

THE HISTORY OF CARTOGRAPHY PROJECT

Literary Selections on Cartography, No. 23

**"BRIEF REFLECTION ON MAPS," BY MIROSLAV HOLUB**

*Off the Map: Commentary by Ellen Poteet*

Miroslav Holub's poem prompts memories of when I too have been "off the map." Maps have been essential to my sojourns in Cameroon and Uganda, but they have been—for lack of a better term—"effaced maps." Asking for and receiving directions is a social event. In the north of Cameroon, maps are drawn on sand, with a finger or a stick, begun by one mapmaker only to be challenged by a second. The stick changes hands, another swift line and curve is made. A third party arrives with further emendations. Finally all agree that my best way is starting with the first line, following the third, and ending with the second. Have I understood? Yes. And then the markings in the sand are effaced. One always leaves a piece of ground as one finds it. Once in Uganda, I stopped at a hut to ask for directions. The grandmother nodded. She knew. She took up a piece of charcoal and began to map the way forward with black lines on the side of the hut. I could see the way ahead, yes? Yes. She took a large plantain leaf and wiped the wall clean. I suppose the most memorable, because the most evanescent, of such maps was one a child drew for me. I had stopped to ask directions from a boy carrying water from a stream. He found a long twig and traced my route—on the water.

With each of those maps I would reach my destination. I worked off them, in the way one says that one has gone "off the map" when charting new terrain, but also by turning the map into an image of hands pointing and inscribing the air with reassuring certainty. Finally, as with any map, we have to look up from it and traverse what is not shown. Maybe the most useful maps are those that give us the freedom to work off them as soon as they are created for us. A map of one mountain pass may thereby liberate the sightlines for another mountain pass, especially when one goes forward with the conviction that what matters are the sightlines and not the accidents of one range versus another.

The obverse of "off the map" is, of course, "on the map." During a recent stay in Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroon, I had to reach an office building for a meeting in one part of town where I had never been. I asked a friend and long-time resident to show me the way. I had a city road map. We laid out the map on a table, and I pointed to where we were. He gazed at the map bewildered, declaring, "I know the streets but I do not know this map." He insisted on driving me himself. We lost our way twice, and asked for directions, but we arrived. He was triumphant. "Do you have your map?" he asked. I took it out. "We are on your map at last!"

The poem was translated by Ewald Osers in Miroslav Holub, *Poems Before & After: Collected English Translations*, trans. Ian and Jarmila Milner et al. (Bloodaxe Books, 2006); it is reproduced on this broadsheet with the publisher's permission. Miroslav Holub (1923–1998) was a research scientist who often used scientific metaphors in his poetry.

Images are from Institut géographique national, *Carte de France au 50000e* (Type 1889), sheets Vizille 188 N.E. and Prades 257 N.O., courtesy of the Stephen S. Clark Map Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

We are grateful to Ellen Poteet (Lecturer, History and Classical Studies), who brought this poem to our attention, and Karl Longstreth (Map Curator, Stephen S. Clark Library), who identified and provided the map details; both are at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

The broadsheet was designed by Tracy Honn and hand printed with printing assistance from Julie Copenhagen on UV Ultra II paper on a Vandercook No. 4T Proof Press at the Silver Buckle Press, University of Wisconsin–Madison. The type is a digital version of Menhart (from Monotype) originally designed by Oldrich Menhart in 1938. Photopolymer printing plates were made by Boxcar Press in Syracuse, New York. Four hundred copies have been initialed and numbered.

Published 2015 by the History of Cartography Project, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 550 North Park Street, Madison, WI 53706-1404 U.S.A.

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