A History of America in 100 Maps

Professor Susan Schulten
British Library Publishing
272 pages. Hardback. £30

A History of America in 100 Maps by acclaimed historian Susan Schulten uses maps sourced from the British Library to explore five centuries of American history. The title could be considered a bit misleading as only a few of its early chapters include all of the Americas, the book predominately concentrates on North America and what is now the United States of America.

The book includes chapters on discovery, independence, expansion, industrialisation, conflict and peace, charting the early days of exploration in the Americas through to the formation and development of the United States of America from 1490 -2001, with a final short chapter on the future "Road Ahead". The book illustrates a wide range of thematic maps portraying topography, geology, transport, industry, urbanisation, population and society, politics and past/recent historical events.

Although a number of the pre-1850 maps may be generally familiar to some readers, some of the more unusual maps such as the Cherokee Deerskin Trade, Slave Trade and Temperance (Geography of Sin) maps will not be. As we move through the industrialisation and development period prior to the two world wars we see an increasing improvement in the quality and accuracy of the mapping culminating in the excellent Rand McNally 1904 historical map of US acquisitions. Chapters 7 and 8 are dominated by maps of conflict during the WW1, WW2, the Cold War and their post war affects on America and its development. Noticeable amongst these is the feeling of contrast between the simple but solemn trench, holocaust and segregation maps against the hope given by the pictorial Hollywood and Disneyland maps. The final chapter 1962-2001 documents the Unsettled Peace during the Cold War through to the Ground Zero map of 2001 which coincided with the introduction of digital cartography as illustrated in the attractive 3D Hispanic Population map.

A number of images and extracts from the book can be found at:
http://www.america100maps.com/preview.html

While the book is attractive and informative is has its limitations as it must be by its nature both selective and subjective, especially as a single source (The British Library) has been used. The book also includes a very limited number of maps post-2001, a period in which there has been an explosion of new map makers and users which are now influencing society and it use of digital map products.

To readers with a mapping or cartographic background a noticeable omission of great American maps is one of the pioneering recreational maps by the renowned American explorer, mountaineer, photographer and cartographer - Bradford Washburn - his beautiful map of the “Heart of the Grand Canyon" would have been a suitable inclusion if available. In fact, there is only one map "Extermination of the American Bison" with a natural environment theme compared to numerous maps on human settlement and development, something that maybe mirrors the history and development of the United States of America.

The extensive accompanying text gives a useful insight to the use and purpose of each map but maybe the author’s narrative should be treated with some subjectivity. The maps alone however make this an interesting and appealing ‘coffee table' book that would be a welcome addition to a historical cartographic collection or bought as a gift.

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