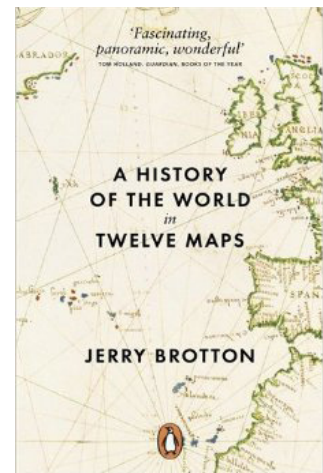


Jerry Brotton:
A History of the World in Twelve Maps
 Penguin Books (2013) 514pp.

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Jerry Brotton's *A History of the World in Twelve Maps* was first published in 2012, was widely reviewed and well received by general readers and academic cartographers alike. [1] It lies somewhere in the overlap between the genre of books about the history of science and technology aimed at non-expert readers, such as Dava Sobel's *Longitude* or James Gleick's *The Information*, and a full-blown historical account. It's an absorbing history of how people have thought about the world, not a world history, evinced in a dozen case studies derived from maps. Brotton is a scholar of the renaissance and it is not surprising that the core of the book is drawn from the early modern period (Waldse Müller, Ribiero, Mercator, Blaeu) together with classical, Mediterranean Arabic and medieval English antecedents (Ptolemy, Al-Idrisi, the Hereford *Mappamundi*). The development of modern cartography is illustrated by Cassini, Mackinder, Peters and Google. The only example which is outside this tradition of the Ptolemaic and post-Ptolomeic is a chapter about the world map of 1402 by the Korean scholar Kangnido, which provides an opportunity to discuss the imperial Chinese map making tradition.

The book is avowedly not an attempt at a systematic overview of the history of map making, but the case studies illustrate some persistent themes. Brotton demonstrates that the quest for 'objectivity' in map making, of producing a single definitive map of the world, is a chimera. Yet even after the 1820s, when Gauss demonstrated mathematically that an accurate projection of the three dimensional globe onto a two dimensional map was impossible, the quest to produce a technically perfect map free from ideological bias has persisted. This remained the case in Peters' attempt to produce a counter-hegemonic projection in the 1970s. The book's focus is on maps of the whole world (itself a concept which has a history) and hence of the development of the cartographic gaze. Brotton identifies this as essentially hierarchical, and, in so far as cartographers have always needed enormous resources – whether from the library of Alexandria, the French king's army of surveyors or Californian venture capitalists – it has been the gaze of those in power and of dominant ideologies whether religious, mercantile, nationalistic or imperialistic. The question as to what the dominant ideology of Google maps might be is left hanging.

The book has a kind of coy Foucauldianism about it, but its overall style and approach are cautiously empirical. It's a history of the production of texts and ideas. For all that the roles of individuals, objects, political structures and belief systems are intimately interwoven in these case studies, Bruno Latour doesn't get a mention. There is a concise outline of the development of the cartographic profession from the 1930s, including the emergence of critical cartography in the work of Brian Harley whose approach to context informs discussion of the maps. The general format is nevertheless conventional in its approach to describing the life and times of individual map makers before taking the reader through the challenges which they were facing in terms of the belief systems which they inhabited. This means a high degree of generality at times, but at others, as in the discussion of the commercial circumstances of map production in the Golden Age of the Netherlands, Brotton gives us a glimpse of the insight which would come were these chapters to be extended to much greater length.

The most striking absence is a critical analysis of the character of the all-pervasive cartographic gaze itself. From the evidence presented here, it has been not only hierarchical but monotheistic, male and imperialistic. Feminist and post-colonial perspectives aren't invoked, there's nothing from psychoanalysis or anthropology. Brotton's role is not to take on Kei Miller's rastaman and his belief that 'Map was just Babylon's vampiric orthography'. There is no discussion of map-making traditions other than those sponsored by states or organisations with global ambitions like the Catholic church or Google. There are no indigenous landscapes on offer here. Nor, apart from references to maps shown in Dutch paintings and Mackinder's aim of increasing geographical knowledge through the formal education system, is there much about how people who weren't rulers, technicians (military, naval or academic) or traders used these maps or how their world view was affected by them. If it is in part a social history of the production of maps, this book isn't one of their consumption.

This perhaps leads us to Andrew Motion's poem *Discovering geography* (see the poem and interview in this issue). Brotton's history is one which, despite arguing against any inexorable progress towards scientific accuracy and objectivity, becomes an account of the progressive demystification of the world through western traditions of map making. The story culminates in the kitsch of the widespread use of the Apollo 17 photograph of earthrise and Sergei Bryn's belief that we are 'the last generation who knows what it means to be lost'. Motion's poem explores the inadequacy of maps to fulfil our desire for transcendence, to discover the genuinely new, and to fashion our understanding of the world not from a map but from imagination – precisely that which the techniques of cartography described in the book have sought since at least Cassini's time to banish.