

THE HISTORY OF CARTOGRAPHY PROJECT
LITERARY SELECTIONS ON CARTOGRAPHY NO. 21
FROM "WEST WITH THE NIGHT" BY BERYL MARKHAM
Commentary by Paul Hansen

This year's broadsheet passage comes from *West with the Night*, the memoir of Beryl Markham (1902-1986), a free-spirited adventurer, noted racehorse trainer, and the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean from east to west. In the selected passage,¹ drawn from her years as a freelance African bush pilot, Markham makes a smart comparison between maps and the written word. She draws a distinction between the assumed objectivity of maps, which inspires confidence and trust, and the ambiguity and artfulness of written text, which can sow doubt. That her idea appears as mere words on a page—particularly in a biography that Markham may not have written alone—suggests that there is more to the story. Markham sees trust and doubt as mutually exclusive, rather than as two sides, one seen and one hidden, of the same object.

We need not turn to maps of *Terra Australis* to realize the similarities between maps and fiction. For example, definitions of the word "plot" include: a map or chart, a graphical representation of movement or variables, and the plan of a literary or dramatic work. Considering the overlap between cartography and literature is helpful in understanding what Markham is saying and also in taking her idea a step further. For her, maps might appear as simple lines of ink on paper,² but their modesty conceals the hope, adventure, and conquest upon which those lines are drawn. She asks us to read beneath the surface of maps, down to landscapes and history, in order to appreciate them more fully. The same is true, of course, for the written page. To ask only "What is shown on this map?" is equivalent to asking, "What is the plot of *The Old Man and the Sea*?" Just as we accept that Hemingway's artful narrative conceals universal truths, we must accept that the cartographer's trued lines conceal volumes of narrative.

Thankfully, a pilot or sailor can navigate safely without knowing how many lives were lost charting a certain coastline or the intricate political history behind the name of a geographic feature, but beneath the ink on paper, these stories remain in the form of palimpsests. That

the stories beneath maps exist in the spheres of language and history, sometimes awash in doubt, is not cause to overlook or devalue them. Tracing the plot is only the first step to be taken in a full consideration of a map no less than a novel.

What we can learn from Markham is that while maps retain their utilitarian value, they are also objects of narrative value that, like great novels, reward the careful reader. An accomplished pilot in a time when much of Africa remained half surveyed, she saved her marked-up copy of each chart by which she had flown, and so, as she put it, "I have a trunk containing continents." In an age of glass cockpits, we might pause to appreciate what is actually represented on our maps.

¹ Beryl Markham, *West with the Night* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1942; reprinted San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983), 245-46.

² Markham also indicated that the maps she used when flying across Africa were necessarily incomplete. In addition to the maps' small scale and lack of detail, she wrote, "it was even more disconcerting to examine your charts before a proposed flight only to find that in many cases the bulk of the terrain over which you had to fly was bluntly marked: 'UNSURVEYED.' It was as if the mapmakers had said, 'We are aware that between this spot and that one, there are several hundred thousands of acres, but until you make a forced landing there, we won't know whether it's mud, desert, or jungle—and the chances are we won't know then!'" (*West with the Night*, 35).

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