Mapping The World (1981)

BY PAUL THEROUX

It is not often that one happens upon an article that engenders a feeling of pride in one's chosen career. Such an article, however, is the one that follows. We have received permission from the publishers to reprint.

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CARTOGRAPHY, THE most aesthetically pleasing of the sciences, draws its power from the greatest of man's gifts – courage, the spirit of inquiry, artistic skill, man's sense of order and design, his understanding of natural laws, and his capacity for singular journeys to the most distant places. They are the brightest attributes and they have made maps one of the most luminous of man's creations.

But map-making also requires the ability to judge the truth of travelers' tales. Although Marco Polo's *Travels* allowed early European cartographers to give place-names and continental configurations to their maps, the book itself contained only a tiny sketch map and had many odd omissions (no Great Wall, no mention of tea). Columbus had the Latin version of 1483 among his belongings on his voyages westward – which was why, in Cuba in 1493, he sent a party of men searching the Cuban hinterland for the Great Khan, and on later voyages believed he was coasting past Indochina (it was Honduras) and about three weeks away from the Ganges. Columbus was not unique in his misapprehension: cartographic ignorance has been universal. There are the many maps of the Abyssinian kingdom of Prester John, and the maps which show California to be an island (this belief persisted throughout the seventeenth century). And it was only seventy or eighty years ago that the Chinese were finally satisfied that the world was round.

"It would seem as though cartography were an instinct implanted in every nation with any claim to civilization," the geographer, Sir Alexander Hosie wrote. He had in mind a map of China, carved in stone, and discovered in the Forest of Tablets at Hsian, the capital of Shensi province. That stone map is dated in the year called *Fou Ch'ang*, 1137, but the Chinese had been making maps for centuries on wood, silk and paper. The Chinese and the Romans were making maps of their respective known worlds at roughly the same time. In 128 B.C., Chang Ch'ien, China's first historic traveler, returned home after having covered the immense distance to the Oxus (we know it as the Amu Darya) in Central Asia. Chang reported to the Emperor Wu on what he had seen, and the emperor named the mountains K'un-lun, where the Yellow River rose.

For the next thousand years, China was active – a nation of travelers, warriors, conquerors, traders and, inevitably, map-makers. What was the point of conquering if the subject lands were not then given a shape, and their rivers and households described on maps? The Chinese word for map, *t'u*, also means "plan", "chart" and "drawing". (Our own word *map* has Latin cousins meaning "napkin" and "sheet".) Chinese cartography could be ambitious. P'ei Hsiu (224-271), sometimes called The Father of Chinese Cartography, did a magnificent map of China in eighteen panels ("The Map of the Territory of the Tribute of Yu"), and codified map-making in Six Principles. His First Principle, an enormous contribution to the art, was *fen lu*, the grid system.

P'ei's successor was Chia Tan, whose masterpiece in 801 was "The Map of China and Barbarian Countries Within the Seas." Chia was working in the T'ang Dynasty (618-907), one of the most renowned in Chinese history. It was very much a map-making dynasty – it had imperial ambitions, pursuing a policy of conquest in the west and south. Chia was commissioned to make maps of the conquered territories. Subsequent maps of China for the following few hundred years were based on Chia's ninth century work.

China also exemplifies the way cartography can go into decline. As a nation craves silence and becomes xenophobic and inward-looking, demanding tribute instead of initiating trade, it loses the will to communicate with the world and begins to wither of its own egotism. The Chinese still continued to regard the world as flat and four-square (though they believed the sky to be round). One cannot attribute this to stubborn ignorance; after all, it took Europe a thousand years to accept the notion that the world was round.

Yet all of China's naïve geocentricity can be seen in the outrage of the Imperial Court's scrutiny of a Jesuit map in which China was situated in the eastern corner. What was the Middle Kingdom doing on the far right? Father Matteo Ricci cleverly redrew his map by spinning his globe, so to speak, and placing the Celestial empire smack in the middle, with Europe in the distant west. That was in 1602. The Chinese accepted the priest's version of the world – it somewhat resembled their own – but they rejected his spherical projection.

When China lost interest in foreign countries her maps became inaccurate, not to say bizarre. These maps showed European countries and the United States and Africa as tiny islands and sandbars off the Middle Kingdom coast. Even in the mid-nineteenth century Chinese maps depicted the natives of these little islands as monstrous and one-eyed, and some were shown with holes through their stomachs for their convenient carrying on poles. Around the turn of the nineteenth century, the Chinese accepted that the world was round. It is possible, I think, to read in this acceptance of a new map a profound understanding of their place in the world.

Cartography has always required utter truthfulness – it is one of its most appealing features: crooked maps are worse than useless, and nothing dates more quickly than the political map ("German East Africa", "French Indochina", "The Central African Empire", "Jonestown"). But until the recent past, maps have been more than scientific;

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they have depended on a high level of pictorial art – vivid imagery and lettering – and a style of labeling and a conciseness in description that is literary in the best sense.

Blaeu is the Rembrandt of geography. Most maps, even modern ones, are beautiful – beautiful in colour and contour, and often breathtaking in their completeness. They can tell us everything, and the best ones, from the great periods of trade and exploration – our own is one such period – have always attempted to do this. In 500 B.C. Anaximander's successor, Hecataeus, made a disc-shaped map – it was a startling illumination. But maps specialize in such surprises.

Consider the Ortelius map of China of 1573 – "Regnum Chinae". It is full of fictitious lakes, but it accurately places rivers, mountains and cities – enough to guide any explorer or trader to his destination. It also includes the westernmost portion of America ("America Pars") at 180° longitude, and it shows what we know as the Bering Sea. In vivid marginal pictures it tells us about the Far East – the Great Wall is drawn, a Chinese junk is rendered in perfect detail, a man is shown being crucified in Japan for being a Christian and keeping the faith (there is a warning in Latin). In a corner is a Chinese four-wheeled cart, powered by a sail, and this cart (so the inscription tells us) can also be used as a boat. The map is a masterpiece of practicality and imagination.

Cartography has the capacity to open up countries to world trade. For example, throughout most of the nineteenth century it was recognized that a canal was needed in Central America to join the two great oceans. Mexico and most of the Central American countries were exhaustively mapped and a dozen canals were proposed. These maps expressed hopes, promises and fantasies. On a map by F. Bianconi in 1891, Honduras – which could not have been emptier – is shown as a teeming go-ahead republic. "Railways under construction," it says and you see hundreds and hundreds of miles of track, two lines from coast to coast. Who needs a canal with such trains! In the Mosquito jungle you have the impression of intense cultivation, and mining, and cattle-grazing. Honduras looks blessed – full of sarsparilla and sugar-cane, and iron, zinc, silver and gold. The word "gold" appears on this map sixty-five times, in each spot where it apparently lies in the ground.

There were similar maps of Panama, and of course Panama won out. But a modern map of Honduras shows most of the cartographic detail in this hundred-year-old map to be unfulfilled promises. Anyone who looks at a lot of maps becomes highly suspicious of the designations "Proposed railway", "Road under construction", "Projected highway" – with dotted lines; or that other heart-sinker, "Site of proposed Hydro-electric Dam". These are not features which are found only on maps of Third World Countries. "The M25 Ring Road" is shown on some maps of Outer London, though the road has yet to be finished. The most ominous line of a map is the one labelled "Disputed boundary", and it makes one think that there are perhaps fifty versions of the world map, depending on your nationality. Israel has about four different shapes, and on some modern Arab maps it does not exist at all.

The map of the London Underground is by almost any standard a work of art – a squint turns it into late-Mondrian – but it also has great practical value. After ten years of residence in London I still have to consult this map every time I travel by tube: the underground system is too complex for me to hold in my head. The same goes for the New York subway, which is a problem for cartographers – at least three recent attempts have been made to map it so that it can be understood and used by a stranger. None has succeeded. It remains an intimidating map.

The map predates the book (even a fairly ordinary map may contain several books' worth of information). It is the oldest means of information storage and can present the most subtle facts with great clarity. It is a masterly form of compression, a way of miniaturizing a country or society. Most hill-climbers and perhaps all mountaineers know the thrill at a certain altitude of looking down and recognizing the landscape that is indistinguishable from a map. The only pleasure I take in flying in a jet plane is the experience of matching a coastline or the contour of a river to the corresponding map in my memory. A map can do many things, but I think its chief use is in lessening our fear of foreign parts and helping us anticipate the problems of dislocation. Maps give the world coherence. It seems to me one of man's supreme achievements that he knew the precise shape of every continent and practically every river-vein on earth long before he was able to gaze at them whole from the window of a rocketship.

This sense of map-shapes is so strong it amounts almost to iconography. The cartographer gives features to surfaces, and sometimes these features are resonant. It is easy to see a dependency in the way Sri Lanka seems to linger at the tip of India; Africa looks like one of its own paleolithic skulls; and some countries are, visibly, appendages. Who has looked upon Chile and not seen in it an austere narrowness, or smiled at Delaware, or wondered what Greenland is *for*? The shape of a country may condition our initial attitude towards it, though I don't think any conclusion can be drawn from the fact that Great Britain looks like a boy riding on a pig. And position matters, too. It does not surprise me that the Chinese called their country the Middle Kingdom. It is human to be geocentric. Every country, to its people, is a middle kingdom – zero longitude, where East and West begin. And what a shock it must be for the Pacific Islander looking for his country for the first time on a world map, and not finding it, and having to be told that his great island is this tiny dot. The opposite is also remarkable. We have the word of many British people who have spoken of their pride at seeing the Empire verified in pink on a globe.

Maps have also given life to fiction. From *Gulliver's Travels* to *The Lord of the Rings*, novels have contained maps of their mythical lands. Thomas Hardy carefully drew a map so that his readers could understand his Wessex novels and so did Norman Mailer when he published *The Naked and the Dead*. In these books the map came later, but there is an example of a fantasy map preceding a work of literature. Robert Louis Stevenson wrote,

> . . . I made the map of an island; it was elaborately and (I thought) beautifully coloured: the shape of it took my fancy beyond expression; it contained harbours that pleased me

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like sonnets; and with the unconsciousness of the pre-destined, I ticketted my performance *Treasure Island* . . . as I pored over my map of Treasure Island, the future characters in the book began to appear there visibly among imaginary woods; and their brown faces and bright weapons peeped out upon me from unexpected quarters, or they passed to and fro, fighting and hunting treasure. The next thing I knew I had some paper before me and was writing out a list of chapters . . .

I was delighted to find this example for Stevenson's cartographic inspiration, because for two years I worked on a novel – *The Mosquito Coast* – with a map of Central America next to my desk. When I was stuck for an idea, or when I wanted to reassure myself that my fictional settlements really existed, I studied this map.

Most novelists are map conscious, and all great novelists are cartographers. So are all true explorers, and the most intrepid travelers and traders. The real explorer is not the man who is following a map, but the man who is making one.

I do not think that it is profit alone, the desire for financial gain or celebrity, that animates such men. But it is a fact that the most commercial-minded countries have also been the most outward looking. In the past, there were no trading nations that were not also the dedicated patrons of cartographers. Today, the proudest boast of any commercial enterprise is its illustration, with a map, of its influence and success. All maps are records of discovery; without fresh discoveries no new maps are possible. Our fastidious curiosity and our passionate businesss sense and even our anxieties have made ours a cartographic age.

Maps reflect the face of the land. They tell us most things but not everything. Long ago, they were shorelines; and then they were riverbanks; and at last they were territories with a million features. But they have always been surfaces figured with routes and suggestions. To the most courageous and imaginative of us, these surfaces are eloquent, showing the way to new discoveries. In a sense, the world was once blank. And the reason cartography made it visible and glowing with detail was because man believed, and rightly, that maps are a legacy that allows other men and future generations to communicate and trade.

A good map is better than a guidebook: it is the ultimate tool of the man who wishes to understand a distant country. It can be merciless in its factuality. It can also tell us things that are unobtainable anywhere else.

About ten and a half years ago, in Singapore, I rented a house – sight unseen – in the English county of Dorsetshire. I had been to England twice, but never to Dorset. The village, South Bowood, was not mentioned in any guidebook. What descriptions I came across were general and unhelpful. After a great deal of reading I still knew absolutely nothing of the place in which I was now committed to spend six months with my wife and two small children. I began to wonder if the place existed.

It was then that I found some Ordnance Survey Maps. The whole of Britain is scrupulously mapped. I had the correct sheet. I located South Bowood: it was a hamlet of about eight houses. Letters and symbols told me there was a public house down the road, and a mailbox, and a public telephone. The post office and school were a mile distant, and the nearest church was at Netherbury; but we would be on a hill, and there were meadows all around us, and footpaths, and not far from us the ruins of an Iron-Age hill fort. The houses were small black squares, and at last, sitting there in the Singapore Library studying the map, I worked out which house would be ours. So I knew exactly where I was going, and all my fears vanished. With this map, I was prepared: without it, I would have been in darkness. ●

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