

## Talking Maps

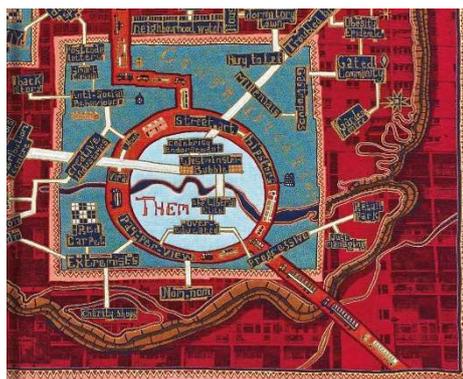
Jerry Brotton and Nick Millea

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At first glance, the title of the book and the cover image of Grayson Perry's *Red Carpet* tapestry sparked great interest regarding the context of 'talking maps'. Unlike a close friend of mine, I did not presume it to mean the literal application of the term (i.e. a sat nav) and was very happy to engage with a book coinciding with interests stemming from my doctorate submission regarding the purpose and function of a map. The weight and size of the book promised a plethora of detail, images and various cartographic representations, and unsurprisingly I was not disappointed.



Jerry Brotton • Nick Millea **TALKING  
MAPS**

The book is an accompaniment to the Bodleian Library *Talking Maps* exhibition and provides a detailed account of the creation and evolution of maps. It explores key historical contexts and time periods that are supported by a range of hand-drawn and computer-generated examples. The focus of the book is to outline the story-telling capabilities of maps and their ability to convey information relating to a variety of geographical phenomena; including political and social contexts, demographic compositions, war, and settlement development. As a form of tool or communication device, the authors allow map readers and users alike to decipher and understand more about the landscape and physical environment, based on their own interpretation of details representative of specific dates and times.

Organised into ten chapters, the book sequentially discusses the evolution of maps, mapping and cartographic form across themes including; orientation; administration; the country; the land and sea; imaginary cartographies; and the digital turn. The authors make fantastic use of full-page and multipage spreads to present high quality images and figures, teamed with a reader-friendly font and well-thought out layout to help break the content into manageable sections. However, whilst the book provides readers with plenty of detail and information, I found that the figures themselves were hard to access. Though clearly presented, it was difficult to link the text and descriptions to the corresponding image, especially where the relevant figure appeared four pages later. This may be a more personal concern and of minor consideration for others. However, as a few well-known cartographers have said in the past, it is the smaller details like these that can affect readability and clear communication of knowledge.

On the other hand, the book itself is incredibly interesting and informative, so it is easy to disregard this minor inconvenience. Specifically, in the first chapter alone Brotton and Millea discuss the social and cultural factors that influence a map makers choice to orientate a map to one of the cardinal points. Being north, south, east or west, these points encompass more than just direction, but also power, belief, and political assumptions; such as the familiar north and south associations of the UK relating to social stereotypes and class. It is therefore fascinating to read about the historical, religious and social connotations that frame the presentation of maps, and that enable users to uncover more detail and decipher further evidence engrained within a map's attributes and qualities. Additionally, I was pleased to see that the authors had engaged with the work of Benjamin Hennig, who's work reflects the latest developments in cartography and data visualisation. Within the text, the authors carefully address the 'digital turn' stemming from the developments of Geographical Information Systems (GIS), and briefly touch upon theoretical frameworks and

ideologies associated to critical GIS; such as the role of the computer and subsequent technology. For some, this may be uninteresting and boring. For myself, however, and possibly due to my status as a postgraduate researcher, I have rarely come across these themes of discussion outside of more academic semantics. Brotton and Millea have therefore been able to refer to such developments in a reader friendly and approachable way, making these conversations more accessible to wider audiences.

Penultimately, this book is an exceptional piece of literature that does well to selectively choose a range of maps and cartographies from a collection of over one and a half million. The Al-Sharīf al-Idrīsī maps, the Selden map of China, the Gough map, Grayson Perry's work and the imaginary maps by J.R.R Tolkien and C.S.Lewis are just some of my favourite examples used to illustrate the story-telling capability of cartographic representation, and further fuel my interest and passion of cartography from a human geographical perspective. I feel that Brotton and Millea have done a fantastic job and have achieved their aim to celebrate the creation, function and purpose of maps, using specific examples that cover nearly two millennia.

On a final note, knowing that this book is an accompaniment to an exhibition means that I now want to know more and see what other stories and tales can be uncovered across their collection of maps and cartographies.

**Isabel Williams**