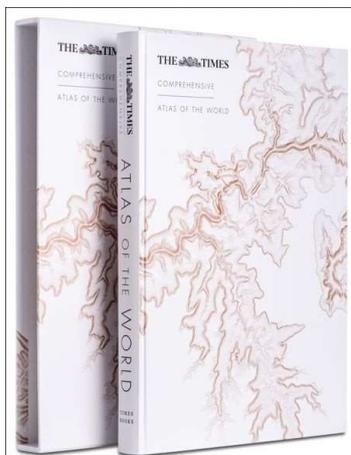


MAP, BOOK and ATLAS REVIEWS

Edited by Steve Chilton



The Times Comprehensive Atlas of the World

Pages: 528

Format: Hardback

Publication Date: 06/09/2018

ISBN: 978-0-00-829338-3

Price: £150

First impressions? Love it. And it's not out of the case yet.

I instantly love the lighter, cleaner and more modern presentation that begins with the white cover and its brown Grand Canyon contours – the first non-dark cover for a long time. Very striking. The next thing I spot is the new sans-serif font for texts and titling throughout the atlas. Love that too.

The atlas comprises 41 introductory and thematic pages, 132 map plates and 223 pages of glossary and index – 528 pages in total. The number of plates in the heart of the atlas is unchanged from the previous edition and the maps are in the same design as before but the new font for the marginalia together with the removal of the outer frame gives them a fresher look.

With an atlas of this calibre and reputation one expects the editorial integrity of the topographic plates be up to scratch. It is four years since the 14th edition and a lot has changed in the world. There are no new countries but there are a number of administrative changes in Democratic Republic of the Congo, France, Morocco, Northern Ireland and Bangladesh as well as lots of updates to place names in Spain, India, Indonesia and Iraq specifically. Czechia and Eswatini are in there too. The crisis of migrants fleeing war zones in recent years has led to the establishment of large refugee settlements, some of which have become large cities. For example, Bidi Bidi in Uganda with 285,000 residents and Dadaab in Kenya with 245,000 are the largest camps in the world for displaced people – on the maps. So, as far as representing the world as it is today, it would seem that the content is indeed up to scratch.

The cartography remains superb – 'a benchmark of cartographic excellence' is the claim. I won't dispute that – the maps are clear and legible and the layer colouring pleasing and aesthetic. There is something comforting about this familiarity, which proves the maxim 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it'. Some of the type is exceedingly small (the price to be paid for so much information being included, I guess) but nothing that cannot be overcome with the judicious use of a magnifying glass.

The greatest difference in this edition becomes apparent in the introductory section, which has been completely redesigned. The title pages, imprint and foreword all benefit from the new font. Compressing the Contents from four to two pages gives a tighter appearance without looking squished. There are eleven thematic topics with elements of previous pages revamped into the new design. Essays have been commissioned from leading experts on topics ranging from the composition of the Solar System to modern global communications with Health and Migration now covered. Texts are presented in two columns in place of three on the left page, accompanied by maps or graphics on the right. The result is very light and 'minimalist' which is most refreshing but occasionally at the expense of useful information. For example, there is a full page of climate graphs but no climate zones map. Without the map the geographical context has gone. In contrast, on the Physical features pages, the illustrations (highest mountains, longest rivers, etc.) are now keyed into a world map, adding the context but the tables of geographical comparisons have gone so there are fewer features included. On the urbanization page fewer cities are named on the map but the table of city populations is much larger.

But none of this is of serious concern, just me being picky. No two editors would make the exact same decisions based on common data. The main point is that this new material addresses issues of global change, is thought provoking and demands our full attention. The thematic maps are generally larger and clearer than before so that has to be a plus. The Migration graphic is a triumph of design and conveys the information far more effectively than could be done on a map – for once geographical context can take a back seat. And the Human global presence illustration on the Communications page is simply mesmerizing.

Each new edition of the atlas addresses what is happening in the world at the time of publication. The 15th keeps that tradition. I may prefer the North America and Europe key maps to be on the front endpaper in place of the blank map; I may question why there isn't more large-scale coverage of China and India; I may wonder why the index itself has not been reset in the new font and why the first five pages are labelled as 'INDEX' when they are in fact 'GLOSSARY' as itemized on the Contents. Oh, and the Tectonics map may be the wrong way round. But none of this detracts from the joy of studying the atlas – except perhaps the orientation of the Tectonics map, which is still troubling me.

Altogether, the new design and content make it feel like a totally new atlas, not just an update of an old favourite. There is so much to get stuck into – lots of reading and some striking graphics to interpret. Plus, the topographic plates are reassuringly familiar and yet totally updated.

It may be big and heavy and need a table all to itself as some critics say, but I urge you to clear the space and create some free time to absorb the contents. It will become your go-to reference work, just as it has for our famous explorers, adventures and travellers; Jon Snow sums it up perfectly – 'It remains one of those prized possessions which even the age of the internet can never upstage.' Quite so.

Mary Spence