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Drawing on the Past Mapping Medieval England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales

John Garnons Williams

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Map-making is a much younger art than most people appreciate. Surveying as a science blossomed in the middle to late 1500s, under the influence of men such as Mercator. Then, European countries received maps. The concept of accurate mapping had simply not occurred to the medieval mind.

This is a sad deficiency for the modern historian or genealogist, because a map is what they will look for while in the preliminary stages of research. Yet the fact that there were no accurate maps in the Middle Ages does not mean that we have no geographical information from that period. If you dig deep enough into place-names and family names you can learn a great deal, and over the past twenty-five years the historical cartographer and genealogist John Garnons Williams has done just that. (John’s own fascination in maps stemmed from his earlier career as a military helicopter pilot. In his own words, “Helicopter pilots don’t really need to be able to read or write, but they certainly do need to understand maps.”

The Domesday Collection

In 1986, to mark the 900th anniversary of the famous Domesday Book, John published a series of 44 exquisitely hand-drawn, decorated maps of the counties of England, as they had been in the time of William the Conqueror. Nearly ten thousand of the place-names recorded in Domesday Book, the great tax survey of England undertaken after the Norman Conquest, are shown with their original spellings. Thousands of these names, of course, survive in English surnames, linking people all around the world with the often-tiny villages where their ancestors lived so many centuries ago. Forgotten spellings such as Eurvicscire for Yorkshire, Grantebrige for Cambridge or even Snotingham for Nottingham reveal the original meaning of the names. (To make the maps fully accessible, John supplies with each map a translation ‘Key Map' showing the equivalent modern place-names.)

The borders of the maps and the rustic scenes on them are inspired by the Bayeux Tapestry (which was actually made in England not France). The American cartographic review, Mapline, praised the Domesday Collection as “a delightful series of maps ....which repay close study.... They really demonstrate how much William the Conqueror missed in being unable to translate his material into graphic form.” Soon after completing the series, John’s unique achievement received recognition with his election as a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society.

Medieval Ireland, Scotland and Wales

After years working on England, John, himself of Welsh descent, turned his attention to the Celtic countries (which had not been included in Domesday Book). The resulting three maps, created after extensive research into place-names and family names, bring the early histories of these countries alive as never before. On the maps of Ireland and Scotland, in particular, where many major clans and families have territorial connections stretching back to medieval times; these names also display their contemporary spellings. The Book of Kells, the supreme
example of Celtic art, provides many of the decorations. Meticulous research went into the accompanying booklets, which explain the meaning of each place-name, and, in the case of Ireland and Scotland, every clan and family name shown on the maps.

Available on the Internet
Fascinating and accessible to both professional and amateur historians, a delight to map lovers and to those interested in their family’s past, The Domesday Collection is a unique and timeless work of major artistic as well as historical value. John Garnons Williams’s maps are available in a large hand-coloured Limited Edition at $75 and in smaller editions for less than $30. For viewing and ordering information, http://www.maps-maps-maps.com.