

This Is Not about Old Maps

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“[A] palpable determination to revolutionize a discipline by breaking it down and rethinking and rebuilding it from the ground up in an entirely new form” is the way Roberta Smith recently characterized the work of Ferran Adrià (Smith 2014, C27). Adrià’s a chef and Smith was talking about cooking, but I think her words capture the determination Brian Harley felt when he was writing “Deconstructing the Map” (Harley 1989).

How would I know?

I wouldn’t really. I barely knew Brian. We met only once, and though we sent each other copies of our papers with “For Brian” and “For Denis” scrawled in the upper margins, we corresponded infrequently. I’ve said all this before, in the introduction I was asked to write for *The New Nature of Maps* (Harley 2001). Brian’s executor, Paul Laxton, didn’t care for my piece, and, though I was paid for it, it only came out eight years later as “The Map as a Kind of Talk: Brian Harley and the Confabulation of the Inner and Outer Voice” (Wood 2002).

I’d originally called my piece “This Is Not about Old Maps,” because though he couldn’t stop talking about them, I never heard what Brian said as really very much about old maps. What he was talking about were *maps*. But as the title of my published piece implies, whatever it was Brian said about maps was . . . confabulated. My piece was about the way Brian thought about maps as a residuum of a colloquy, a conversation, a debate between six pairs of oppositions, these slipping from one to the other as Brian’s focus shifted. These are the oppositions I identified: (1) society and the context of the cartographer, (2) the political context of the maps and cartographic symbolism, (3) deliberate distortions of map content and “unconscious” distortions of map content, (4) intentional silences and epistemological or unintentional silences, (5) external power and internal power, and (6) culture and technology. The ensemble of *culture, society, political contexts, deliberate distortions, intentional silences, and external power* recognizably limns a patron – Brian’s, yours, and mine, no less than those of eighteenth-century map-makers – precisely as that of *technical, the context of the cartographer, cartographic symbolism, “unconscious” distortions, unintentional silences, and internal power* sketches the practiced competence, the specialist knowledge, the

craft . . . that the professional, the scholar, the editor brings to the tasks of making maps, of doing history, of . . . writing this essay.

What Brian was pointing out was that our maps, histories, and writings are compromised . . . strangled, really, the patron inhibiting the . . . *drudge* I’d called him (or her) – a worker in any case – precisely as the drudge enables the patron to speak at all. Brian’s two *voices* come to so inhabit each other that they become hard to tease apart, come to seem no more than the voice of the real. This isn’t, I hasten to say, the way Brian put it. He suffered a much more powerful patron than I do – than I ever have – and it kept him polite when he wanted to rage as he did more and more frequently toward the end of his life. “Deconstructing the Map” is classic late-period Harley, but “Cartography, Ethics and Social Theory” (Harley 1990) – which among other things is his response to the 11 comments collected about “Deconstructing the Map” – and “Can There Be a Cartographic Ethics?” (Harley 1991) pay less heed to the patron. While he may never have gotten around to calling a spade a spade, at least he’d given up passing it off as a spatulous device for abrading the surface of the soil. He actually heads “Can There Be?” with a quotation from a lifelong Marxist. And it’s not even about maps.

“Deconstructing the Map” was the *turning point*.

It’s hard to remember what it was like when he wrote it. It was pretty grim. People were still talking a lot about *The Nature of Maps*, Arthur Robinson and Barbara Petchenick’s 1976 screed about . . . Well, does anybody remember? Does anybody remember what the *excitement* was about? The 1980s began in the same sad way. These were the high-water years of Robinson’s influence, and though I made my peace with Robbie in 1996, I never forgave him for the baleful effects of his work. In 1982 he popped out *Early Thematic Mapping in the History of Cartography*, whose text, I wrote in my *Cartographica* review, was “a slow trip to nowhere, an exhausting and frequently infuriating compendium of clichés, unsupported asseverations, and bland nonstatements that conspire to reduce even the amazing maps to stuttering banality” (Wood 1983). I had less pleasant things to say, too. A couple of years later he and his team came out with the

fifth edition of *Elements of Cartography*, a textbook with, lamentably enough, no competition in cartography classrooms (Robinson and others 1984). The computer revolution was underway – ESRI had held its first International User’s Conference in 1981 (16 people showed up) and had launched Arc/Info in 1982 – so this *Elements* was perhaps the *summa* of twentieth-century map-making; hard to imagine a more depressing conclusion. Then in 1987 Robinson and Helen Wallis published the disastrous *Cartographical Innovations: An International Handbook of Mapping Terms to 1900* (Wallis and Robinson 1987). It was an official International Cartographic Association publication, and Brian himself damned it in a long *Cartographica* review (Harley 1987).

Brian appreciated the irony of his situation: *his* attack immediately preceded *my* review article of his and David Woodward’s *The History of Cartography, Volume 1* (Wood 1987a; see Harley and Woodward 1987). Supposed to make a break with the history of cartography as she’d been written – John Noble Wilford’s *The Mapmakers*, for example, had appeared in 1981 – the volume more than disappointed me. I actually found fewer positive things to say about it than Brian had found to say about *Cartographical Innovations*, and they hadn’t been many. Brian wrote Ed Dahl, then *Cartographica*’s effective editor, that

I find myself in the rather hilarious position of cursing you for publishing Denis’s review yet at the same time defending myself against the reaction over the review which is to appear on *Cartographical Innovations*. Doubtless the humor of this will not escape you though not everyone is chuckling.¹

But Robinson’s hand lay as heavily on the *History* as on the rest of the 1980s. Robinson had supervised Woodward’s thesis and dissertation, Robinson and Woodward taught together on the University of Wisconsin–Madison faculty where the *History* project was headquartered, and in 1995 Woodward was named the Arthur H. Robinson Professor of Geography. Brian may have been neither a student nor a faculty colleague, but he’d swum in the same water for a long, long time and, with *dozens* of master’s and PhD students, Robinson’s presence was ... everywhere. But our reviews, our extremely negative reviews of *Cartographical Innovations* and *The History of Cartography* – both heavily sponsored cartographic monuments – were among the clearest signs that the weather was changing.

I came to the game as an outsider. Though I’d written my dissertation under George McCleary, a PhD student of Robinson’s (who in the classroom referred to Robinson as “God”²), George had given me my head, and I wrote *I Don’t Want To, but I Will* as a 20-chapter history of my experiences doing the work (Wood 1973). It was about what, at the time, we were calling “mental maps” – I thought about myself as a *psychogeographer* – and after a couple of years teaching high school I ended up on the landscape architecture faculty of the School of Design at

North Carolina State University. State had no geography department, much less a cartography program, and I couldn’t have been more isolated from the world in which Brian moved if I’d been on the moon. Of the 31 articles I published during the 1980s, only 6 had anything to do with maps. *Seven were long pieces about movies*. True, during the same decade I did review 11 books about maps (for *Cartographica*, *The American Cartographer*, and the like), and in these reviews, perhaps because I had nothing to lose, I let loose; and true, these did attract the attention of John Fels, with whom I wrote “Designs on Signs: Myth and Meaning in Maps” (Wood and Fels 1986) – its semiological bent a consequence of the fact that I’d spent the previous years obsessively reading Roland Barthes – but there is *no* sense in which I was a member of the cartographic, or even the geographic, community. I had no professional allegiances. I could step on all the toes I wanted. I was a free agent.

Brian’s career could hardly have been more different. He was the consummate insider, a geographer practically from birth and a historian of cartography from the very early 1960s, with literally hundreds of books, articles, commentaries, and reviews to his credit; a fellow of who knows how many societies; a member of boards, editorships, consultancies too numerous to count; and, during the 1980s alone, author or editor of 41 pieces – not to mention 33 reviews – concerned with the history of cartography. At the end of his life he was professor of geography at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, as well as director of the Office for Map History in the university library’s American Geographical Society Collection – not to mention co-editor of the *History of Cartography*.³ Brian had a ton of professional allegiances. He couldn’t afford to step on too many toes. He was anything but a free agent.

All of which makes Brian’s flowering in the 1980s as a critic of map-making – as my comrade in arms – all the more remarkable. If we’d opened the decade by sniping at each other – in our exchange over his and M.J. Blakemore’s *Concepts in the History of Cartography* (Blakemore and Harley 1980; Wood 1982; Blakemore and Harley 1982)⁴ – as the decade waned we quoted each other with increasing frequency. And with increasing approval. In “Deconstructing the Map” he cites my and Fels’s “Designs on Signs” seven times – and includes a long quotation – as well as my 1987 “Pleasure in the Idea: The Atlas as Narrative Form” (Wood 1987b). I returned the compliment by writing an applauding commentary on “Deconstructing” (Wood 1989), which Brian then approvingly quoted from in the closing paragraph of “Can There Be a Cartographic Ethics?” Shortly after that ... it came to an end with his death at the end of 1991.

Well, his side of it came to an end. I found his later writing increasingly relevant – especially things like “Victims of a Map: New England Cartography and the Native

Americans” (Harley 1988) – and I cited him often in the early 1990s. There may be only five entries for Brian in the index to my *Power of Maps* (Wood 1992), but Ed Dahl, at *Cartographica*, and George Thompson, at Johns Hopkins, had provided me with copies of all of Brian’s late work, and while writing my book I devoured them. I like to imagine his influence is, maybe not as pervasive as that of Barthes, but pretty extensive. I dedicated the book to Brian.

But flowers wilt. “An applauding commentary,” I just said about my response to “Deconstructing,” but “as [of] any demystification,” I’d continued in my comment; and perhaps I was the more enthusiastic because this demystification was coming from the heart of the profession – from its *very* heart – rather than from some outsider (rather than from me). But “Deconstructing” was a *turning* point; Brian hadn’t yet made the pivot, and though he was in “full turn” when he died, he never got where he was going. *Have any of us?* Perhaps not, but we’ve gone a lot farther than Brian was able to. I guess it was that the time was right, because “Deconstructing” *wasn’t* frankly that much of a demystification. In it Brian applies ill-digested methods and models derived from a superficial acquaintance with the work of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida to the rules of cartography, deconstruction and the cartographic text, and maps and the exercise of power. The paper is turgid with generalization, and too many of its examples are historical. Its style, however urgent it might have felt to Brian, was . . . academic.

There are simply too many phrases like “we should encourage,” “urgent need to rethink,” “read between the lines,” “I will argue,” “the issue in contention,” “It has been said,” “allows us to challenge,” “allows us to redefine,” and “may allow map history to take a fuller place in the interdisciplinary study of text and knowledge.” *That’s our goal?* A fuller place in the interdisciplinary study of text and knowledge?? And then the *waffling* between – around? – Foucault and Derrida. Why couldn’t Brian have just deconstructed a map, why the “here’s Foucault’s position,” and “here’s Derrida’s,” applied to maps generally? Why the review, the superficial review trying to pass itself off as more knowledgeable than it was, of some of the work of these two writers? I mean, I think I know: Brian was just too busy to do the nitty-gritty reading and writing, and we’re probably lucky to have gotten these salvos from inside the fortress. And they did knock some things down, defenders did rise to froth at the mouth, and . . . that’s all valuable.

But its time is over, has been over, for some time. And it never had its intended, its desired effect. It didn’t. The making of maps has proceeded along its dreary path with scarcely a ruffle, certainly not from this paper read by a gaggle on the margins of relevance. Maybe it *did* help us gain entrance to the interdisciplinary study of text and

knowledge, but let’s face it: none of us on the critical, on the radical, on the . . . contestatory edge are paid the slightest attention by the many makers of maps busily going about the business of . . . keeping the ship of state on course. There are more foul, anti-human maps made now than ever, *way* more; and more of the ugly things done with maps in the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries are done with maps today than ever before;⁵ and this despite the rise of a *whole family* of (completely marginalized) counter-cartographies! The maps used to aim today’s missiles may embody all the contradictions of our bellicose, late modern, capitalist society – and not be all that accurate either – but they’ll get the missiles there all the same.

We’re no farther along the road to deconstructing the map than we’ve ever been, but then Ferran Adrià hasn’t changed the way people eat either, not very many of them. He’s just made incredible food!

Author Information

Denis Wood curated the *Power of Maps* exhibition at New York’s Cooper Hewitt and Washington’s Smithsonian museums in 1992 and 1994. In 1992 he also published *The Power of Maps*. Since then he has published seven books about maps (translated into Chinese, Thai, and Korean) as well as more than 100 papers. He gives lectures around the world. Contact him through his website, www.deniswood.net.

Notes

1. Letter from Brian to Ed Dahl, 16 March 1988. Ed sent me copies of his correspondence with Brian that he thought I’d find helpful in writing my introduction to Harley’s essays.
2. Okay, not *all* the time, but often enough. Of course, at the time – the spring of 1968 – George was still working on his dissertation (he got his degree in 1969).
3. Derived from the curriculum vitae Brian submitted in July 1991 to Johns Hopkins along with his proposal for *The New Nature of Maps*. George Thompson had sent me these things to help me write the book’s introduction.
4. I conclude my assessment of their work with “Many things need to be debated in the history of cartography: can’t history be one of them” (Wood 1982, 75), while Brian gets off, “Wood, who is always prone to clutching at universal straws before drowning in generalization,” among many other priceless characterizations (Blakemore and Harley 1982, 83).
5. Joe Bryan and I track part of this history in our forthcoming *Weaponizing Maps: Bringing the Conquest Home*, which Guilford plans to bring out in early 2015. Kicked off by the US Army’s 2006 attempt to map property in the Sierra Juarez of Oaxaca, it runs a genealogy back to the US Marines’ involvement in Nicaragua in the 1920s and follows it forward.

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