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### **Book review: The Self-Made Map: Cartographic Writing in Early Modern France; and, The Face of the Earth: Natural Landscapes, Science and Culture**

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## **Book review: The Self-Made Map: Cartographic Writing in Early Modern France; and, The Face of the Earth: Natural Landscapes, Science and Culture**

### **Abstract**

Politics, and (therefore) national and personal identity, are at the core of these two publications. The analysis of the remarkable period of European (and therefore world) history during the early modern period of the 15th and 16th centuries is discussed in the first book and provides the call for the kind of topographic descriptions compiled during the early part of the 21st Century, the topic of the second book. Then as now, proliferation of technology and political change provide the background to these accounts—overtly in the first, occluded in the second.

### **Keywords**

natural, landscapes, science, culture, earth, france, modern, early, writing, cartographic, map, made, self, review, book, face

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This is the first volume of a monumental work that crosses a number of disciplines as it provides the basis for understanding 3D displays. My perspective for this review is that of a vision researcher who has done research on binocular systems and a visual artist who has been working with computer systems for many years.

The overall organization and approach to the material is excellent. After presenting a general overview of the topics to be covered, the author discusses the basic physics and physiology of the visual system. In a very helpful style that is carried throughout the book, he presents the essential information and then provides references for those readers interested in pursuing particular topics further. For example, in Chapter 2, on visual perception, the author covers a great deal of background material, emphasizing those aspects that will be most relevant to his later discussion of 3D displays, while giving references for the reader who is interested in other aspects of perception or who may not have the necessary background.

The level of presentation, while giving some detailed and technical accounts, does not get lost in jargon. It is written in an intelligent and engaging style. I also appreciate very much the author's use of history. He points out and gives credit to early workers who, while they did not have the technology of today, understood and made use of the principles to create image-making devices that are the forerunners of some of today's more advanced technological systems. A good example is in Chapter 7, where Blundell discusses Pepper's Ghost, which made its first appearance as a theatrical device in the 1860s. It involved using a large glass plate onto which ghostlike images were projected such that they appeared from the audience perspective to be on stage. Since they were images and not solid forms, they could be made to appear to pass through solid objects. More recent adaptation has used the same optical principles but with digital projection and with plastic film replacing the large, breakable glass. This historical approach emphasizes the principle that science and technology are incremental and that to understand and to appreciate current technology we need to know its history. This also allows the book to remain a valuable

resource even as the field naturally moves ahead rapidly.

Anyone interested in gaining a firm understanding of the current practice of 3D display technology would find the book a great beginning. I highly recommend it.

### **THE SELF-MADE MAP: CARTOGRAPHIC WRITING IN EARLY MODERN FRANCE**

by Tom Conley. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN, U.S.A. 2011. 392 pp., illus. Paper. ISBN 978-0-8166-7448-0.

### **THE FACE OF THE EARTH: NATURAL LANDSCAPES, SCIENCE AND CULTURE**

by SueEllen Campbell. University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 2011, U.S.A., 334 pp. Trade. ISBN: 978-0-520-26926-2; paper and e-book ISBN: 978-0-520-26927-9.

Reviewed by Mike Leggett, Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong, NSW, Australia. E-mail: <legart@ozemail.com.au>.

Politics, and (therefore) national and personal identity, are at the core of these two publications. The analysis of the remarkable period of European (and therefore world) history during the early modern period of the 15th and 16th centuries is discussed in the first book and provides the call for the kind of topographic descriptions compiled during the early part of the 21st Century, the topic of the second book. Then as now, proliferation of technology and political change provide the background to these accounts—overtly in the first, occluded in the second.

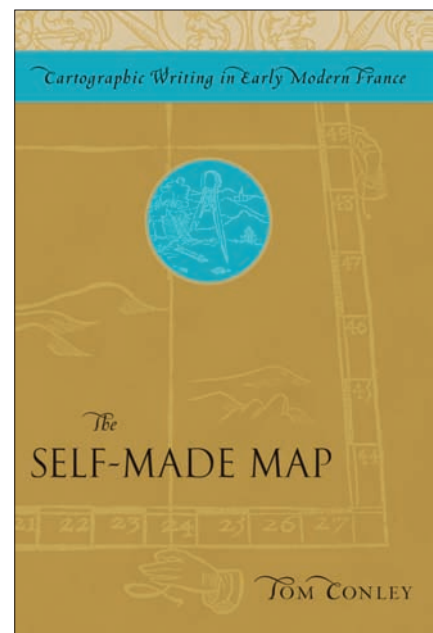
Since the time of the cosmographer Ptolemy, 1,500 years before the early modern period, cartography, like many other technologies, had been held subservient to the principalities of warlords and the belief systems centered on the Church of Rome. The technologies emerging in the 15th century—printing, perspective drawing, written forms of the vernacular, scientific method and other matters of the Renaissance—began the process of rolling back superstition and the power vested through religion.

Maps are of fascination for our quotidian moments and occasionally become essential for survival (even) to those on the move. A map confidently

organizes data gathered from the physical world, and we accept its greater knowledge and authority as expressed in neutral appearances. We have only to remember the colors applied to groupings of countries, and projections favoring their placement in the frame, to know that the reality is otherwise. These realizations, a placing of oneself in the world, are the maps of the mind at the center of Tom Conley's fascinating account.

He begins by providing a window onto an arcane world (not unlike our own though of a different era) and the inexorable processes through which knowledge was extended beyond the court and the Church of Rome. The focus is on the various kingdoms that were to become the French nation, although the overall project employed "European" experts of the day moving (and being moved) to the research and production centers. Earlier travel writings, complete with woodcut "snaps" of scenes and activities sold as well then as they do today. But these lacked uses as tools to soldiers and traders, camp followers and mercantile pioneers—what was required was greater accuracy and brevity.

Individuals such as Oronce Finé are traced as they think their way through from the cordiform, "whole-world" map view, alerted to the affordances of "the grid" by both mapmakers and typographers, to regional, almost localized renditions. Writings, from itineraria way-sheets to the sojourns of Rabelais's characters, concomitantly raised the desires of the traveling classes and



their expectations of adventures to be had abroad, in the imagination and as experience, on the real roads and byways described in word and image. The bounds of the worldview began to spread with the continuing colonization of the New World and, “in the singularization of experience that affects cartographic writing,” in the island book, or *isolario* (described as the beginnings of ethnography by 20th-century scholar Claude Lévi-Strauss). Andre Thevet’s *La Cosmographie Universelle* took a form that layered in all manner of fact “that refuses to concede to an atlas structure,” the precursor of other written forms (from Swift to the present-day television documentary or celebrity adventure?).

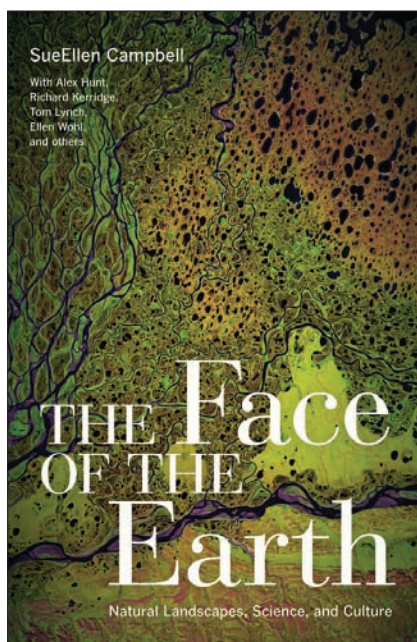
The shift from woodcut to copperplate technology permitted advances in the acuity of the reproduction of drawings, but the discipline of the atlas asserted itself in the work of Bouguereau, in a perspective form and viewpoint that would be recognized by users of current Internet map tools. The royal commissioning of this, like the corporate sponsorship of today’s manifestations, had a purpose beyond the altruistic: the consolidation of spheres of influence and profit. The Iberian destruction of the peoples of the New World, motivated by plunder and religion, was the turning point for the emergence of the “internationalist” essay writers, the three Frenchmen Montaigne, du Voisin and Descartes. The carefully analyzed differences in their cartographic writing enable Conley to arrive at a sentence that carefully locates the reader, the text and its writer.

One can move into space by surveying and arrogating it, and one can make it virtual, seemingly self-made, when a cartographic process is adjusted to the imagination of one’s origins, growth, works, memory, and living itineraries (p. 301).

Michel de Montaigne observed in his seminal *Essais* that “we need topographers to provide specific accounts of the places they have been.” This Conley paraphrases as aiding in

the art of writing and composing a work that can extend itself in mental directions that will move long enough and far enough to yield a verbal geography that can be experienced through both intellectual and physical means (p. 249).

Responses to the call over the centuries have been slight, from popular windows on the world such as National Geographic to some 20 writers, several



from Colorado State University, who provide accounts in *The Face of the Earth*, not only of the rural byways of medieval France but also of the remote areas of today’s planet. A series of edited expressions of the culture that constructs our sense of “the natural world” is offered, as “intriguing and suggestive examples of the many ways that we and our earthly surroundings are tied to each other.” “We,” it must be pointed out, are concentrated primarily in the United States, Great Britain and Australia.

Four chapters, each with about a dozen sections, describe the dramatic zones of internal fire, volcanoes and geysers; climate and ice; wet and fluid; and desert places. “On the Spot” accounts describe the experience of being in such places and are interspersed with more objective descriptions using the interdisciplinary languages of the sciences and humanities. A final chapter moves into the complexities of humankind’s relationship with the physical world, steadfastly maintaining its neutrality, planted in the domain of the empirical. The contradictions of Heidegger’s *dasein*, “being-there,” and the clear need for affirmative remedial reconstruction of the human role within the biosphere are left for the reader to imagine if not desire. Clearly the book is intended to elevate the knowledge levels of city-bound high school students, to stimulate and encourage expeditions to sparsely populated places and experience of wilderness areas, and to create

space for mapping of the self to begin, for understanding of the forces shaping the landscapes of history and the contemporary world. As a source book for constructing agendas it is admirable, although as there is not an image to be seen, it will appeal mainly to the already committed and serious student.

That student could be further galvanized by Conley’s paraphrasing of Lévi-Strauss. Conley writes:

We can only offer cosmetic reasons for granting humans the right of temporary residence in the nature of things. The gratuitousness of human presence in the world could not have failed to vex cartographic writers of the early modern age as well (p. 302).

The self-made-map approach to writing of the 16th century created for the first time a spatiality of narrative, a form that was perfected not in the 19th-century novel but through the development of narrative in 20th-century cinema, a subject about which the author is also a recognized contributor.

Conley’s book is an engrossing read because, to this reader, so much was new and expressed in such fulsome and scholarly detail. Thus it was a “slow” read as, often using unfamiliar but resonant humanities-based terminology, it required consulting so much background. At times the detail discussed in the illustrations and maps is beyond visible comprehension on the (octavo) page, and this reader had to track down larger images on the Internet. (Perhaps a simultaneously published website containing links to images could have benefitted both these publications?) Fortunately, as with the genre of books that have followed the pioneering early modern writers, the images available have proliferated.

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