



**Atlas: A world of maps from the British Library**

*By Tom Harper*

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The last decade or so has seen a remarkable increase in the publication of what might loosely be called coffee-table map books. There seem to be a couple, at least, published every year chock full of beautiful reproductions of some of the world's finest maps, just in time for the Christmas market. And 'Atlas' is no exception. This lavish 200+ page volume illustrates the British Library's magnificent maps collection but differs from previous books which were closely tied to exhibitions. Harper is a mine of information and offers a wonderful insight into the maps presented within. The use of the term atlas is slightly misleading but only in the sense that it's unconventional as explained in the book. The term atlas came to mean a systematic collection of accurate and uniform maps of part of all of the world. And while this is certainly a collection they are not accurate (in comparison with modern maps) or uniform. But they are a collection, and it's precisely this lack of uniformity that showcases the rich and varied approaches that cartographers (and map-makers, for not all maps in this or pretty much any collection are made by trained cartographers) take in making a map of their interests.

Most of these coffee-table books are often thought of as pictures of the past, and of glossy tableaux of historical cartography. Yes, there's plenty of *olde worlde* maps in Harper's book but the first map you see after the title page is a very modern density equalizing cartogram made by Ben Hennig ([worldmapper.org](http://worldmapper.org)) showing the world thematically distorted by the incidence of territories covered in the book itself. I find the map intriguing because it paints a picture that many will assume reflects some sort of measure of global cartographic prevalence. Yet the Americas (particularly North America) don't come out very well on this map. And the European countries do. So in reality it's simply a graphical device to visualize the spread of the book's contents. That's clearly noted in the title of the map but intriguing because it illustrates how, all too easily, a map can be seen differently from the author's intent.

The book is ordered by geographical region plus a few oddities like celestial maps and fantasy maps. But it is at pains to explain the alphabetical ordering (Europe comes pretty much last) as a break from the traditional practice of placing those places deemed 'most important' toward the front of atlases. A nice touch. Throughout the book, Harper touches on how the maps included here were part of other publications too and so the context of a map's origins and purpose are explained. For instance, there's a wonderful illustration of a map of Australia and New Zealand that shows a watercolour relief map intended to form part of the front sections to Odham's *New Illustrated Atlas of the World*. Much of the explanation of this stunning map is taken up by exploring its production and context in that atlas, as much as in its design.

While there's inevitably a bias towards older maps from the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries, the temptation to simply use well-known and well-seen maps has been avoided. Not filling the book with maps that people largely either know about, or have at least seen, is both brave but necessary. Most of us could probably name a set of maps you'd expect to see in this sort of book but they aren't there. Instead, Harper has selected and curated a set of interesting maps that are perhaps less obvious, but deserving of a moment in the spotlight. For instance, if you're expecting to see Harry Beck's original 1933 London Underground map you'll be disappointed. But then we've all seen it, right? In multiple books. Instead, we get a diagrammatic map published c.1255 that shows the route from the Holy Land to London as a strip map. The map was drawn by Benedictine monk Matthew Paris who, presumably, we now must credit as the originator not only of schematic transit maps (or, diagrams if you prefer) but also the strip map format which is more commonly associated with the work of John Ogilby in the mid-1600s. Old is always new again! But its evidence of the inclusion of a map that many will never have seen and, certainly, the eyes of this reviewer has never seen.

There's actually very little from the 20<sup>th</sup> Century or more recently. I find this a little disappointing given the massive surge in mapping that has taken place at the turn of this century. Though, once again, there's a few really interesting entries such as the 1969 SYMAP generated maps of Britain showing Dudley Stamp's 1962 'Great Britain Land Use Survey' as a dot matrix map of land use classes and a 3D perspective view of the distribution of arable land. The latter would now be seen as a trendy display technique given the way in which new mapmakers have revisited the idea of stacked and layered transects and called them 'Joy plots' after the famous Joy Division album cover for 'Unknown Pleasures' by Peter Saville. There's also a predominance of topographic maps as opposed to thematic though this is inevitable given the natural tendency for the maps of a collection like that at the British Library to have more of the former. But picking on what isn't in the atlas as opposed to what is in it is always going to be a pointless exercise. With around 4 million maps to choose from, any collection of around 100 will inevitably have some bias or miss out your personal favourite. They can be found in other books. This one does a great job of giving us a taste of some of those that might be less seen or, as Harper says 'a celebration of some of the oldest, prettiest, most significant, unusual, delightful, confusing and compelling maps from the 13th to the 21st centuries from the vaults of the British Library.'

One final comment: the typeface. The book is set in Palatino Linotype Roman. A perfectly good and appropriate choice. Except, in the view of this reviewer, in the use of a stylistic ligature connector for the 'st' letter pairing throughout. It jolts as I read. I get that it gives the overall appearance of the text somewhat of a nod to the historical content but it actually disturbs the process of reading. It's a minor quibble. I wouldn't get too hung up on it, though inevitably, getting hung up on small details is what cartographers do. At least this one.

**Kenneth Field**