

The History of Cartography, Volume Six: Cartography in the Twentieth Century

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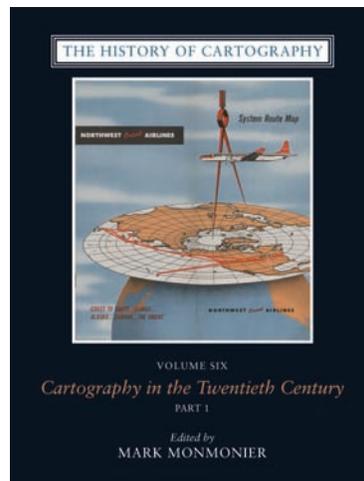


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The History of Cartography, Volume Six: Cartography in the Twentieth Century

Mark Monmonier, ed. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015. 1,960 pp., set of 2 volumes, 805 color plates, 119 halftones, 242 line drawings, 61 tables. \$500.00 cloth (ISBN 978-0-226-53469-5).

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Finally, Volume Six of the *History of Cartography* (HOC6) is out. Paraphrasing the late British historian Hobsbawm (1994), who labeled the past century as a short age of extremes, it is suitable to say that the not so short twentieth century of cartographic history was extremely eventful and witnessed far more technological innovations, paradigm shifts, and the emergence of new ideas than the sum of events during the preceding centuries.

The result of the grandiose undertaking of the HOC project is an impressive two-volume hardcover edition, with 1,960 pages and a total shipping weight of 17.7 pounds, which is only exceeded in page numbers and weight by one of its predecessors in the series, the “double feature” of Volume 3 (*Cartography in the European Renaissance*). Courtesy of the University of Chicago Press, all previous tomes of the History of Cartography Project are now freely downloadable on the publisher’s Web site. Volume Six can be purchased either as a hardcopy or an e-book for the steep price of US\$500.

The history of the project itself is a curious story for various reasons. About forty years ago, J. B. Harley and David Woodward, the driving forces behind this initiative, came up with the idea of writing a new history of cartography that gradually transformed into a multivolume project “to

document how all cultures of all historical periods represented the world using maps” (Woodward 2001, 28). What started as a chat on a relaxed walk by these two authors in Devon, England, in May 1977 developed into a monumental *historia cartographica*, a cartographic counterpart of Humboldt’s *Kosmos*. The project has not been finished yet, as the volumes on the eighteenth and nineteenth century are still in preparation, and will probably need a few more years to be published.

The making of HOC6 is vividly narrated in detail in a chapter on the processual history of the book at the end of the second tome. Chief Editor Mark Monmonier tells the histories and cartographies of the production process, justifies the format, and documents the drama of financial support, from the initial steps in October 1997 to the submission of the final manuscript in summer 2013.

Different from the first three volumes, the structure of HOC6 is not in the form of essays. After much discussion and several trial-and-error attempts, Monmonier, who received the original invitation for this mission in December 1984, followed the recommendations of the editorial board and opted for the encyclopedia format to control the length of the entries and reflect “a design and a process that not only determine its contents but also limit and enhance its usefulness” (p. xxv). The 529 key terms, written by 323 authors, were divided into six conceptual clusters, each addressing a specific focus in cartography, from historiography, representation, and methodology to political and social contexts, individuals, institutions, artifacts and events, and spatial contexts. The reader can find a very useful detailed overview list of topics on the inside of the front and back hardcover bindings. Maybe due to an editorial mistake, however, the index remained

incomplete. The entries for the Spatial Contexts cluster were clipped and the list only includes the first two references, “Antarctica” and “Arctic, The.”

Contents cover a wide range of topics from “academic paradigms in cartography” (unfortunately limited to North American and selective European countries and not about the influence of theories in other regions) to “Zhongguo kexueyuan,” the Chinese Academy of Sciences. *HOC6* includes biographies of influential cartographers and surveyors; details about professional and scientific institutions, associations, and journals; the history of surveying and mapmaking in different scales, contexts, and regions (e.g., the production of national atlases, property mapping, cadastral and topographic maps, and photogrammetry); and abundant documentation of the almost unlimited uses and forms of maps. The *HOC* project is so important that it even justifies an encyclopedia entry for itself: the History of Cartography of the History of Cartography Project.

This is an encyclopedia of the history of the relatively recent past. The past is not disconnected from the cartography that is practiced today. It is not about “dead” people, obsolete processes, and out-of-date products, but points out which events, innovations, and political decisions have been decisive factors in shaping modern cartography. Instead of leaning exclusively on archival material, *HOC6* had the opportunity to consult living witnesses, “drawing on the memory of contributors who lived through, and in some cases even influenced, the electronic transition of the latter half of the twentieth century” (p. xxv). A considerable number of entries were written by scholars who participated directly in the events or even were the pioneers in their field.

There are several critical issues in a project that aims to document the history of cartography. It is a history of predominantly occidental cartography. This becomes visible in some of the entries. For example, colonial and imperial cartography emphasize the actions and activities of European powers and tell little about the oppressed people in the Americas, Asia, Australia, and Africa who were involuntarily mapped. There is an entry for topographic mapping in Latin America (carried out by Latin American institutions), but Africa is restricted to the development in South Africa and the surveying by European countries. This is not a critique of *HOC6*, but rather an invitation to close the lacunae in documenting how different countries map their territories. Much of Africa and Asia continues as blank spots on the “map” of cartographic history.

Editor Mark Monmonier is aware of the “unavoidable biases” (p. 1789) of this encyclopedia. He admits that there is a “most exclusive focus on the processes and technologies of Western Cartography” (p. 1788). Some critics might say that this is drifting away from Harley and Woodward’s original relativist multicultural idea of the *HOC* project, but probably this would require the production of another volume in the series. Anglophone contributions remain dominant, although they are “partly mollified by recruiting non-English speaking scholars as contributors and encouraging them to the best sources and write in their own language” (p. 1789). Even so, only twenty-six entries (5 percent) were originally submitted in a language other than English (p. 1791).

The encyclopedia offers reference material not only for the field of cartography, but also for other areas. Articles on women in cartography, maps and literature, narratives, social theory, and arts give inspiring insights into the social, cultural, and political dimensions of mapping and mapmaking and are of particular interest for social scientists, literary scholars, and the broader public. In particular, Matthew Edney’s text on the “histories of cartography” (please, note the plural form!) is an excellent introduction to the twentieth-century history of cartography.

The most attractive feature of *HOC6* is the abundant illustrations in the two volumes. This is a fantastic visual experience. Although some of the maps are too small to convey their message, most of the figures were carefully edited and have an exceptional resolution and meaningful content that invite the reader to find out further details. It is not easy to pick a favorite map or photo. Memorable examples are the colorful Fernhurst community map (p. 277), the pictorial map of famous sites along the Nagoya Railway by Yoshida Hatsusaburo (pp. 1240–41), the 1931 map of Chicago’s gangland (p. 1633), and the outstanding relief rendition of Mount Kilimanjaro from a 1911 map of “German East Africa” (p. 1573). Other maps are scary, among them the nuclear power plant evacuation plan for the Beaver Valley Power Station in Pennsylvania (p. 390) or the Exxon *Valdez* oil spill map (p. 400), showing how millions of gallons of crude oil discharged into the Prince William Sound in March 1989.

Besides well-known maps and drawings, *HOC6* also includes rare and unpublished material for the map aficionado as, for example, a picture of a hand-drawn sketch of the travel movements of the main characters in Joyce’s novel *Ulysses* that the Russian writer Vladimir Nabokov used for his lectures in the late 1960s to compare the structure of novels with geographic dimensions. Another

example is a handwritten page from John Parr Snyder's early projection notebooks (p. 1398), in which Snyder verbally and graphically explains characteristics of specific gnomonic and oblique map projections.

A large number of photos serves as visual testimony of cartographic history. The reader could find a snapshot of a geography lesson in an elementary school classroom in Chicago almost one hundred years ago (p. 1075) or a bike-riding Dutch topographer jotting down field observations on a drawing board (p. 1536), with the additional information that the surveyors are now equipped with laptops attached to the handlebars of their bicycles.

Common survey instruments such as plane tables, alidades, and production processes from the first half of the twentieth century such as photogrammetric mapping techniques document cartographic practices and remind us how much the field has changed with the emergence of new surveying and mapping technologies in the last decades.

So does *HOC6* do justice to twentieth-century history of cartography? Is it complete? In a review of the first volume of the project edited by the late J. B. Harley and David Woodward (1987), Wood (1987) compared the book to a fancy restaurant, which "all but defies you not to like the food" (67). The menu is comprehensive, the service is excellent, the portions are of good size, and the high price is justified by the quality of the ingredients. Wood concluded that it is the best, but "it is just not very good" (78). In the case of the sixth volume, with a different structure and different contexts, the reader can find some hits and misses (i.e., unnecessary or quirky entries, left-out or vague topics, or inadequate text length), but who would be looking for a hair in the soup in the presence of a monumental opus like this?

The endeavor to portrait modern cartography in a book resembles Borges's (1975) surrealist account on exactitude in science. The Argentine writer narrates the fictitious story of an empire that produced a map of its lands on a 1:1 scale, a map of the empire in the size of the empire.

HOC6 has faced a similar challenge: How to write a book on the history of cartography that contains a complete history of cartography? How to document history in a comprehensive way without leaving out important facts about maps, mappings, and mapmakers? Nobody can deny the impossibility of writing an encyclopedia that size. There is an analogy between books and maps: The author must make decisions about what to include or exclude, and there are always preferences and silenced voices.

HOC6 is literally extremely rich food for thought for anyone interested in cartography's history, not an encyclopedia of taken-for-granted facts, but a starting point for further exploration, a worthy tribute to mapping and mapmaking. Quoting the words from another review of the *HOC* series, "If the cartographic voyeur in you is thirsty, drink up" (Rundstrom 2001, 208), because this is good stuff.

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