



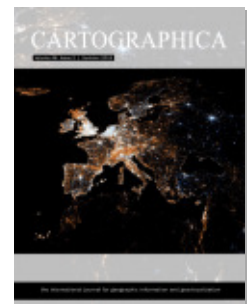
PROJECT MUSE®

---

*A History of the World in Twelve Maps* by Jerry Brotton  
(review)

Gwilym Eades

*Cartographica: The International Journal for Geographic Information and Geovisualization*, Volume 48, Number 2, Summer 2013, pp. 144-145 (Review)



Published by University of Toronto Press

➔ For additional information about this article  
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/513480>

## Reviews of Books & Atlases

A HISTORY OF THE WORLD IN TWELVE MAPS / Jerry Brotton. London: Allen Lane, 2012. Pp. 544; 38 figures (b&w), 56 illus. (col.). ISBN 9781846140990 (cloth), £30. Available from [www.penguin.co.uk](http://www.penguin.co.uk).

Jerry Brotton's time- and space-slicing survey of world maps is less a history of the world in 12 maps and more a map of the world in 12 maps. It takes the ideas of cartographic selection and generalization seriously and applies them to a historiography of maps that is both innovative and exciting to read. Through the first few chapters (up to and including chapter 7 on Mercator), cartographers are shown to struggle to overcome the legacy of Ptolemy and his world-defining projections. By later chapters, it is clear to the reader that maps reflect the cultures and world views of their makers and that those cultures are constantly changing across time and space. As cultures and the technologies those cultures produce evolve, so do their maps. At the same time, the most technically sophisticated maps are demonstrated to be those most suited to state and colonial, commercial, and empire-building projects, up to and including Google Earth and Google Maps.

A representative sampling of maps is shown, through successive chapters, to have served particular ideologies, including science, exchange, faith, empire, discovery, globalism, toleration, money, nation, geopolitics, equality, and information. Through the varying terrain of these 12 chapters (in addition to an extra concluding chapter that is a real "bonus"), Brotton maintains a critical and scholarly cartographic gaze in the tradition of J.B. Harley, while moving a considerable distance beyond his deconstructive predecessor. Brotton is part of a "next generation" of critical cartographers confident in the groundwork that has been laid by Denis Wood, John Pickles, Eric Sheppard, Michael Curry, and other early critics of the cartographic gaze. Cartography has largely moved beyond the need to rely heavily on post-structuralisms that ironically (and not intentionally) seemed to create binaries between experts in geospatial technologies, who often took top-down, god-like views upon the world, and "others," mostly human geographers, who saw the early technologies as hopelessly determined by positivistic ideologies.

Brotton clearly adopts some tools of the former (geospatial experts) to serve the aims of the latter (humanistic geographers). Evolutionary metaphors pervade *A History* as cartographers are increasingly able to realize the dream of a 1:1 map of the world that conquers the millennia-long battle to square the circle, or to find a perfect way

to project the round globe on the flat (square) surface of a map. Google has achieved both in one fell swoop: 1:1 scales are easily achievable on the Internet, and Google has also squared the circle, ironically by using a projection originally created by Ptolemy that takes a bird's-eye-angled view of the globe from a high altitude. The evolutionary metaphor is decidedly non-teleological, and the various technical feats are ultimately placed within a framework of *failure*. The dream of a perfect map is ultimately not achievable, because it is decidedly non-technical in nature. It is, rather, ideological.

The Enlightenment "belief in scientifically accurate standardized realism" (p. 440) contains a universalizing impulse that is ultimately at odds with particulars of global difference and diversity as drivers of commercial interests (p. 444). On the other hand, an impulse to consume the products of universalizing cartographic projects is quite evident in *A History* as, starting with Joan Blaeu and as described in the chapter titled "Money," the purchase of an atlas started to become accessible to (initially rich) members of the general public. French nation-building efforts led by the Cassini family, both before and after the revolution, brought the accessibility bar even lower as technologies became more efficient, driving down prices so that middle-class consumers could now own copies of maps. Before the advent of Google Earth, the Peters projection map was the best-selling map of all time for a few decades, marketed using an essentially Marxist strategy. The Peters controversy revolved around the alleged perfection contained within his map (and an ideology of equality flowing from that perfect representation of the Earth).

Maps, then, would seem to be an exception to a general rule in marketing: that location matters more than just about anything. Maps, on the other hand, will sell just about anywhere they are offered, so long as they exude an aura of objectivity and completeness. The same aura flows from all kinds of maps used throughout history as ways of consolidating power and control over distant populations, resources, and markets. The drive behind the development of Google Earth in no way escapes this paradoxical logic. Google, however, does go a step beyond previous iterations of map-making by seeking to preserve diversity of language in its search engine and on its maps – which only makes good marketing sense.

The strength of Brotton's book is that it enables readers to understand these ideas, through crystal-clear explanation with example after example and details of how and why specific maps came to be, under what circumstances, and in what political contexts. *A History* shows the reader

what it means in clear, accessible language and anchors itself in previous debates in both the history of cartography and critical cartography. The book is therefore a bit critique-resistant, but perhaps that is the very place in which to insert such a critique. Both the selective nature and the quality of the resulting representative sample of maps give the appearance of a seamless surface that is itself a sort of projection. This projection of perfection does not seem to allow for alternatives to flow through its well-anchored cartographic pillars. The title does, in its defence, indicate this quality: it is “A History of the World in Twelve Maps,” not “*The History of the World in Twelve Maps.*”

What would such an alternative history in maps look like? Would other scholars or critical cartographers make the same choices? Almost certainly not – but it will probably be some time before an individual with the kind of training, rigour, and capability that Brotton demonstrates in this book comes along. Until that time, and long thereafter, we will cherish and reread this book as the most perfect of its kind of story to come along in quite some time.

Gwilym Eades / Department of Geography / Royal Holloway, University of London / UK

ADVANCING GEOINFORMATION SCIENCE FOR A CHANGING WORLD / Ed. Stan Geertman, Wolfgang Reinhardt, and Fred Toppen. Lecture Notes in Geoinformation and Cartography. Heidelberg: Springer, 2012. Pp. 538; illus. (201, 15 col.). ISBN 978-3-642-19788-8 (cloth), £153.00. Available from <http://www.springer.com>

The 14th Conference on Geographic Information by the Association of Geographic Information Laboratories in Europe (AGILE) took place in 2011 at Utrecht University. The conference theme, “Advancing Geoinformation Science for a Changing World,” provides the title for this book of peer-reviewed conference proceedings edited by Stan Geertman, Wolfgang Reinhardt, and Fred Toppen, published in the *Lecture Notes in Geoinformation and Cartography* (LNG&C) series.

The book is a comprehensive collection of current research, undertaken under the broad umbrella of geoinformation science, that demonstrates why some researchers make a strong case for GIScience as a separate field of science. The range of topics presented demonstrates the diverse nature of work undertaken; regardless of topical focus, there is a strong emphasis on the GI element. The chapters range from studies about the geographic analysis of Wikipedia contributions (as presented by de Alencar and Davis) to an analysis of historical earthquake trends in Tehran (by Hashemi and Aleheikh). The spatial component and the central role of some form of geographic information system are the elements that bring this research together.

Beyond the conference participants, therefore, this book will appeal mostly to the reader with a broad geographical interest who seeks stimulating examples of research in which GIScience has the potential to provide new answers to sometimes old (but more often new) questions and topics. A remarkable feature of this volume is the understandable presentation of most of the case studies. Only rarely does overly technical language prevent readers from relishing examples more distant from their own interests, although some of the case studies appear very specialized – such as the contribution by Haunert, who uses string matching for detecting symmetries in building footprints.

While conference proceedings are often heterogeneous in quality, this compilation does not disappoint the reader with an interest in GIScience. The quality of the papers is remarkably and consistently high, indicating a thorough review process (as the editors state in the Foreword, only 26 of 70 submissions were accepted for publication, an acceptance rate of 37%). This volume therefore provides an interesting and substantial snapshot of relevant research in the fields of geoinformation science. A reader looking for less technical discussions and more for the topical side of a *Changing World* may be more disappointed, but such a reader will probably not find any title in this series useful.

The papers are divided into six sections that reflect the inter- (or multi-) disciplinary nature of the field: “Spatial-Temporal Modelling and Analysis,” “Road Network and Mobility Research,” “GeoSensor Development and Application,” “Socio-spatial Modelling and Analysis,” “Spatial Data Processing and Structuring,” and “GI-Information Generation and Dissemination.” The papers range from technical solutions for better data interoperability (Nüst et al.’s solution involves connecting the software R to Sensor Web) to classic GI modelling questions (Hecker et al. discuss micro-movement variability in mobility studies). There are also papers addressing data questions related to scalability and generalization (e.g., Thiemann et al.’s approach for generating landcover data for Germany).

A full list of contributions would exceed the extent of this review, and highlighting the most interesting does little justice to those not mentioned – not least because every reader will find different topics interesting. Advancing Geoinformation Science is a theme throughout, and the papers are almost all more than just demonstrations of applications or case studies applying existing techniques. The reader will therefore find many new ideas in the contributions that are at the forefront of the field, which makes the book a valuable overview of the diverse nature of the research in the area and helps us understand why GIScience has started to develop its own identity as a (sub)discipline within the spatial sciences.

The publication of this volume as part of the LNG&C series, however, also makes it rather pricey for conference proceedings. At this price, some of the figures would