

INTRODUCTION

The title of this volume, *Mappa Mundi: Mapping Culture/Mapping the World* has a flowery, almost Baroque flavour to it. Partly reflecting the conceit of the medievalist, the title nevertheless accurately reflects what we have come to think of as mapping in this poststructuralist, postmodern intellectual world. Moreover, our current notions of mapping, freed as they are from geography and topography, harken back to older definitions. Among the many definitions of maps and mapping found in the venerable *Oxford English Dictionary* one finds “a circumstantial account of a state of a thing”. This definition, the compilers report, was common in the seventeenth century but is now obsolete. Yet, a century after this dismissal, it is this understanding of mapping that dominates the intellectual landscape, as we map cultures and genomes as much as continents and galaxies. Similarly, the allegedly archaic notion of mapping as “a mental conception of the arrangement of something” is as immediate to today’s theoretical cartographers as it was to their geographically-focussed ancestors. Whether it is our mental map of a career path or spiritual journey, or an individual’s understanding of self in the universe, we all use “mental conceptions” to orient ourselves. Mapping is the procedure of making sense of our world.

For medieval people, a *mappa mundi* allowed them to locate themselves in time as much as space. It was a means of conveying past, present, and future as well as for ordering peoples, nations, and beliefs into a comprehensive cosmology. Perhaps the most famous *mappa mundi* is that preserved and displayed in Hereford Cathedral in the United Kingdom.¹ This map was produced about seven hundred years ago and is attributed to Richard de Bello of Haldingham. It is beautiful, a work of art embellished by gold leaf and artistic imagination, as have been many maps. It is painted on a calfskin *mappa* (a towel or napkin) and contains the whole of the world in a circle some 52 inches in diameter, presided over by Jesus at the Last Judgement. It is as much theoretical and spiritual as it is cosmographical or geographical and it tells of a world distant and unfamiliar. However would we moderns orient ourselves on a map that places east at the top and Jerusalem at the centre? How would we find ourselves amid the angels and mermaids, ferocious beasts and mythological races that people this world? How do we read a map on which the Red Sea is painted red and Noah’s Ark is as much of a landmark as cities and mountains and rivers? Yet, for medieval people, this was their world. This map told medievals who they were and where they fit in a rational universe and in salvation history.

Today’s maps are no less complicated or ideological, as the essays in this volume demonstrate. Mapping requires the exercise of human perception and consequently is reflective of human subjectivity. This point is at the heart of James Flanagan’s investigation of how biblical maps are created and their enduring relevance. Although they purport to portray the long ago lands and peoples of the bible, Professor Flanagan demonstrates how these maps construct a contemporary world view and continue to affect our lives. The modern representation of the organization of space in the ancient past is inextricably linked to the need for space and the quest for social justice in today’s world. Maps, he argues, are not objective representations of what is. Rather, they are every bit as subjective as narrative, and map makers are able to control how their maps are read, just as Richard de Bello influenced medieval European views through the manipulation of space and the portrayal of “monstrous races” on the margins of his world. But Richard de Bello did not pretend to the scientific accuracy that accrues to modern maps. Professor Flanagan concludes that how this world portrays the world of the distant past, in fact, influences the present and the future.

The subjectivity of maps figures equally in Walter Goffart’s discussion of the appearance of historical atlases. Professor Goffart, too, is interested in how the past was mapped, but this time the focus is on map makers of the past as opposed to the present. When did people begin to want maps of the past and when were historical maps gathered together into albums that, when read consecutively, might be thought to indicate change over time? The great map maker Ortelius said that “geography allows history to be visualized” but this visualization is controlled by the map maker as historian rather than by the map reader. For a long time, ancient geography and ancient maps were based on the descriptions of the world provided by classical authors. These maps coexisted with modern maps that portrayed contemporary geography. Professor Goffart demonstrates how long classical antiquity continued to exert a strong influence. It is the gradual appearance in atlases of maps of other periods that provides tangible evidence for the evolution of educational curricula and the ultimate loosening of the grasp of antiquity on western world views.

James Raven brings new technologies to the service of mapping worlds we have lost in his essay on mapping the book trades in early modern London. How, he asks, can memory be mapped? One possible answer is through experimentation with computer resources to construct a “bookscape”. Professor Raven is (re)making historical maps in a way that would astonish Ortelius and other early map makers. Not only does this application of electronic technology allow researchers to construct an image of the past but it permits the portrayal of dimensions and layers of social space. This reconstruction of verticality aims to show how multi-layered life is in

¹Colour illustrations of the Hereford *Mappa Mundi* can be found at: <http://www.ibmpcug.co.uk/~mserve/mapmundi.html>

complex urban environments, with residences over shops and people living on top of one another quite literally. Understanding how verticality influenced the experience of lived space opens the possibility of capturing something of the dynamics of the past through mapping.

Mapping in the twenty-first century benefits from and relies upon an array of technologies that would have baffled and bewildered Richard de Bello. Equally baffling and bewildering would be the things that are now mapped and the potential power of the ensuing knowledge: power for good or ill; power that technology itself can unleash but cannot control. While Professor Goffart notes that there are more atlases of anatomy than of geography, anatomical map makers of the past would never believe the extent to which human beings and their bodies have now been mapped. The intersection of medical and computer technology has allowed the mapping of the human genome. Yet, it is human beings as ethical actors who will decide what to do with that power. In this, the ethical tools of the ancients are as relevant today as they were two and a half millennia ago. Thus, Dr Jeffrey Nisker interrogates the implications of genetic mapping through drama and the portrayal of the universal through the personal. Just as the drama of antiquity spoke of the tragedies, moral truths, and ethical dilemmas that characterize life, so, using the dramatic voice, Dr Nisker vivifies the contradictions and potential for good and for evil proffered by genetic mapping. *Orchids* speaks to the depth of human experience and reminds us that technology and its awful and awesome potential remains, for all that, a tool and a servant of humanity. It is our choices that will decide the future that will be mapped.

The ethical and moral concerns of mapping are similarly reflected in Dr Kirstie Duncan's reminiscence of her experience mapping the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918. Many kinds of mapping contributed to the ultimate unearthing of the flu virus. Mapping the course of the pandemic allowed for the identification of potential sites of victims' remains. High-tech Ground-Penetrating Radar was used to map the cemetery where the victims lay. Mapping the virus through various bodily tissues will allow for a better understanding of influenza and its fatal potential, for all its mundane familiarity. Through this whole process, Dr Duncan's ethical concern is evident for the victims and their families and community, and for the researchers themselves as they faced a potentially lethal virus. The multiple levels of mapping this project required reminds us of the multiple layers of meanings embedded in maps and mapping. Ethical and cultural issues are never separate from technological potential or scientific enquiry.

There is another *mappa mundi*, one that perhaps reflects our world of the third millennium with the same depth and complexity as the Hereford map reflected the world of the thirteenth century. It is the *Mappa Mundi Magazine*, an Internet site that "maps the journey from data to understanding, revealing invisible worlds of information on the way."² This *mappa mundi* charts the geography of cyberspace. It, too, is a map of conceptual space and a map of belief. Is it so different from the maps of belief and the conceptualization of space that have endured and structured the worlds of many different peoples and many different times and places?

Jacqueline Murray
Director
Humanities Research Group

²See: mappa.mundi.net/map/