

Cartography: The Ideal and its History

Matthew H. Edney

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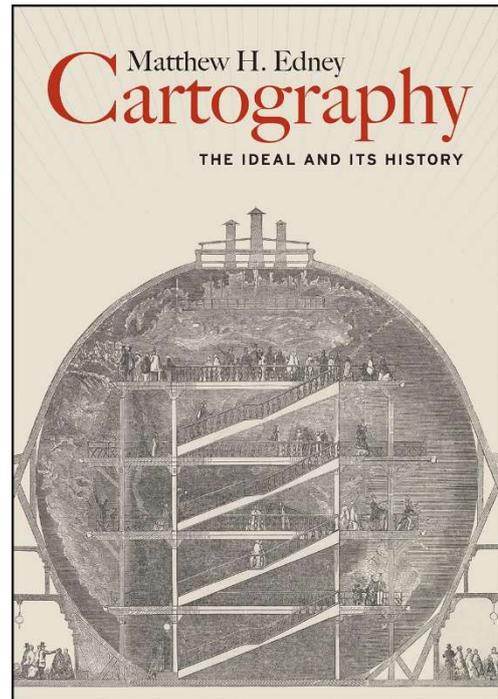
296 pages. 65 halftones. Paperback. £23

This book is a triumph and a challenge. Edney, who has long taken a critical look at the way in which cartography is undertaken, puts forwards deep and important provocation through this text. His work calls into question the sociocultural critiques of mapping practices through a careful deconstruction of the Ideal of cartography. Ultimately suggesting that we have been thoroughly misled by this Ideal and that our preconceptions about what cartography is, and isn't, must also be overturned.

By his own admission, Edney has written a book that confronts everyone who studies any aspect of mapping. He asks them to rethink everything they think know about the subject. While he mostly directs this towards sociocultural geographers, he also takes aim at historians, humanistic scholars, those taking political motivated critiques, and everyone in between. This text makes a radical call for the discarding of, what Edney calls, *inadequate, old and flawed, preconceptions and convictions*, in order to eliminate the normative map to which we are all bound. While he concedes that indeed sociocultural geographers have worked to expose some of these inadequacies and distortions in our understanding of maps, he notes that cartography remains a practice of 'idealization produced by modern cultural that cannot provide a valid conception of mapping in the past present or future' (p.8). And thus, we must revisit these preconceptions and understand the Ideal of Cartography in order to reveal the myriad ways in which people produce, circulate and consume maps.

This is then quite the affront for those of us who have long worked with maps, and one that is initially rather jarring for the reader. However, persisting through the provocative opening paragraphs reveals that Edney has no intention of letting the reader deal with this alone. His thoughts flow effortlessly across the page, anecdotes and first-person quips draw the reader along with him. And while he repeatedly reminds the reader that we have been all been misled and duped by the Ideal, he still makes us want to understand why.

The opening two chapters do an excellent job of setting the scene, plenty of examples and lovingly reproduced 'maps' which help to illustrate the arguments put forwards – a theme that continues throughout thanks to the work of Chicago University Press. It is though as we enter chapter three that the book gets into its stride, with a comprehensive listing of the Ideals and myths of cartography. Following this listing, he provides more detail on each of these supposed axiomatic principles. Unpicking each one in turn, untying cartography from its territory and the limits of latitude and longitude. He reinserts the reader as both an individual and as someone who must decode a map through their own cognitive stores of knowledge and spatial comprehension in order to access these abstract images of the world. He also takes to task the placing of indigenous mapping as a prehistoric undertaking. And rightly challenges the racist, patriarchal and misogynic schema through which we view maps. At its simplest he reminds us that not all maps are navigational. And that all these post-1800 Ideals cannot be placed on past mapping practices – and indeed should be eradicated in future undertakings.



Chapter four then builds on these arguments. If you were not yet convinced of the Ideal, Edney now turns up the heat. The proof, he states, that cartography cannot be a universal practice, is that the Ideal has a history, one that has been layered upon over centuries. There has been an intensification and elaboration of the Ideal, each new factor reinforcing already developed convictions. Throughout this chapter he charts this history, moving quickly from one idea to the next, packing in hundreds of years. Yet each moment is detailed, clear and well-illustrated with examples.

We then turn to the technicalities of mapping in the fifth and penultimate chapter. Here we discuss map scale at length, along with the idealization of geometry. These are, in Edney's mind, the core issue in the creation of the normative map. The acceptance of numerical ratios for all maps has indeed idealized the notion of what a map might be. Those maps without scale are dismissed as not being maps – including Henry Beck's tube diagram(?). The main issue here though for Edney, is not so much the scale in and of itself, but rather that the Ideal is most readily seen here in the way in which map scholars have worked to actively avoid examining the notion of scale in detail. This highlights the deep seated Ideal that maps are all derived from the measurement of the world. This, he claims, is an image of what we naively believe mapping should be. Not what mapping is.

The book, like all books, does have some flaws, in places it becomes repetitive and can also feel like a rather sustained attack on the thinking of other mapping scholars. These though are rather diminished when you get to the end of the text and feel that you immediately want to read it again in order to embed this challenge of the ideal within your own working – even if you disagree on some points.

Edney provides us with an important work here. While some ideas might feel familiar, others are a true lifting the lid on preconceptions. Centrally he reminds us that cartography by its nature cannot be universal, but instead is permeated by the Ideal that has become increasingly persistent as it is repeatedly added to and reinforced, eventually becoming totally naturalized. Edney pulls short of following Denis Wood in suggesting that cartography is dead, but he states that it does *deserve* to die. This book seeks to expose the Ideal of cartography, and does so in a very comprehensive, if at times challenging, manner. Edney reveals the traps that are laid for us as we work to understand mapping practices, and helps us to navigate around them. Most importantly though, he reminds us that we cannot assume anything. The Ideal continues to persist!

Review by
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