

Some reflections on historical carto-bibliography in South Africa

Lessons learnt by a map librarian

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The article discusses aspects of carto-bibliography in South Africa. The methods employed and problems encountered in recording and indexing cartographic material relate specifically to the map collection in the John G. Gubbins Africana Library, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

As a graphic expression of geographical understanding, an antique map or sea chart has the power to capture the imagination. Surely few are able to stand in front of the extraordinary world map of AD 1290 in Hereford Cathedral without experiencing a sense of awe. For those whose interest is engaged, the study of old maps is endlessly absorbing. They embody many branches of intellectual endeavour, and are generally a delight to behold. In the case of Africa, the splendidly embellished maps by Willem Blaeu and Jodocus Hondius, the spare and elegant maps of 18th-century French cartographers such as Guillaume de l'Isle and Nicolas Bellin, for example, manifest the aesthetic visual quality of a fine map. It is also inspiring to observe, through the gradual perfecting of cartographic techniques (which had become wonderfully refined by the mid-19th century), the increasingly accurate redrawing of the magnificent outline of Africa.

Custodial practice

For the custodian of a collection of antique maps to do it justice, certain practices have to be followed, such as conservation, housing, lighting and atmospheric control. The main focus of the librarian-cataloguer, however, is the recording of each item. By comparison with maps as printed objects requiring cataloguing and indexing, the management of a collection of books, however obscure, seems relatively straightforward. For books there is reference material in abundance. Maps, on the other hand, and sheet maps and charts in particular – many of which have been plundered from atlases and thus separated from their sources – can be frustratingly difficult to identify. Intact atlases of antique maps in a collection are a curator's dream, but are rarely encountered outside the great cartographic collections. Second-best as reference sources are facsimile atlases. Many of these have been edited and given valuable historical content by cartographic scholars such as Rodney Shirley (1983), R. A. Skelton (1964), A. E. Nordenskiöld (1889) and Cornelis Koeman (1964), to mention only a few. In the world of map cataloguing, these figures loom large over the average librarian, who is seldom a qualified historian,

astronomer or geographer, but merely (one would hope) good at the orderly and coherent assembling of materials.

It is patently obvious, therefore that the serious librarian entrusted with the recording of a large collection of maps is reliant on sound reference materials covering all aspects of these intricate, complex objects. In South Africa, where bibliographic input in the field of cartography is a relatively young branch of librarianship, the dependence on these sources as well as those such as the British Museum *Catalogue of printed maps, charts and plans* (1967), the microform *National union catalogue of cartographic material* (Library of Congress, 1983–) and the OCLC (2000–), is considerable. These records, while generally extremely useful, are frequently minimal in their information, and at times no help at all.

The situation in South Africa

Excellent national bibliographies of Africana book and periodical material have been compiled in South Africa, an outstanding example being the monumental *South African bibliography to the year 1925*, compiled in the South African Library in Cape Town (see Theron, 2002). Its six volumes list books and pamphlets on all subjects held in the major collections in the country. Online recording is also an enormous aid. Maps, on the other hand, have been only sporadically served. Their appreciation as significant in their own right and worthy of regard as more than decorative items is a recent development. Although some public institutions and university libraries have fine collections of Africana maps and atlases, very little carto-bibliographic work has been done in publishing catalogues of these collections. Still less has there been an attempt to create a union catalogue. In 1952, the Johannesburg Public Library produced an excellent descriptive catalogue of an exhibition of its Africana maps. More than 20 years later, M. F. and J. F. Cartwright (1976) compiled a most useful bibliography of maps in books in South African libraries from 1550 to 1868. It gives essential bibliographic details and sources for the maps, but no historical commentary. An excellent select bibliography of maps of Natal, compiled by Christopher Merrett,

appeared in 1979. Since then, an important carto-bibliography of the magnificent collection of the late Dr I. Norwich was compiled in 1983, and a second edition in 1997 was revised by Dr Jeffrey C. Stone of the University of Aberdeen. It provides an illustration of each map with useful brief annotations, and Dr Stone has included a summary of the history of maps of Africa.

National libraries and archives have enormous holdings of manuscript and printed maps of historical significance that could be of greater value to researchers if catalogues were produced and made available. Useful as the above bibliographies are, they do not provide a sufficiently complete coverage of South African holdings. The present author's own experience in the handling of map collections has revealed that a choice but previously obscure item can be encountered in the most unexpected places. Another aspect of the need to establish records and tighten security more thoroughly than in the past is the growing perception of the map as a desirable collector's item and therefore worth stealing! The Witwatersrand University Library has had its own sad experience of the theft of some of the maps in the collection.

Map collections in the Witwatersrand University Africana Library

Ten years ago, the Witwatersrand University Library began compiling carto-bibliographies of parts of its collection of Africana maps. A bibliography with an historical introduction, illustrations, annotations, selected references, and an index, of a unique collection of Royal Engineer manuscript maps of the Eastern Frontier of the Cape Colony from 1820 to 1870 was completed in 1992 (Garson, 1992). In 1998 an annotated bibliography of the library's maps of Africa (in sheet form and in books), also with an introduction and index, but no illustrations was compiled (Garson, 1998). Current work relates to the compilation of a carto-bibliography of the library's maps and sea charts of southern Africa, and the islands off the Atlantic and Indian Ocean coasts of Africa south of the equator. Sheet maps and charts, as well as those in certain rare books and atlases, are being listed in chronological order. Covering the period from the early 16th to the mid-19th century, the publication will include an introduction, index, selected references, and illustrations.

The mapping of Africa

The cartographic history of the continent of Africa reaches back two thousand years to the time of Claudius Ptolemy and his famous *Geographia* of the first century AD, re-interpreted and widely distributed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when it formed the basis for a new type of cartographic study in Europe. Maritime endeavours to find new land were undertaken. In 1487, when Bartholomeus Diaz rounded the Cape of Good Hope, the Cape gradually came to play a significant role in the passage to the East Indies. As trade expanded between east and west, and southern and southeast Africa were colonized, maps and portolanos (sea charts) were produced in profusion. Books in the form of

diaries, journals, accounts of observations by officials, early travellers and navigators, missionaries, explorers, botanists, astronomers, hunters and traders also made their appearance from the early sixteenth century. Many of these, which are important historically, and are in some cases very rare items, included maps. The incorporation of these maps and charts into the bibliography, as well as the collection of sheet maps, serves to highlight works by well-known cartographers that might otherwise remain in obscurity. A further reason for including these is to provide some added historical depth to the project. The books containing maps are in Dutch, German, French, Italian, Portuguese, English and Swedish.

Cataloguing and indexing methods

In cataloguing a collection of old maps the librarian faces a number of choices. In deciding on the most suitable approach for a particular collection, the needs of the institution housing the collection are paramount. If a simple listing, purely for the record, is required, the task is relatively uncomplicated. However, any librarian who has had to describe antique maps at even the most basic level will have encountered problems such as the lack of author, title, publisher and date, making identification and dating a frustrating exercise. Detective skills must be employed in hunting down these elusive elements, which can become a time-consuming and tortuous experience. A case in point is a magnificent coloured map of Africa in the collection of the Witwatersrand University Library. It is devoid of all identifying symbols, the only clue to a possible range of dates of publication being the watermark, which is dated 1815, the earliest possible date on which the map could have been published. Otherwise the map remains as anonymous as ever.

There are many dangers in being too dogmatic. An example of one of the most hazardous of these for a non-expert in the field of map-making is the dating of hand-colouring. It is easy to be fooled by the skill with which modern methods can be applied to look a few hundred years old. For the user who may need a basis for comparing two maps that seem identical, the smallest detail can be an identifying clue. It is therefore important to note as many features about a map as possible. One of the most maddening features of an old map is that it might turn out to have been reprinted a hundred years after it was first published, with no change whatever to its content or date, but with a different imprint, often quite clumsily inserted over the original. The condition of the wear of plate marks can be useful in determining whether a map has been frequently reprinted.

The Witwatersrand Africana Collection is a particularly fine one from the point of view of its book, manuscript and illustrative material. In order to respond to the academic nature of the library, it seems important to place the maps being processed in their local historical context. It is also important to attempt to explain previously obscure allusions to places and incidents that occur frequently on the older maps. This requires a good deal of research among as wide a range of such reference materials as are available, as well as

consultation with experts in various academic disciplines, making it an undertaking of absorbing interest. At the same time, there can be problems of selection and compression of data – information overload is indeed another hazard.

The method of compilation followed is loosely based on the suggestions for the cataloguing of old maps in the *Anglo-American cataloguing rules* (AACR2R, 1988). Room for notes is indicated as an element in each description. In analysing the library's maps, full advantage has been taken of this provision. The items at present being processed, with their sometimes long and complex foreign names (particularly French and Portuguese), names of publishers, illustrators and engravers, the extensive titles of the sheet maps, atlases and books, require extremely careful indexing and cross-referencing. In this particular instance, names in the vernacular of ethnic groups, places and individuals also require references to current orthographic versions. Past experience has shown that to compile the index using computer software leads to more trouble than it is worth. The oddity and obscurity of some of the names appears to baffle the program to such an extent that the old-fashioned system of index cards comes into its own.¹ Experience has also shown that in order to simplify the task, there is an advantage to entering relevant entries on cards as they present themselves. Another aspect of a descriptive carto-bibliography that can cause problems is the inclusion of illustrations.

Many maps are enormous, some are in very poor condition, having folds in awkward places, and some books and atlases are thick and difficult to open without damage to the spine. To make the most of them requires very careful and skilled photography. In the case of large maps, in the past one had to choose the most relevant parts for highlighting, since reduction of the whole item often led to an aesthetically unpleasing and muddy image of doubtful use to anybody. Current technology appears to have overcome some of these problems and it may be possible to achieve better results.

Earlier, the special needs of the institution were referred to. In South Africa, antique maps of the continent of Africa and its regions speak loudly of the colonial past. They were drawn by western cartographers from the western viewpoint. Many of the elements portrayed on cartouches often display wretched scenes of slave-trading, for example. Also, vignettes of local inhabitants on the borders of some of the maps, and descriptive notes in the content of the maps, appear to be disparaging and condescending. To view these maps as symbols of oppression is, in some quarters, a natural response.

Response to current needs and problems

There is a need to be sensitive to this reaction in the historical interpretation of the items, especially in an academic institution, where many students visit the library and examine the maps on permanent display. On the other hand, their importance in what they convey in terms of geography, astronomy, survey, navigation, and history, should not be

minimized – they are, after all, the only record of this nature that is available. It is important to stress that a good number of the maps resulting from exploration of the interior of Africa could probably not have been made at all without the aid of local knowledge and the experience of the indigenous inhabitants themselves.

The carto-bibliographies of the Witwatersrand University Library are a small step towards the recording of an institutional collection. There remains a great deal of material still to be catalogued. The ideal is to eventually record every item of cartographic material in the Africana Library. It would be gratifying if these publications could contribute to a greater awareness of the need to develop this important area of South African bibliography.

Note

1. A colleague and custodian of early printed books also finds it preferable to follow this system.

References and further reading

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