

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Susan Schulten, *Mapping the Nation: History and Cartography in Nineteenth-Century America*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012. ISBN: 9780226740683 (cloth); ISBN: 9780226103969 (paper); ISBN: 9780226740706 (ebook)

Susan Schulten's (2001) last book, *The Geographical Imagination in America, 1880-1950*, tackled the popularization and deployment of mapping in such venues as *National Geographic*, the publisher Rand McNally, and Richard Edes Harrison's popular wartime maps. Her concern was to trace the ways that geographical knowledge can, as she put it, "shape history". Drawing on the work of critical cartographers such as Brian Harley, and extensive archival work, she argued that the National Geographic Society and "mass-market cartography" (for example, *Time* magazine, Rand McNally publications) became coupled with the rise of geography as a discipline in schools and colleges. She argued that historians had yet to fully appreciate the role of geographical knowledges in the formation of America, a story that can only be seen properly through a historical examination of technology and national aspirations. Her work thus occupies a position somewhere between STS, history, and the state. Schulten generally does not seek to build theory or make political arguments, but there is much in here that, for example, readers of Foucault would find broadly familiar on the constitution of knowledge for governance.

Schulten, a historian at the University of Denver, received a Guggenheim fellowship in 2010, and is a contributor to the fifth volume of the History of Cartography project on the nineteenth-century¹ as well as a frequent columnist for the *New York Times*². Her new work acts as a sequel to the earlier book and is divided into two main parts, 'Mapping the Past' and 'Mapping the Present'.

1<http://www.geography.wisc.edu/histcart/series.html#v5>

2<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/author/susan-schulten/>

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In 'Mapping the Past' she sets out her guiding questions: "when and how did Americans begin to map their past?" and to what extent did a sense of national identity rely on geographical knowledge? (p.4) Her answer is that subsequent to the American Revolution history was no longer seen as a matter of providence, but as a matter national loyalty, that is, as the formation and reinforcement of a "sovereign territory" (p.12). She evidences this through the career of Emma Willard, an educator and women's rights activist. Willard founded the first educational schools for women's higher education, first in 1815 at her home in Middlebury, Vermont (now part of Middlebury College), then in 1821 in Troy, New York (now a private school).

Willard drew heavily on cartography as a way of providing children with a context-based learning system. She did not object to memorization (as later educators would) but rather saw it as a way of making sense of geographical knowledge and its relation to history. Schulten points out that at a time (early nineteenth-century America) when there were no formal research universities as such, Willard essentially began the formalization of the geographic discipline, especially in the service of forming national identity. For example, she created the first atlas of American history, which illustrated through a series of "progressive maps" a narrative of "territorial fulfillment" (p.24). As she points out, the westward march of population that was captured by the Census Bureau's 1874 *Statistical Atlas* (the first such atlas in the United States) formed the basis for Frederick Jackson Turner's highly influential essay on the frontier (from 1893). But it was a particular one; Willard's maps gradually erased native Americans from the story (here Schulten draws from arguments made in the late 1980s by Brian Harley [1988] on the "silences" of maps, and more recently by Martin Lewis [1998] on Native American mapmaking). Willard also suppressed regional identity and local variation in her nationalist vision.

One of Willard's most interesting innovations was the so-called 'Picture of Nations', which was designed to integrate all of human history in a single image. Depicting a pyramid-like

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shape of increasing diversity over time, it allowed any civilization to be “placed” in its proper location in terms of its “distance from the ancients” (p.33), that is, its degree of development. Steven Jay Gould identified a similar impetus in modern depictions of evolution in what he called the “cone of increasing diversity” in his book *Wonderful Life*: “placement in time is conflated with judgment of worth” (1989: 39). Some ideas it seems, are hard to let go.

The second chapter in this section traces the work of the US Coast Survey and the development of a national map archive. This idea came late (even the British Museum did not get one going until 1867). ‘Old maps’ were not understood as inherently valuable, except perhaps in the antiquarian sense of knowledge. Schulten provides a useful account of the culmination of the shift from old maps to a scientifically-based appraisal of national formation in the *Atlas of Historical Geography of the United States* published in 1932. This atlas, a joint production between the Carnegie Institution and the American Geographical Society, was a direct outgrowth of Willard and her contemporaries.

Although Schulten ties these works to a project of national unification and “territorial integrity” (p.76), she does not see these in the context of contemporary critiques of historical accounts that have such a will to unification. It might have been interesting, for example, to draw contrasts with Nietzsche’s genealogical accounts. Both Willard’s ‘Picture of Nations’ and the national archive evoke Nietzsche’s criticism of history as “Egyptianism” or a suprahistorical perspective that fits diversity into a single fixed vision; a perspective, as Foucault observes in his commentary on Nietzsche, that “implies the end of time” (Foucault 1998: 379). As Elden (2003) has argued, genealogy can be thought of as “historical ontology” which would question absolutes, rather than reify them.

‘Mapping the Present’ comprises three chapters: “environmental” mapping (i.e. meteorology, climatology, and disease-mapping); slavery maps; and an account of government

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mapping (primarily that of the Coast Survey and Census Bureau). As such, these “thematic” (topic-based, rather than locational) maps brought into view the possibility of analysis rather than description; “hypotheses rather than summaries” (p.80). This story has been told before as Schulten is quick to acknowledge, most importantly by Arthur Robinson (1982) in *Early Thematic Mapping in the History of Cartography* - probably his best, but least read work. Robinson’s interest in thematic mapping sprang from his wartime experience as Chief of the Map Division in the OSS, America’s first national intelligence agency. Robinson, a PhD student at the time, switched his dissertation topic from a historical study of settlement in the Mississippi valley to the challenges and obstacles he and his colleagues faced, primarily the lack of a formal discipline of cartographic knowledge.

Apart from this glancing reference, however, Schulten does not retrace Robinson’s steps. Where his interest was the European origins of thematic mapping, her focus is resolutely American. Her chapter on environmental maps covers epidemics (such as cholera and yellow fever) and climatology. These were concerns that rose to prominence in the nineteenth-century (recall John Snow’s famous maps of the London cholera epidemics). Although we learn many new details of these events, we learn less about the work these maps did. Schulten does note repeatedly the increasing focus on “population”, and there is much here that a student of biopolitics would find recognizable. Maps of climate could be used to increase the predictability of natural events, and to assess the suitability of agriculture (particularly cotton in the south). In much of this the role not just of government but of the military is apparent. For those who wish to trace the origin of the military and geography to this or that moment, Schulten demonstrates rather a longstanding and continuing history.

Chapter 4 on slavery and the origins of statistics uses a remarkable painting by Francis Bicknell Carpenter (from 1864) that shows President Lincoln’s announcement of emancipation

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to his cabinet. Tucked into a corner of that painting is a careful reproduction of a 1861 map showing the distribution of slave population in the southern states. This well-known map was made by the US Coast Survey, and Schulten uses it to argue that it is as good a point as any to mark the trend of statistical cartography in the US. In Chapter 5 Schulten picks up this point with a detailed discussion of the US Census Bureau's statistical atlases, the first of which appeared in 1874. For me, these two chapters are worth the price of the book alone, and there is much new territory and historical detail here (especially US-German connections via people such as August Petermann). If Matthew Hannah (2000) has covered the larger "governmental" context of the Census and its chief, Francis Amasa Walker, in his own excellent book, *Governmentality and the Mastery of Territory in Nineteenth-Century America*, then Schulten here provides the cartographic history.

This is a deeply informed history. If anything it is a little too close to a series of influential figures (Willard, Gilman, Walker, Quetelet, etc.) but Schulten keeps a fairly light hand on the tiller. There is little grand theorizing, but rather a concern to see maps as part of a historical argument that America might be said to have had with itself over its own identity. If such an argument presupposes that knowledge is transparent to itself, this book will still make an essential addition to any student of the genealogy of mapping.

The book is well illustrated in black and white, with a companion website providing more illustrations in color³.

References

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³<http://www.mappingthenation.com/>

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Jeremy W. Crampton
Department of Geography
University of Kentucky
jcrampton@uky.edu

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