

Mick Ashworth
Why North Is Up
Map Conventions and Where They Came From

Oxford: Bodleian Library 2019, 224 pp.

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At the extreme of the Tierra del Fuego, many years ago, an upside down planisphere in the hall of a hostel, claiming that “Ushuaia is the most northern city in the world!”, made me think for the first time that north is up just because someone decided so. Mick Ashworth brought me back to that moment with his wonderful book, while adding dozens of other conventions to think about.

The book is enjoyable in every aspect, from the elegant cover to the quality of the paper, from the pleasant writing to the beautiful images. Let’s be honest, it could have been the simple linear description of technical advances along the centuries in the art of map production. Instead of that, we have the lively narrative of how different aspects in the creation of maps arose, were developed, and died or became eternal, jumping between ancient and modern times. The layout itself is dynamic, with the text adapting to the needs of the maps represented in the volume.

The first chapters of the thirty composing the book provide accessible information sufficient to understand a map: grids, latitude and longitude, projections (how to spread the globe on a 2-dimensional paper sheet) and scale. Technical details come with stories about problems and solutions of building a map.

Ashworth then describes the elements used to draw maps - points, lines, shapes - and how they can be arranged to represent the landscape: colors, shading, hachures, or isolines, for example, naming some of the great men or civilizations that contributed to conventions still in use today.

If topographical elements are crucial, symbols, typography and how to place names are not less important, able to define the intended use of a map. Needless to say, military purposes have been of great impulse in maps’ production and development.

Digital and online maps, with their virtually limitless potential, are also briefly considered, being the final result, so far, of centuries of evolution of map conventions.

It really doesn't matter if you are not a map lover or an historian, map conventions are so deeply embedded in our daily life that any reader will find something familiar in it. Just think about Google Maps and how your phone drives you to the closest sushi bar.

Besides the predictable scales, projections, and ways to represent specific characteristics of the environment, Ashworth highlights aspects that although implicit in the idea of a map as a personal abstraction of the world, are not always strikingly evident. I mean, of course there is a hierarchy of information in a map, but have you ever seriously thought about it? How relevant is the standardization process when the misinterpretation of a symbol can be a life or death matter? What's the emotive connotation of a color in the representation of a given reality?

Maps are not just a mean to find a path. Maps can be used to promote a cause, as a symbol of power, or to further scientific discoveries. When Art meets Science, maps are also amazing pieces of work beautifully decorated by masters of ornamentation. A tradition that disappeared relatively soon, leaving room to good looking but more efficient representations.

The "Breaking the convention" boxes offer educational fun, like the one talking about a team of army surveyors that were too tired to explore a faraway hill and decided to sketch it in the shape of an elephant.

For evident reasons, I felt quite excited reading about Portuguese *roteiros* (p. 180), almost as much as when I found out that hand-coloring maps was considered a decent past-time for grown-up people.

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