

Reviews of Books and Atlases

SEEING THROUGH MAPS: THE POWER OF IMAGES TO SHAPE OUR WORLD VIEW / Ward L. Kaiser and Denis Wood, edited by Bob Abramms. Amherst, MA: ODT Inc., 2001. viii, 150 pp.: ill., maps; 22 x 28 cm. ISBN 1-931057-00-1: US\$19.95, Can\$29.95. Available from: ODT Incorporated, P.O. Box 134, Amherst, MA, USA, 01004. Tel.: 800-736-1293. E-mail: BAbramms@aol.com

Seeing through Maps presents a thoroughly commercial meditation on the nature of maps, mapping, and mapped representations. Its sometimes avuncular, often repetitive, narrative style does not, however, obscure an argument that is complex, radical, and subtle.

This is a book cartographic cognoscenti will hate to love. Fortunately for them, most will feel free to ignore the work if not its argument. Simply, *Seeing through Maps* doesn't look ... serious ... in the way of the typically weighty cartographic tome, or even previous works by co-author Denis Wood (*The Power of Maps, Home Rules*).¹ There are six pages of advertisements at the end of the text, all hawking the publisher's workshops and seminars ("Keynote speeches; university symposia; 'honor the earth' celebrations, 'green events'"). The book's back cover is a "Do you know ... ?" challenge asking prospective readers to "Test Your Knowledge!" by matching different cartographic projections (for example, the Peters projection) to a fact identifying its purpose ("Which image show how big each country is?"). Yuch.

Worse, perhaps, the book's language is direct, the vocabulary easily understood by a high-school student. The argument is not subtly nuanced in the language of cartographic scholarship – something to be quoted in the next journal article – but directly stated in plain speak with simple words. In the way of high-school textbooks it introduces its technical language (*graticule, projection, etc.*) in small boxed inserts, presenting the vocabulary of cartography in a few deceptively simple words. Throughout the book the sentences are mostly declarative, and amazingly, for a work by co-author Denis Wood, relatively free of em-dashes, semicolons, and parenthetical comments. Footnotes are non-existent and endnotes are minimal. The font size is large enough for the moderately sight-impaired to read with some ease.

Simply, the book is neither written nor produced in the style or language of high cartography. Rather, its publisher presents a product designed as a point-of-sale item in the local bookstore, something to give the kid for Christmas, or the spouse who "just always loved maps, you know?" *Seeing through Maps* appears to be a straightforward attempt to popularize the structured, technically complex domain of cartography. It isn't.

What Kaiser and Wood in fact offer is a primer on the absolute limits of map-making as a way of representing anything but the limited perspective of the map-maker mediated by the understanding of the map-user. That the argument uses map projections as both a metaphor for the limits of mapping and an example of why those limits are absolute, makes the whole crafty, subversive, and enticing at once.

The book's perspective owes at least as much to art history and theory as it does to either the rhetoric of academic cartography or of postmodern deconstruction. It does, in fact, show how to deconstruct – the authors call it "unpacking" – the map artifact, considering its elements, one by one. It begins with the amateur's map and with the mental maps that permit all of us to navigate our mundane world. Mostly, however, the focus is on map projections and the history they represent. Here this arcane but central consideration is presented as preparation for understanding the intent of the map-maker, the author of the cartographic work. The result has far more in common with the work of aesthetes and theorists like Susan Sontag than, say, the postmodernist arguments of a geographer like Derek Gregory.

In the end, this book argues that all maps are nothing more – but nothing less! – than "selections from everything that is known, bent to the mapmaker's purpose." The real trick for map users, it argues, is to perceive that purpose and thus the purpose behind the map itself. The question becomes not simply "What did the cartographic seek to show?" but as important, "How important is that intent to me?"

These questions are important to ask because to show one truth – say, distance – another truth (say, relative areal size) must be sacrificed. No map presents "reality," because representations are necessarily limited in the

truths they can present. This is equally true, the book argues, whether the map in question is a student's classroom exercise, a gas-station jockey's directions to the hockey arena, or a professional, *National Geographic*-produced four-colour wall map.

In short, *everything* is up for grabs. Whether the map is historical or modern, hand-produced or drawn using GIS technology, maps reflect the intent of the map-maker, his expertise, and whatever knowledge he brings to the project at hand. This is necessary, and necessarily true, because all maps distort and all maps exclude, selecting some details while sacrificing others. And, of course, it is true because all maps are purposeful, reflecting a map-maker's prejudices, perspectives, and concerns: "To Repeat: A Map's Quality Is a Function of Its Purpose" (p. 10).

From this viewpoint, the assumption that a map is "definable as a physical model of a smooth surface of zero elevation with added apparitional modelling" (Freemlin and Robinson, 1999)² fails from the start. For Kaiser and Wood that is like saying a painting is a two-dimensional model of reality enlivened by descriptive representational symbols. Similarly, to argue that maps are a way of seeing the world is like saying music is a way of hearing, of organizing sounds. To the extent that these definitions are true, they are also necessarily trivial and inadequate, ignoring everything of importance in the graphic and musical arts.

For devotees of computerized, GIS-based mapping, the point remains the same. The insistence that the "science of GIS" is based upon algorithms that manipulate data in a representational manner is as inadequate, by these lights, as saying architecture is about structural loads. For Kaiser and Wood and those who accept their thesis, that is where the real issues begin, not where they end. From the authors' perspective, computerized mapping would be ... *just* mapping. Choices of scale and projection must still be made. Detail and data are necessarily excluded by those choices. *Whatever* the medium, maps are about the intent of the map-maker to summarize an argument using data calculated or estimated before being manipulated into the map's two-dimensional plane.

Truth is limited not only to the eye of the beholder, however, but also to that of the user. Every map is to be judged by the skewed reality it presents and the manner in which that limited expression of the real is interpreted. In a thoroughly postmodern fashion, the viewer becomes in this approach as important as the maker. For Kaiser and Wood, therefore, the task of the map user is first and foremost to "unpack" a map and see it for what it is, a selective representation of a reality the map-maker perceives. Then she must decide if those choices are acceptable to her, if the purpose and intent of the map-maker is in accord with her own.

Individual maps are thus beyond good and bad, truth or falsity, accuracy or ... failure. They are either effective or ineffective for the purpose they were made, legible or

obscure for the user who seeks to understand it. Maps using Mercator projections are good if you're a sailor, bad if you're an African arguing the effect of global warming on your continent. The Peters map is swell for those who seek to argue the importance of the African continent but lousy if, instead, you're navigating a plane from Stockholm to Nairobi. T&O maps accurately reflected the world view of their makers, and thus served their purpose as well as did the eccentric navigation charts – replete with sea dragons – carried by adventurers, or for that matter, those of modern-day navigators.

The book promises to "change your view of the world," but that is simply salespeak. What it really seeks to change is the layperson's and student's view of maps. And of course, to Kaiser and Wood, maps are simply one phoneme in the language of the collective world. "This book is a map," its introduction declares. It, too, can therefore be "unpacked." It, too, has prejudices and intentions that the reader will consider. To evaluate *Seeing through Maps* the question becomes, in the authors' language, a balance between its intent and its design. To understand that it is necessary first to understand something of the authors.

For perhaps 20 years Ward Kaiser has advanced the Peters projection of the World.³ Denis Wood is a historical cartographer best known for his work on mental maps, his analysis of mapping as a means of representation, and the insistence that maps are necessarily political and social as well as representational instruments.⁴ He is the only author in the history of this journal – or, to my knowledge, any cartographic journal – to end a book review with a one-line paragraph whose single, four-word sentence declared, "Power to the People."⁵

Ward's agenda appears to be not merely advancing the map projection he has championed, and selling the seminars he offers, but more generally, an understanding of the degree to which this and perhaps other projections effect the content of the map itself. The dialog between map projection and map purpose, the history and complexity of the problem, is almost certainly Wood's rather than Ward's contribution to the text. For Wood, this book advances the arguments of *The Power of Maps* in an interesting way. There, too, he was concerned with how maps work, their grammar and purpose. But in that text his principal technical interest was signage, the rules and methods by which mapped abstractions carried a grammar that could be studied.

Those issues are muted here. For Wood, the book seems an attempt at a more generalized consideration of the map as not simply a representation of reality, or a statement of it, but as a dialog between map-maker and reader. Its real intent is to bring map users into a self-conscious dialog that permits them to understand the limits of any single map, and simultaneously to appreciate the map-as-artifact at a deeper level. For those who have read his previous work – books and reviews – this is a logical advance in the *oeuvre* he has developed over years.

Both authors are populists, albeit of different stripes. Neither is a professional map-maker. They are instead lecturers and critics and ... map lovers. Both want their argument out *there*, in the public. The applause of the professional community is relatively unimportant to either, one suspects. If they wanted this work to be well considered in the academy, it would have been offered in a different, more polysyllabic language, with lots of footnotes, and in a thicker, more prestigious format.

And, of course, both men want *Seeing through Maps* to sell. They want not only to get their point of view across but for the process of education to give them a decent financial return. That's why the back cover has seven map projections and a series of questions designed to tease a bookstore browser into buying the book on a whim. It's a come-on, a shill. The text's large font says, "Hey, I'm here for the normal folks, the basic student. Buy me!" The introduction insists "this book may be dangerous to your cherished view of the world," on the assumption, I assume, this will challenge the armchair reader to live dangerously by shelling out \$19.95 (Can\$29.95) for the book.

My suspicion is that the hard-sell will backfire. Kaiser will unload volumes at the seminars he runs on "changing your world view." But the average reader will find the hard-sell a little shrill. And the repetitive narrative style will set many readers' teeth on edge. I lost count of the times – page by page and chapter by chapter – the book asked "And what do you, the reader, think?" I didn't want to count the number of times the book's later chapters referenced earlier points excessively (And as we said in chapters 1, 2, and 3, and repeat here in chapter 4 ...). Aaargh.

The real future for this book, in fact, may be as a high-school or introductory college text. *Seeing through Maps* is absolutely the best introduction available on map projections, their history and importance. The appendix's summary of 14 projections – their strengths and weaknesses – is probably worth the price of the book. The text weaves the theory and history of maps-at-large – from mental maps to amateur work to high cartography – into a seamless thematic whole. And at its best the book's understanding of its subject is erudite and invigorating in the same way that the art historian's passionate consideration of, say, Géricault's painting *Raft of the Medusa*⁶ – its intent and purpose and place in history – is satisfying and illuminating at once.

Maps are just images on paper, or today, bits and bytes on the computer screen. But what images result! And what labours they represent, whatever their purpose, whatever their intent. Maps *are* art, and deserve to be treated with the seriousness of all our best attempts to present our world, the child's drawing hung on the refrigerator no less than the Hockney painting hung upon the art gallery's wall. I'm enough of a snob to sneer at the narrative style of this book, enough of an academician to cringe at its commercial pleas (Buy me! Buy my

seminars!). But I'm also enough of a map user (and maker) to glory in the respect the work in fact shows to the artifact, its passion for the problem of projection as a thematic structure on which an aesthetic of cartography is hung.

Notes

1. Wood, D. 1992. *The Power of Maps*. New York: Guilford Press; Wood, D., and R. Beck. 1994. *Home Rules*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
2. Fremlin, G., and A. H. Robinson. 1999. "Maps as Mediated Seeing." *Cartographica* 35: 1&2 (Monograph 51): xi.
3. Kaiser, W. L. 1983. *A New View of the World*. New York: Friendship Press; Amherst, MA.
4. Wood. *The Power of Maps*.
5. Wood, D. Review of *Boundaries of Home: Mapping for Local Empowerment*, ed. D. Aberley. *Cartographica* 30/4: 83–4.
6. Guilbaut, S., M. Ryan, and S. Watson, eds. 1997. *Théodore Géricault: The Alien Body – Tradition in Chaos*. Vancouver: Moris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery.

Tom Koch / Department of Geography / University of British Columbia / Vancouver / BC / Canada

PHOTOGRAPHING CANADA FROM FLYING CANOES

/ S. Bernard Shaw. Burnstown, ON: General Store Publishing House, 2001. xii, 294 pp.: ill., maps, portr.; 24 cm. ISBN 1-894263-42-1, Can\$34.95. Available from: General Store Publishing House, Box 28, 16948 Burnstown Road, Burnstown, ON, Canada, K0J 1G0. Tel. 613-432-7697, 800-465-6072. E-mail: publisher@gsph.com or orders@gsph.com

Under the enlightened leadership of Eduard Deville, Canada was one the first countries to make extensive use of photography as part of its mapping program. Deville's pioneering work involved the use of panoramic cameras to take terrestrial photographs. Planimetric information could then be derived from these photographs using a perspective grid technique. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that, at the end of World War I, Canada should also become a pioneer in the extensive use of aerial photography for mapping. It is the story of the early years of aerial photography for map-making that Shaw sets out to tell in *Photographing Canada from Flying Canoes*.

Using the annual reports of the Canadian Air Board and a variety of published sources, Shaw sets out to document the activities of the aircrew who flew these early photographic missions. The flying canoes of the title were the primitive flying boats and float planes available at the time. In a country so well endowed with lakes and rivers and with few landing strips, the use of flying boats and float planes made perfect sense. The earliest planes were war-surplus models supplied by the British or American governments. Subsequently, the flyers of the Royal Canadian Air Force were to acquire aircraft specifically