



Haines, E. (2017). Mapping out history: A cartographic view of the twentieth century. *Journal of Historical Geography*, 60-68.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2016.12.004>

Peer reviewed version

License (if available):
CC BY-NC-ND

Link to published version (if available):
[10.1016/j.jhg.2016.12.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2016.12.004)

[Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research](#)
PDF-document

This is the author accepted manuscript (AAM). The final published version (version of record) is available online via Elsevier at <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305748816301657#!>. Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research

General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available:
<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/pure/about/ebr-terms>

Elizabeth Haines, Independent Scholar

elizabeth.haines.2011@live.rhul.ac.uk

*Mapping out history: a cartographic view of the twentieth century*¹

- *Maps and the 20th Century: Drawing the Line* is an exhibition at the British Library
- It puts some of their fascinating and diverse map collection on display
- It traces the multiple roles that mapping has fulfilled in the twentieth century
- This essay reviews the exhibition
- It also considers the impact of maps on the historical imagination

Maps and the Twentieth Century: Drawing the Line is a timely exhibition. In the last two decades the history of cartography has fully broken free from its image as an antiquarian sub-specialism, to be seen as a substantial contributor to cultural and social history. This field of research also appears to be increasingly interesting to the general public, and popular histories of mapping and mapmakers are swelling non-fiction bestseller lists. At the launch of *Maps and the Twentieth Century*, the BBC invited a historical geographer to explain their work on morning television. I suspect this is a very rare occurrence. Such is the power of the map.

The show has been brought together by Tom Harper, curator at the British Library. Harper mediates between the general popularity of maps in contemporary culture and some recent scholarly work, and he does it artfully. It is also done with panache. The show has grand scope and ambitions, exploring geopolitics, social history and the history of science (including the World Wars, the Cold War, urban expansion, post-war planning, macroeconomics, plate tectonics and the mapping of the history of the universe). It includes a panoply of items from the library's vast map collections, putting the celebrated alongside the banal, pop culture alongside secret political documents, and contemporary critical cartography alongside ancient and non-Western mapping. Through this massive domain the exhibition follows two narratives in particular: firstly, the role of maps in a century of rapid technological and political change; secondly, how mapping became increasingly accessible to the masses. These themes play out through the exhibition via five main sections.

¹ *Maps and the Twentieth Century: Drawing the Line*, An exhibition at the British Library, London, 4 November 2016 to 1 March 2017, curated by Tom Harper. An accompanying book also edited by Tom Harper is published as *Maps and the 20th Century: Drawing the Line*, British Library, 2016. 272 pages (£40 hardback, £25 paperback).

The first section ‘Mapping a New World’ focuses most on the history of cartography, and describes changes in mapping practices, products and circulation throughout the century. These changes are largely illustrated through pairs of maps that represent particular contrasts. So, for example, the pair *Satellite and Hand-drawn* features two maps of Riyadh. On of these is a hand-drawn map from 1942 compiled from information collected by spy and explorer St John Philby. The other is a satellite image taken on October 4th, 1986. Another pair, *Professional and Amateur Mapmaking* offers two very different cartographic products of the Vietnam War. The first of these is a 1:25,000 map of Laos produced by the US Army Map Service (1966). The second is an activist map of the campus of the University of California, Berkeley that shows which departments were receiving funding from the Department of Defence and the Atomic Energy Commission (1971). A further example, *Town and Country*, illustrates changes in the culture of urban planning. Here the first map comes from Ebenezer Howard’s book of 1898 *Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path to Reform* (foundational to the Garden City movement). The second is an edited screen capture from a game of *Sim City* (1989) by Electronic Arts.

The other four sections are built around historical rather than cartographic themes. ‘Mapping War’ displays a wide range of maps, from those used directly in the planning and organisation of combat, to maps that were created to explain and justify war to larger audiences. ‘Mapping Peace’ focuses on maps that were used in settling new geopolitical paradigms after the First and Second World Wars and in resolving the practical consequences of the conflict. The third section, ‘Mapping Markets’ brings together examples of maps that were used in marketing, but also maps that were used to functionally support economic activity, and some used to argue for different perspectives on the nature of economic progress. The final section, ‘Mapping Movement’, displays maps of dynamic phenomena, from the migration of people, and birds, to transport and communication networks, and seismic activity. The items I list here are so few amongst the full catalogue of exhibited items, and the descriptions that I can give them here are so sparse (a map is also worth a thousand words) that for any map aficionados – or, indeed aficionados of twentieth-century history – there are thousands of fascinating details and several hours of perusal to be savoured.

The exhibition as a whole introduces the public to several key areas of expansion in cartographic scholarship. There are echoes of Denis Cosgrove’s work on the view of the Earth from the Apollo space missions. The exhibition picks up Alastair Pearson’s research on three-dimensional maps, and Pearson’s work in collaboration with Mike Heffernan on internationalism in cartography. The influence of Heffernan’s recent research on newspaper cartography can also be felt, as can Jeremy Black’s work on socioeconomic mapping, and recent research into maps and

twentieth-century travel by James Akerman, Ralph Ehrenberg and others. The exhibition seems also to be informed by recent work in historical geography that examines popular geographic cultures and tourism in the UK. It is fantastic to see this scholarship reaching the public through the careful selection and description of the maps on display. Visitors who want to pursue those ideas further are offered a great series of public talks and discussion panels in which historians of cartography, political and cultural geographers have been invited to address themes touched on by the show.

Maps and context – history, stories and sources

Maps and historical scholarship do not, however, always sit easily together. The lineage of using maps to ‘tell’ history – a practice which is also flourishing (in print, on screen and on websites as image-production becomes ever easier) – is one in which history tends to be simplified, and flattened. As J.B. Harley pointed out, when maps are used to narrate history they can:

narrow our ways of seeing the past, freezing it in a didactic image of our own representational culture, they project a ‘vacuous and stultifying image’, drawing a curtain across the landscape, and shutting out the sense of place from our thoughts. They are a lexicon without people.²

Unlike the historical atlases that Harley was critiquing, *Maps and the 20th Century* exposes its audience directly to primary sources. Nonetheless, in presenting the twentieth century from the mapmakers’ view, the curation finds itself with similar difficulties. The exhibition ‘invites you to immerse yourself in their [maps’] virtual realities’. But can you situate maps in their historical context if you can’t see around their domineering lines to consider the territory from other points of view? Is multiplying the number of maps on display a sufficient tactic to ‘consider the recent past from different perspectives’? Despite my pleasure in exploring the abundance of maps and their stories, I found these questions uncomfortably unresolved in the exhibition.

The difficulty of tackling history through maps is, perhaps, also reflected in the direction of two quite different publications by Harper that have emerged in the course of his recent research. The first book, published two years ago, takes a relatively straightforward position, explicit in its title, *A History of the Twentieth Century in 100 Maps*.³ This book loosely groups those hundred

² J. B. Harley, Historical geography and the cartographic illusion, *Journal of Historical Geography* 15 (1989) 86.

³ T. Bryars and T. Harper, *A History of the Twentieth Century in 100 Maps*, Chicago, 2014.

maps chronologically, in such a way as to expose cartographic change, and social change, over the century. The more recent publication, *Maps and the 20th Century* (which accompanies the exhibition) is thematic and asks how maps served as ‘powerful cultural mediators between people and their political, economic and social masters, reinforcing existing realities and creating new ones’.⁴ The exhibition pulls in both directions; as a history of the twentieth century and a cultural history of maps, and this feels a little awkward at times.

As I walked through the exhibition this tension pushed me to think more about the role of maps as sources in popular history. Historians of cartography are often a little bemused that their objects of passion are so underused in general historical research. Since J.B. Harley began promoting the use of old Ordnance Survey maps for local historians and the publication of David Buisseret’s *From Sea Charts to Satellite Images* (1990) there has been a wider uptake of maps as historical sources, and they have been put to more diverse uses. Nonetheless, cartography has strong associations with national histories, the cultural domination of European empires, with state authority and with war. The ever increasing popularity of maps in Britain is, I think, because of, rather than despite, the qualities that make them useful in those contexts: maps allow us to inspect, to seek overviews at a glance, they bring out the analytical in us. The imaginary journeys we make as our eyes wander across them are usually projections, patchworked together from our existing experience. And although I think that maps can potentially serve as a basis for deep dialogue, it is rare for a map, standing alone, to jolt us into new ethical relationships, or intersubjective entanglements. So what kind of history emerges when maps are the primary narrators? What kind of evidence of their own history can they provide? What do we need to understand how maps could become ‘more real to people than the reality they claimed to represent’ (exhibition brochure)? The richness of the exhibition excited and satisfied all kinds of curiosities, still, several questions have lingered ...

But ... how do maps bear witness? And to what?

Maps and the 20th Century does an excellent job in illustrating the breadth of cartographic output of the last century. The range of maps is huge and they are not put into hierarchies of value (either technical or historical). They are on display because of a particular social role that they have played, not necessarily because they are perfect or particularly accurate. This eclectic approach beautifully brings home the point that ‘there is more than one way to read a map’

⁴ T. Harper, Introduction, in T. Harper (Ed), *Maps and the 20th Century: Drawing the Line*, British Library, 2016, 9.

(exhibition brochure). Yet it means that across the show maps serve as historical evidence in very different sets of ways.

Some of the maps have been selected because they are unique or associated with very specific events or decisions. For example, some of the exhibits illustrate milestones in cartographic or scientific practices, such as the map from a 1915 publication in which Alfred Wegener first put forward his theory about the origin of the continents, the first relief depiction of the Atlantic Ocean floor from 1968, or Dudley Stamp's *Land Utilisation Map*. There are also social 'firsts' such as *London Gay City*, the first publication, explicitly for the gay community, that was licensed to use Bartholomew's city mapping as a base. Other maps are included as evidence of political acts such as map on which Mark Sykes and François Georges-Picot carved up the Ottoman Empire between the French and British in 1916. Yet other exhibits bear witness to genocide, such as the map of Auschwitz that was smuggled out to Palestine during the Second World War, or the map that proved that German forces deliberately planned the eradication of Lidice, now in the Czech Republic, in 1942).

More often, however, the maps have been selected in order to represent wider historical narratives. A page from Bartholomew's *Atlas of the World's Commerce* (1907), and the CIA map of drug smuggling routes (1983) outline the changing fortunes of the opiate trade. Sketch maps made in the compilation of predecessors to the *Lonely Planet* series are used to highlight the rise of youth tourism in the late twentieth century. A Soviet map of Brighton from 1990 brings the Cold War very much back home, and the plans of a shopping centre in Okinawa demonstrate the influence of US military bases on Japanese youth culture in the 1970s (Fig. 1). The use of maps to illustrate the local reach of global geopolitics and technological change is a particularly successful aspect of the exhibition.

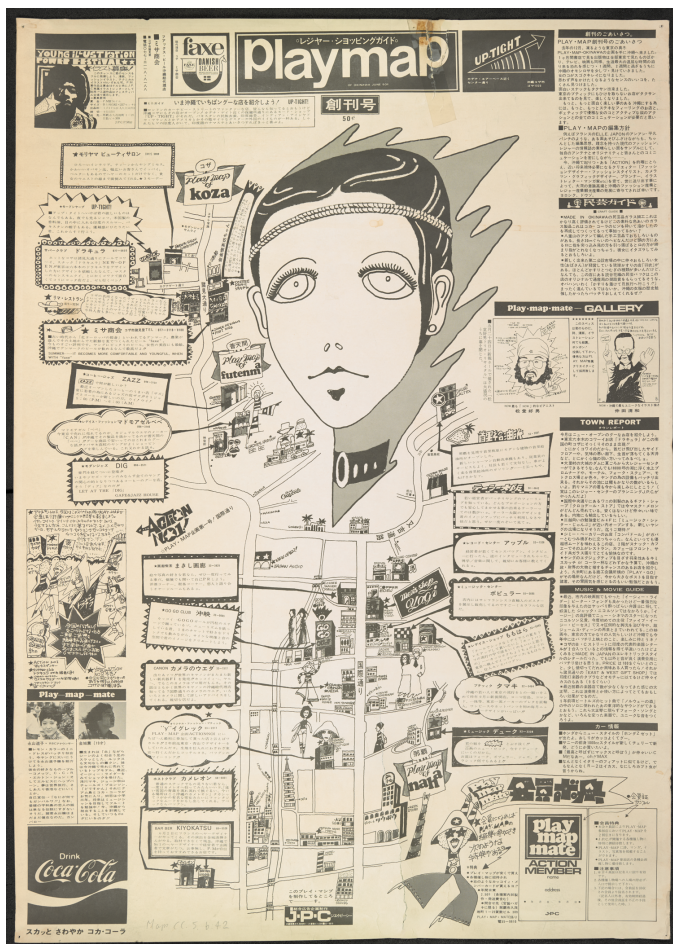


Figure 1: Okinawa Play Map. Okinawa, 1971.

However, the diversity of maps, and associated narratives means that there is no systematic framing for interpretation. As an audience member, the movement from the unique to the typical to the unique left me a little uneasy. This is compounded by the inclusion of maps that were either parodic or fictional (such as Tolkein’s first sketch of Middle Earth, or A.H. Shepherd’s plan of Hundred Acre Woods). I found that this curatorial strategy disrupted my ability to contextualise what I was seeing, because whilst representations of Middle Earth and early Ordnance Survey tourist maps from the 1920s share visual tropes, what these representations do is completely different. Despite the diversity of documents on display the exhibition left me with a sense of ‘the’ map as a platonic ideal, rather than with a sense of how maps were documents tied to particular times and places.

This effect was compounded by the fact that the exhibited maps are very disassociated from the technologies of their production. The brochure and text panels state that there were ‘spectacular advances in the technology of mapping across the century’. In the exhibition these changes are reflected in a great diversity of map material culture including postcards, posters, LED screens,

badges, a moon globe, medals, handkerchiefs, a plate, crate labels, a map designed to sit on the stock of a rifle, a dress (Fig. 2), a series of stamps produced from maps, and a painting of a map. The exhibition doesn't, however, give the audience much detail about the changing ways in which data for maps was collected (particularly the development of satellite visualisation technologies), about changes in data processing (particularly the advent of the computer) or changes in printing technologies. Very few maps are shown in their draft stages. Without a sense of the mechanics that support the abstraction and translation of the world into these diverse documents I was left, again, with an impression of equivalence between the maps rather than a clear understanding of their differences.



Figure 2: Installing dress made of German silk escape maps. Dress on loan from Worthing Museum. Photo by Clare Kendall.

So how do maps bear witness? And to what? In *Maps and the 20th Century*, primacy is given to the symbolic content and the graphics of the maps. However, although the choice to only display maps is interesting, for me maps themselves are insufficient sources for their own history. Where maps are presented as sources on larger issues in sociopolitical history, I would argue that it's necessary to give the audience more indication of how they are attached to their social context; not only through their aesthetic qualities but also by the material conditions of their production. Where the historical imagination is given more indication of the effort involved in mapmaking it becomes easier to see cartography's role in social and political organisation. One of the most astonishing facts about the mapping of the First World War trenches is its sheer quantity. More than thirty-four million maps of the Western Front were produced by the British military alone. The scale of this production (which I didn't find mentioned in the exhibition) offers some insight

into the relationship between mapping and the human carnage engendered by this form of conflict.

Equally, since the necessity of the resources and capacity to produce maps isn't substantially addressed by the curation, the incapacity of particular groups to represent their interests 'cartographically' is also not addressed. In 1944 only seventeen per cent of the British Empire had been mapped in any amount of detail.⁵ Even by the 1980s, significant proportions of Africa, Antarctica, Australia and South America had not been covered by state topographic mapping programmes.⁶ Today, communities are still fighting to get 'on' the map. For example, this year's Olympic Games exposed the invisibility of the vast favelas on Rio's city maps.⁷ So, although the pair of maps titled *Professional and Amateur Mapmaking* offer the contrast between US government maps of Laos and US activist maps of Berkeley, it might have been more illuminating to see the maps (or alternatives to maps?) that were used by the opposing forces in Vietnam operating with guerrilla warfare tactics.

But ... how do maps shape history, and become 'more real' than what they represent?

The problem of contextualisation became more urgent for me in relation to another of the exhibition's aims – to explain how maps 'made the world we live in' and could become 'more real than the reality they claimed to represent'. Whilst – to take Harley's metaphor – maps themselves have a tendency to 'draw a curtain' across landscapes, the curation itself redoubles the act of 'shutting out' the lived contexts that these cartographic documents abstracted and summarised. I'm not sure that an exhibition best does justice to the conceptual power, technical achievement and political potency of twentieth-century mapping by reproducing that status quo in the display. Visitors need to understand more about the sites and activities that are cartographically represented in order to – as Kitchin, Gleeson and Dodge pun – unfold the practice of mapping them.⁸

⁵ A. Macdonald, *Mapping the World: A History of the Directorate of Overseas Surveys, 1946-1985*, H.M.S.O., 1996.

⁶ M.L. Larsgaard, *Topographic mapping of the Americas, Australia and New Zealand*, Western Association of Map Libraries, 1984; M.L. Larsgaard, *Topographic mapping of Africa, Antarctica and Eurasia*, Western Association of Map Libraries, 1993.

⁷ Max Opray, How Google is putting Rio's invisible favelas back on the map. *The Guardian* 9 October 2015.

⁸ R. Kitchin, J. Gleeson and M. Dodge, Unfolding mapping practices: a new epistemology for cartography *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* (2013) 480-496.

Little support is given for the visitor to allow their historical imagination to follow the practice of mapping back from the maps on display to lived experience. At the very beginning of the exhibition a handful of wonderful photographs depict schoolchildren, motorists, bureaucrats, politicians and taxi drivers all at work with maps. However, from that point onwards the only representations of people are those on the map documents themselves. As a result, throughout most of the exhibition, the human form is only directly depicted in the iconic and reductive language of the map: as satirical cartoon (Fig. 3), as ethnographic stereotype, in mythological fantasy or in a combination of all of the above. The unique exception to this is an extract from the opening sequence of the film *Casablanca* (1942), found in the last gallery. In this clip we see a filmic montage in which maps of the sites of conflict in Second World War Europe are overlaid onto newsreel footage of refugees trying to reach the Americas.



Figure 3: L'Entente Cordiale, 1915. © British Library. Photo by Jon Ellis.

There are of course other traces of human experience in the exhibition than the direct depiction of people. They are found in the representation of movement and habitation, or in handwritten inscriptions. In some of these cases it was a relief that the maps shield the audience from the lived experience of the spaces they depicted. Take, for example, an example of a trench map from 1918, annotated by John Hodgson to show which routes had become impassable, 'full of dead' (Fig. 4); or the hand-drawn map of a Auschwitz mentioned above; a map of Sarajevo (Fig. 5), drawn by a besieged inhabitant of the city; German and British bombing target maps from the

Second World War; or a map of the sites of Soviet labour camps. In these cases the photographic or narrative evidence necessary to counter the ‘stultifying’ effect of the map would have rendered a sense of place that was raw and extreme. Others would, however, be easier on the psyche. Recent writing on geographic education, leisure and activism by David Matless, Hayden Lorimer, and Laura Cameron, amongst others, has demonstrated to great effect how astute collaging of sources can sketch out both multi-sensorial historical environments, and the processes that people went through as they learned to translate their lived experiences into cartographic terms.

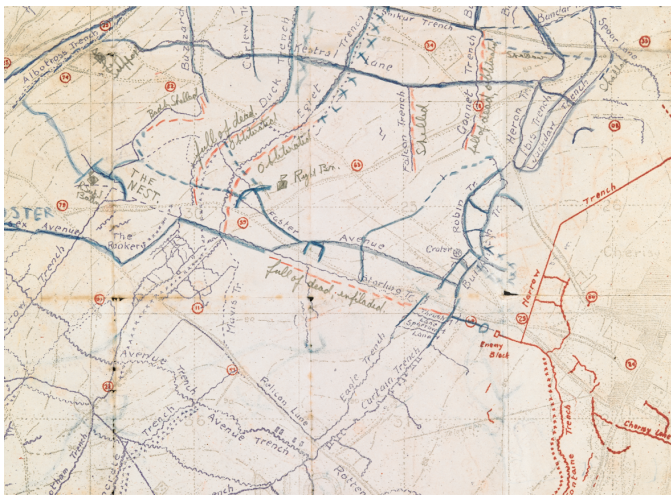


Figure 4: Trench map sheet 176, with annotations by John Hodgson, Arras, 1918

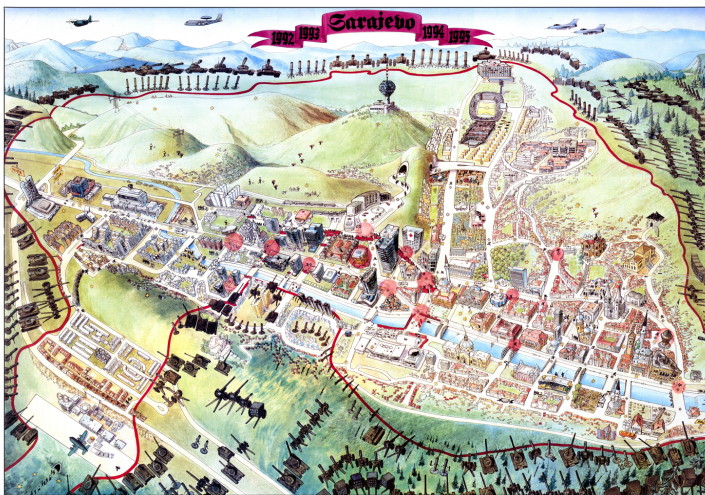


Figure 5: Sarajevo Escape map, 1996. © Miran Norderland.

The text panels occasionally expand on intimate biographical histories, but these are usually the stories of mapmakers, rather than those of map users, or of mapped populaces. In particular, in this category, are the stories of artists who self-consciously subjected themselves to cartographic abstraction. The artist Jeremy Wood’s intriguing map *My Ghost* (2016) charts in glowing lines

(against a dark background) his movements for over sixteen years as tracked by a GPS receiver (Fig. 6). There are also documents from Richard Long's peculiarly geometric engagements with rural Britain. Whilst these artistic gestures offer critical comment on the poverty of the map in relation to lived life, they aren't substantial enough to really draw back Harley's metaphorical cartographic 'curtain'.

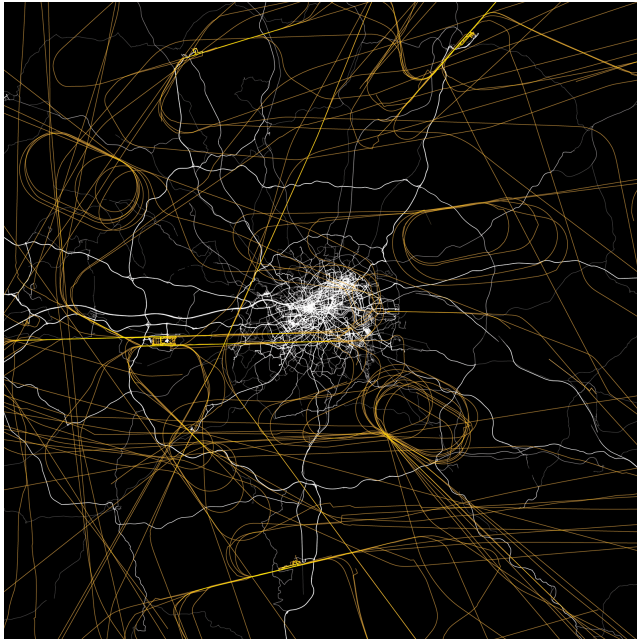


Figure 6: Detail from *My Ghost*, 2016. © Jeremy Wood

I wondered whether the question of how maps act as sources in *Maps and the 20th Century* might depend, very heavily, on what I was expected to bring with me to the exhibition. I felt that the viewer was certainly supposed to imaginatively bridge between map and territory, and 'unfold mapping practices' using their own life experience. In some instances this worked and I could use my personal history to add a sense of place into the maps on display. The sinister effect of seeing a detailed map of Brighton in Cyrillic depended on familiarity with, if not the town of Brighton, then British seaside towns in general. I have memories to draw on that supported my reading of the fire insurance maps of the City of London, the Beeching Report's schema for a streamlined British rail network, a proposed Oxford ring road, or Harry Beck's sketch for the London Underground map (Fig. 7), as situated places. It is possible that it was intended for the visitor to bring knowledge of World Wars, the Cold War, urban expansion, post-war planning, macroeconomics, twentieth-century agricultural practices and outdoor sports culture. I don't mean to be facetious here, only to highlight that in order for the visitor to build a placedness for all, or a significant portion, of the maps on display they needed a great deal of historical knowledge and imagination. In the end I wasn't sure whether it was assumed that a

visitor would bring those attributes, or whether it didn't matter if they didn't, and that it was expected the audience would just sit back and enjoy the visual ride.

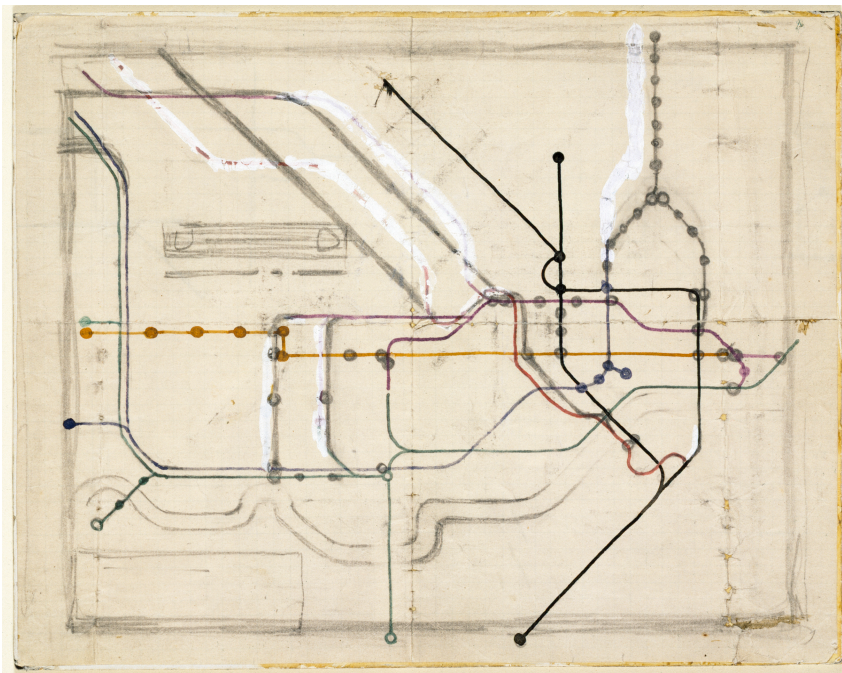


Figure 7: Tube map sketch, 1931, Harry Beck. Victoria and Albert Museum. © TFL.

It seems a lot to ask of an exhibition, that it should recount episodes of global history over one hundred years, changes in map technology, changes in map use and distribution, and also tell history from below. But this last aspect is something that is emphasised in the panel texts; that in the twentieth century maps documented and affected ordinary lives. Since those ordinary lives are so invisible in the exhibition, the acts of translation between quotidian experiences and cartography are hard to grasp. As a result, the incredible power of mapping, I would argue, is indicated by the curation rather than being explained.

In sum, the exhibition offers increased knowledge of the kinds of virtualities that maps can be, a strong sense of their importance within visual culture in the twentieth century, and highlights their ubiquity in a wide variety of shapes and forms from high-level precision to the ludic and banal. The main draw to the exhibition and enjoyment in the exhibition for many will be just that, its breadth. *Maps and the 20th Century* offers the public an encounter with a huge range of very well selected, incredibly interesting maps from the British Library's monumental collections. It admirably documents the increased circulation and currency of maps in the twentieth century. In choosing to rely almost entirely on maps themselves to recount their historical role, *Maps and the 20th Century* remains a description rather than an explanation of the mapmakers' century. This fell a little short of both what the exhibition suggested it might be and what there is currently public goodwill to explore.

PREPRINT 16/12/2016

Importantly however, this exhibition has excited even more interest in the history of cartography. I hope that historical geographers and historians of cartography will take advantage of this opening of the field to go yet further, and to put more explanatory, thematic and critical histories of mapping in the public domain. I hope to see more scholarship getting circulated from BBC sofas to homes across the nation in the near future.

Acknowledgements:

With many thanks to Tom Harper for arranging my visit, and re-visit to the exhibition, as well as procuring images and permissions for this review.