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# Norman Joseph William Thrower. *Maps and Civilizations: Cartography in Culture and Society*

Laurence Grambow Wolf

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**Norman Joseph William Thrower. *Maps and Civilization: Cartography in Culture and Society*. University of Chicago Press, 1999**

This book was first published as *Maps and Man* by Prentice Hall in 1972, and then, by the University of Chicago Press under its present title in 1996, of which the book at hand is a second edition. This is not a map-making "how-to" work, but a report on maps per se, from preliterate people to the present.

As a geographer whose fascination with historical and cartographic material spans more than a half century, I am quite pleased that Dr. Thrower has provided us with this historical study of cartography. The title, however, gave rise to expectations that in part were not met. We have been presented with a wealth of cartographic information. Presenting it in one study, instead of in fragments scattered in various publications, is a welcome contribution and hopefully permits access to a wider audience. The "society" and "culture" are backdrops to the story of maps.

Dr. Thrower has cast his map net rather widely. Some of the included items are so diagrammatic or stylized that they barely qualify as cartograms, much less as maps. However, I reckon it was better to cast one's net widely rather than in a restricted manner. It helps us appreciate how long ago men attempted to display spatial relationships, and in how many ways.

Maps are not only an important means of presenting information, they are a blend of visual art and mathematical science. Therefore a civilizationist can well attend to them. The oldest known attempt at a map is one of c 2,000 BCE of a settlement in northern Italy. There are other occurrences of mapping by preliterate people. These are discussed in Chapter One. From ancient Egypt there are zodiacal and cosmological maps, a 1,500 BCE garden plan, and other items. A Mesopotamian map dates from c 2,300 BCE. Aristotle and the Pythagoreans espoused a spherical Earth in contrast to earlier ideas of Earth as a slab or even a column [p. 19]. This led to Eratosthenes' famous estimate of Earth's circumference which may've been within 200 miles of being correct. Other estimates had been offered which were far off the mark [p. 20].

Unfortunately Ptolemy (Klaudios Ptolemaios) used an estimate about three-fourths that of Eratosthenes', and this prevailed on into the 1600s. This, with Hipparchus's fiddling with map projections in the second century, BCE, led to significant advances in the creation of region-

al and “world” maps. Thus goes Chapter Two.

Chapter Three deals mostly with China. India provides very little data in this regard, but Korea and Japan are worthy of discussion. Apparently maps in China began in the sixth century BCE. By Ptolemy’s time a rectangular grid was used in China. Triangulation for accurate location and distances dates from the third century CE or so [p. 30]. Maps were done on silk or stone. The first printed one was c 1155 CE, predating Europe’s first map printing by more than three centuries. Sinocentricity remained in Chinese “world maps” until the 16-1700s.

Along with medieval European cartographic activities, the work of the famous Muslim Idrisi is discussed in Chapter Four, along with the development of portal charts. A comparison of a part of the *Carte Pisane* (c. 1290 CE) with a modern map (of south Italy and Sicily) can bring forth the remark of a generalist, “not bad”, but a navigator might well have had cause for some dissatisfaction. “At certain points, Christian, Muslim, and Jewish savants worked together, leading to a valuable interchange of ideas” [p. 57].

The Renaissance occupies Chapter Five, and the great increase in western European cartographic skill is well traversed. This was the era of Ortelius, Mercator, Waldseemüller, Hondius, Blaeu and several lesser lights. Printed maps came into their own, based on a variety of mathematically logical projections. The era of the Enlightenment is discussed in Chapter Six, with its advances in map projections, things mapped, and improvements in accuracy. The remainder of the book, a bit more than a third of the whole, deals with modern cartography from the 1800s on, written with the same clarity as marked the previous chapters.

Dr. Thrower points out that maps have been used to convey “ideas cultural and scientific, legal and political, anthropological and medical, and many others” [p. 233]. They’ve been created by not only the professional cartographers but by many other specialists. They’ve not been limited to any one civilization, or even the pre-civilized. In the 20th Century, mapping has benefited considerably from aerial photography and the use of computers and is now quite internationalized.

I am delighted to see a full page devoted to part of the landform map of North Africa by the late Erwin Raisz. I consider Dr. Raisz the world’s finest cartographic landform artist. To appreciate the physical stage on which the drama of human history has been played, one could do no better than to have a Raisz map at hand [p. 209]. There are, also, one might note, approximately 76 maps in this book, along with illus-

trations of 42 projections.

This rewarding text is completed with a nine-page tabulation of map projections by name, century of invention, inventor, characteristics and uses. This is followed by a two-page list of isograms (terms for lines of equal value, i e , contour lines, referred to here as isohypses), and a nine-page glossary of technical terms—all very helpful for those for whom cartography is unfamiliar territory.

The author has spared us any doting on the romantic and mythological artistry to which our expectations of old maps are apt to revert. He has provided an excellent survey of one of the (I think neglected) fields of human achievement. Mapping is a major attempt on our part to understand our world and our place(s) in it. I wish more historians, social scientists, and news organizations were better acquainted and more appreciative of maps as a means of conveying a great deal of information at a glance.

———Laurence Grambow Wolf