases and the print quality is very good, even if sometimes one wishes to fold out the original versions of the maps. This is of course an inevitable compromise when creating map books. The presentation of the maps and the overall layout however are beautiful and appealing.

Both books will appeal to map addicts and general readers alike who are interested in the geography and history of London and America. They are not strictly scientific compendiums, even though the essays included meet academic standards. Both books provide no surprising new insights, although some readers may discover maps they have not seen before. The *Mapping* series does a great job in showcasing a good selection of representative maps, including iconic maps as well as some less known hidden treasures. This makes the books a safe choice for people having an interest in high-quality maps of an area, accompanied by substantiated commentary that can be read from cover to cover. They also function, in a more casual way, as tools for discovering and re-discovering some milestones in the history of mapping London and America.

This Blackdog series whets the appetite for more. Paris is to be published in 2011.

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