Journal of Historical Geography 39 (2013) 135–138

Contents lists available at SciVerse ScienceDirect

Journal of Historical Geography

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jhg

Review

The public life of maps: new social histories of maps and their makers

Rachel Hewitt, *Map of a Nation: A Biography of the Ordnance Survey*. London, Granta Books, 2010, xxvii + 436 pages, £25 hardcover.

Richard Kirwan, *If Maps Could Speak*. Dublin, Londubh Books, 2010, 192 pages, €14.99 paper.

Andrew Macnair and Tom Williamson, *William Faden and Norfolk's Eighteenth-Century Landscape*. Oxford, Windgather Press, 2010, vi + 216 pages, CD, £25 paper.

Laurence Worms and Ashley Baynton-Williams, *British Map Engravers: A Dictionary of Engravers, Lithographers, and their Principal Employers to 1850*. London, Rare Book Society, 2011, 744 pages, £125 hardcover.

It is now over 20 years since the death of Brian Harley, who was working towards a book to be called 'The Map as Ideology' at the time. As Paul Laxton describes in *The New Nature of Maps* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), Harley hoped that his book would seek 'to illustrate the possibility of writing a social history of the map rather than one which is mainly antiquarian, bibliographical or technical in its emphasis'. Although Harley's book was never to be completed, his writings had already been moving in the direction of looking at maps as documents produced in a particular social and historical context. Others, too, were joining him and were developing similar ideas. I hope that he would therefore have welcomed all the volumes reviewed here, each of which in its own way is linked both to the Ordnance Survey, about which Harley had published, and to his wider interests.

Indeed, Rachel Hewitt's *Map of a Nation* takes the 'social history of the map' idea further by her subtitle 'a biography of the Ordnance Survey'. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a biography is 'a written record of the life of an individual'. Hewitt is most successful when using the dictionary definition: she focuses on the key players in the Ordnance Survey's history and prehistory, men such as David Watson, who grew up in a family who were enthusiastic sponsors of the Enlightenment in Scotland and who appointed William Roy to survey Scotland in the aftermath of the Jacobite rebellion of 1745–6; William Roy himself, who laid the foundations for the Trigonometrical Survey of Great Britain, established in 1791 a year after his death; Charles Lennox, third duke of Richmond, who created the national military survey; Charles Hutton, professor of mathematics at the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich; Edward Williams, first director of the Ordnance Survey (about whom little has been written hitherto), and his deputy and successor William Mudge; Thomas Colby, who was to oversee the Interior Survey and the Ordnance Survey of Ireland; and many others including scientists, mathematicians, 'walkers, artists and dreamers'. She is perhaps less convincing if the dictionary definition is broadened to the written record of the life of an institution. The Ordnance Survey was made up of more than the leaders upon whom she understandably focuses. Some of those who helped to shape the Ordnance Survey might be more shadowy figures, but others can be traced to some extent and it would have been interesting to have known more about the lives they led and the parts they played. A tall order, perhaps, but her title is ambitious.

While her publishers perhaps overstate the claim that this is one of the 'great *untold* adventure stories' [the reviewer's italics], Hewitt gives the reader a lively and comprehensive account of the events that led up to the founding of the Ordnance Survey and its years until 1870. She starts in her prologue with Charles Edward Stuart fainting on Lord Lovat's bed in 1746 at the rout of his army, and then in chapter one, 'A magnificent military sketch', describes the circumstances and those involved in William Roy's military survey of Scotland 1747–55. In 'The propriety of making a general military map of England,' she turns to the second half of the eighteenth century in England, the arguments that were being put forward for making a military map, the county maps stimulated by the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce, and the surveys carried out to determine the shape of the earth. She then moves to France and the linking of the observatories in Paris and Greenwich by triangulation. Charles Lennox, Master-General of the Board of Ordnance, is a central figure in chapter four, which describes the events around 1791 that led to the so-called 'foundation' of the Ordnance Survey in that year. Surely, though, it was not so unusual to employ a land surveyor on a long-term basis in the second half of the eighteenth century, as was the case of Lennox's employee Thomas Yeakell? Chapter five, 'Theodolites and triangles', describes the early years of the Trigonometrical Survey with an account of levelling and the one-inch map of Sussex that was published in 1795. The publication of the map of Kent in 1801 is the subject of the next chapter, which is followed by an account of the Interior Survey and engraving. Chapter eight, 'Mapping the imagination,' is where Hewitt, an English scholar, discusses the way that cartography excited the cultural imagination in the early years of the survey. She offers a tantalisingly brief insight into the connections between maps and literature and this is an area that could usefully be developed further. After an account of the Anglo-French mapping of the Shetlands in 1817, Hewitt turns to Ireland before returning to the fire in the Tower of London in 1841, mapping on the mainland at five feet-to-the-mile for London and 35 other towns, and the publication of the highest-numbered sheet (108) of the one-inch series in 1870. Hewitt's epilogue brings the reader up to the present with the decision by Ordnance Survey to make 13 data sets freely available to the public from 1 April 2010.

There is some fascinating incidental information that brings the biographies to life: for instance, that the Astronomer Royal Neil Maskelyne bought a violin by Stradivari for the local Scottish boy,

0305-7488/$ – see front matter
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2012.10.007

Duncan Robertson, who had assisted him in the survey of Schiehallion in the 1770s and whose fiddle had been burnt in the party at the end of the expedition. Similarly, the story of James Sampson, a colourful character who was employed by Charles Lennox as an estate surveyor at Goodwood and ended up being executed at Tyburn in 1768 for theft is vividly told.

The style of writing implies that the book is aimed at a general reader, the sentences flow easily, and there are some useful asides and footnotes for those unfamiliar with the field, such as descriptions of map scales, surveying techniques, the process of enclosure, and a brief history of the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich. In some cases more elaboration is needed: for example what were the results of the comparison of the relative merits of the French repeating circle and the British theodolite in the linking of the French and English observatories? However, some aspects irritated this reviewer and Hewitt was not always well served by her publisher. In particular, endnotes give sources, but these are not referred to in the text so are likely to be ignored. The enthusiasm to bring 'biographies' to light in some cases makes it hard to distinguish between how much is evidence and how much conjecture: for example, how do we know that David Watson was 'buoyant' and 'confident of his own abilities and at ease in the presence of power'? Thomas Colby's viewing of Scafell is brought to life, and it would have been helpful if the text had made clear the source. And the illustrations are not referred to in the text, sometimes making it difficult to link the two.

Richard Kirwan makes no claim to be writing a biography either of Ordnance Survey Ireland or of himself, but does both rather successfully. A former director of the organisation, he 'takes the reader behind the scenes into the minds and work of the early mapmakers … Their struggles and achievements are counterpointed by the successful efforts of the author and the OS staff to bring the mapping of Ireland up to date … in the final decades of the twentieth century'. Kirwan devotes around 80,000 words to the mapping of Ireland compared with Hewitt's 20,000 or so, and makes good use of them. They both use Robert Kearsley Dawson's diary kept while he was assisting Thomas Colby in his triangulation of the Scottish Highlands in the summer of 1819. The reader quickly appreciates the arduous nature of the work and the near impossibility of keeping up with Colby, who allowed his surveying parties to use roads only as a way of encouraging rivalry between two teams searching for good surveying stations. We learn from Kirwan how the weary men on occasion had to make do with three to four chairs placed on earthen floors, with knapsacks for pillows, short walking-cloaks for cover, and the putrid tail-end of a salmon for dinner. Both authors stress that Colby was also good to his junior sappers in Ireland, insisting that their children had a good schooling. The ambitious and ill-fated project to supplement the maps with memoirs collecting statistical information about the townlands is described by both, though it is Kirwan who has the space to show how much was lost by abandoning the project, with a description of life on Rathlin Island off the north Antrim coast, comparing it with a more comfortable life on the mainland, and with tenant life in Monaghan.

Because of his personal experience of Ordnance Survey Ireland, Kirwan is able to bring insights into the social history of the maps that were produced. Thus he describes how Colby and his assistant Thomas Larcom introduced the processes of the industrial revolution to map-making, creating an assembly-line system where every man had a particular specialty and bringing to an end the role of the holistic surveyor-cum-cartographer who made an entire map and put his own stamp and style on the depiction of the landscape. While the style of the maps was standardised, Kirwan feels it still had artistic merit and evoked the lifestyle of those who lived in the townlands. It is with comments such as that these methods were still in use when he joined Ordnance Survey in 1970 that the reader feels drawn into a picture of what it felt like to work for the organisation.

The arrangement of *If Maps Could Speak* helps to bring the history to life, as Kirwan uses the technique of alternating personal memoir with history, and relating one to the other. Thus in chapter three he talks about Thomas Larcom's decision to use place names as close as possible to the original Irish form and the work of the scholar John O'Donovan, and in the following two chapters recounts his own interview for a post with Ordnance Survey Ireland (which he did not accept until he was offered the job again 15 months later), and his initial impressions of Mountjoy House and training in traditional survey techniques. Thereafter the reader learns about the engraving process through Kirwan's discovery of an 'Aladdin's Cave' of copper plates 'dulled from age and neglect with Ireland's history embedded in them', and the introduction of lithography and more modern methods. The re-triangulation from the 1960s is described from personal experience in the following decade of the ways that soldiers and civilians worked together, and of dealings with local landowners. Kirwan then continues the story in the twentieth century, with the introduction of the 25-inch series in 1888, and the half-inch from 1912. One hundred years later, computer mapping came with the Doppler system in 1975 and Kirwan's promotion to deputy director in 1979. His account of the decision to move into digital mapping and the processes he took Ordnance Survey through so that by 1997 it was recognised as a leader in world mapping technologies must surely be one of the first accounts of the developments of the period. As with many biographies, the account tails off towards the end of this chapter. Overall this book, without footnotes or endnotes, a one-page bibliography and a few plates, succeeds in giving a real feel for the nature of Ordnance Survey Ireland and its map-makers.

Just as Kirwan's book expands on the history of Ordnance Survey Ireland as outlined by Hewitt, so Andrew Macnair and Tom Williamson have the opportunity to provide a much more detailed account than she does of county map-making in the late eighteenth century, in particular the map of Norfolk published by William Faden in 1797, who was to engrave and publish the first Ordnance Survey map, of Kent, four years later. Indeed, Hewitt perhaps underestimates the role that the publication of large-scale county maps played in the years running up to the foundation of the Ordnance Survey. Like the other works reviewed here, Macnair and Williamson place Faden's map in its social and economic context: here is a 'biography' of a map rather than of an organisation or its director.

Macnair and Williamson divide their study into two parts. The first, which looks first at county maps in general and then at Faden's Norfolk in particular, provides many points of comparison with Hewitt; the second examines the map as a source for landscape history. Thus they discuss in this part what the map tells the reader about commons, greens and heaths; woods, parks and plantations; fields, farms and fens; leisure and 'edification' (or 'education', which is what appears on the running heads); and the evolution of settlement, land use and territorial organisation.

By 1765–80 about 65% of England had been triangulated and surveyed at a scale of one inch to one mile, and, anticipating the Ordnance Survey, the triangulations had in some cases been extended into neighbouring counties. Both works point out the contribution the Royal Society of Arts made to the fostering of new cartography by bringing about standardisation to private county maps, using rigorous surveying techniques and the one-inch-to-one-mile scale. Macnair and Williamson point out that at the end of the century there was much exchange of trigonometrical and cartographic information between public and private map-makers, and by the early nineteenth century county maps by Christopher and John Greenwood, and Andrew Bryant, were freely using Ordnance Survey's trigonometrical data and producing maps equal in quality to the Ordnance Survey. Macnair and Williamson do their best to assess Faden's Norfolk alongside the 50 or so eighteenth-century county