

WHERE WE LIVE

A COLLEAGUE OF MINE offered me a Current Fashion Update recently: *digital watches are going out of style* — not because of their illusory exactness, I am led to believe, but because of the mechanics of display. It seems many people still seek what the traditional clockface provides and the flicking numerals do not: a sense of a *space* of time — the leisurely obtuse angle's worth of twenty minutes or twenty-five, the acute pressure of only two. Einstein on guard for thee! In a country ruled by distance, people inevitably measure space by time (the four-hour flight to Ottawa, the four-day drive across Ontario); but apparently Mercator — “the man who gave most to Canada,” the old joke goes — stands behind even these approximations, inducing us to measure time in turn by space.

As a lifelong lover of maps, and an admirer of the aesthetics as well as the execution of volume I of the *Historical Atlas of Canada* (1987), I have been looking forward to the next two volumes in this series. In 1990, skipping volume II for the moment, the University of Toronto Press released volume III, which was edited by Donald Kerr and Deryck Holdsworth and which adopted the cartographic designs of Geoffrey Matthews. Volume III covers the period 1891-1961. It's large. It's full of information. It's also a disappointment — for reasons that involve conception as much as design, and for a selectivity that governs the patterns of representation and that can be read as unconscious bias.

Admittedly, the idea of representing (through map, graph, and pie-chart) the complexities of Canadian social change during the twentieth century offers a daunting challenge. For one thing, finding consistent data from all across the country proved in some cases impossible; hence not all the 66 plates offer “national” paradigms — many are specific models governed by region, industry, or institution. Imperial Oil and Massey-Harris get separate maps (Imperial Oil was one of the financial backers of the publication); so do Dixon Brothers General Store, Eaton's, the Canadian Western Lumber Company, and Ontario and Quebec cheese factories. None of this might seem exceptionable, except that over the course of the book, several presumptions begin to become apparent. One has to do with the

normalizing of sociopolitical dominance; the other has to do with the function of selective representation, which rapidly turns a “sample” into a synecdochic trope. In other words, from being one example of a variety of possibilities, a charted figure comes to be taken as a model of the “whole,” a process which leads to distortion at least as often as it leads to illumination.

Consider the mapping of educational institutions: Queen’s University in Kingston is taken as an example of Canadian practice — but because no alternatives are offered, it rapidly becomes “the” example. And is Queen’s representative? How can any institution that had private religious affiliations designing its origins (and its function, through many years of its history) adequately “represent” the structure and history of the large nondenominational *public* institutions of Western Canada? The *absences* in this book sometimes loom as large as the illustrations. I am not speaking of mere omissions. I am speaking of the way a series of recurrent choices *designs* certain absences as “natural” by — unconsciously, perhaps, or at least without examining the ideology involved — consistently attaching “importance” elsewhere.

Numerous plates do chart interesting material, of course. There is an instructive guide to the interlocking directorships in corporate Toronto in 1913 (though nothing parallel from the 1960s). There is a tiny map of the extent of damage caused by the Halifax explosion. Interesting maps also examine such issues as immigration sources and movements (demonstrating the substantial draw of population from the U.S.A. and therefore highlighting a largely ignored American “ethnic” influence in Canada). There are maps of median rent (by street) in Montreal in 1901; of the sectarian amalgamations that led to the formation of the United Church of Canada (from the 1780s to 1931); of tribal lands in the Skeena Valley; of the expansion of provincial boundaries (reminding one visually that Quebec’s — and Ontario’s — current political boundaries alike derive from an early twentieth century *federal grant*, which makes the James Bay territories, historically, “Cree” and/or “Canadian” but not, by ancient custom, “Québécois *pure Paine*”). There is a map of the distribution of flu deaths in Winnipeg in 1918; and a map of the birthplaces of NHL hockey players between 1927 and 1961. But there’s no index, so it’s hard to find data without already knowing where it is.

Some of the colour distinctions also leave much to be desired — affecting, ironically, the “ethnic divisions” map among others; when the sliver-sized pie-chart segments indicating differences of ethnic source depend upon visual distinctions between grey, grey-brown, and steel grey hues, and when the whole map is designed in fashionable pastels, with the explanatory legend at some remove from the chips of coloured data, then the page is not effectively communicating its message. (Unless it’s more radical than I think, and is deconstructing the idea of colour-bars and visual discrimination.) In any event, the statistics behind these ethnic divisions are dubious at best, for census data until 1981 did not record mothers’ lineage.

Statistics nevertheless constitute the heart if not the soul of this entire volume, apparent from the outset in the interest in “manufacturing value added in millions of dollars,” in the text’s concern for the “gross reproduction rate,” and in the charting of the evolution of corporate railway emblems and the movement of bank and insurance company head offices. Fundamentally, this is a book about social power. But in visually recording the way power is associated with finance and number in Canada, the book goes on to *enact* the uneven distribution of power it ostensibly just depicts. “Regionalism” offers an example. Anachronistically, the book institutionalizes the presumptive term “Central” Canada (though in one unclear map involving language distribution, the Ontario/Quebec border is misleadingly referred to as the “Bilingual Belt”); but it does not examine its terms. Nor does it always explain its inclusions. While a fascinating “isodemographic” map (which distorts “standard” dimensional relations to emphasize the areas of largest population) enumerates census areas all across the country, it *names* (in an attached list) only those from Ontario, Quebec, and the Maritime Provinces; any names from Manitoba west and north, and from Newfoundland, are simply omitted from the page. This same map also indicates that the Vancouver-Victoria urban area is the third largest in the country; but while the rest of the volume provides detailed maps of Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa (for aborted urban design plans), Halifax (for port development), and Edmonton and Winnipeg (for population expansion), only one tiny map of an innovative and cancelled rapid transit system adds anything further about Vancouver, the second largest port on the entire west coast of North and South America. It’s not the only omission. Besides the Skeena tribal lands, relatively little is said of the native population. (A graph of the grade distributions of Indian students in 1936 and 1957 comes without an adequate context for interpreting the data.) And the Alaska Boundary negotiations go without notice.

Presumably these “margins” don’t fit into the design package — that is, into the *intellectual* “design package” that constitutes, alas, a currently pervasive perception of Canadian culture. The editors write that they are discarding the “hewers of wood” version of Canada, and tracing the change from a Canada that was still “unknown territory” in 1891 to a Canada of “increasingly homogeneous tastes, values, and standards,” and that the book, further, depicts “Canada’s social, economic, and cultural evolution.” But what happens page by page? Any interest in raw natural resource *location* gives way to an interest in the shifting centres of economic crisis and resource *management*. (Drought and relief feature prominently in portraying the prairies during the 1930s, though nothing makes particularly clear that Quebec — *pace* the 1991 Allaire Commission Report — is still the *recipient* of Equalization Grants from three other Canadian provinces, namely B.C., Alberta, and Ontario, and not the *donor*.) The book focuses on finance, trade, manufacturing, grain-*handling* — in other words, on industrial profit. That might seem all to the good. But when, to these maps of industrial design, one adds

all the comments on *labour*, something curious happens. Almost always, labour is associated with strikes, strikes with violence and military intervention, and hence with interference in profit-making and disruption to civil order. “The strike,” the editors write, “represents the most accessible measure of *overt conflict* between workers and employers” (my italics). It’s not just selectivity that constitutes a judgment in cartography; so does the language of arrangement.

Even “culture” — one of the “evolutionary” terms the editors intended to illustrate — refers here more to the sociological than the aesthetic. Culture consists of sport, disease, and broadcasting, apparently, but not of art, music, or literature — even though the industrial involvement of Massey-Harris and the CPR in establishing the status of the Group of Seven is now well known. The one painting reproduced in the volume — a Franklin Carmichael — depicts a minesite and is positioned on the page analyzing Canadian Shield resource development. While “industry” is the book’s palpable interest, nothing on the publishing industry, the magazine industry, the film industry, or the music industry is to be found here — despite the fact that *Chatelaine* is as much of a *national*, popular, commercial success story as was “National” League hockey during these years, and even though the cultural industries collectively contribute greatly to the GNP. Perhaps gender politics as well as a narrow definition of culture dominates the cartographic decisions on the point. That there is no map of the birthplaces of the stars of Canadian literature, however, in the long run tells less about literature (or about hockey) than about undeclared priorities.

Or are they truly undeclared? The editors may be doing nothing except reflecting the dominant social discourse in Canada, a discourse apparently as dominant in 1991 as it was in 1913 or 1966. And for cartographers to map presumptions, or map the gaps and absences that presumptions construct, may present altogether different dimensions of challenge than Descartes dreamed of. *May*. Even declaration is fraught with uncertainties. In giving their volume of the Atlas the separate name *Addressing the Twentieth Century*, the editors intend, I think, not just to allude to time and social change but also to indicate the process they have gone through in devising ways of visually representing historical data. Yet in an age given (perhaps over-readily) to deconstruction, it’s hard not to read the title also as the number sign of the house where we live. If that’s the case — sobering thought — we live in a house that’s riddled with biases that a great many people remain unaware of. To accept these biases as natural because they can be graphed and mapped, or because they have not been consciously and carefully questioned, would be to accept a corporate version of cultural priorities as well as a selective version of history. That’s not something a whole society should do lightly, even for the illusion of space, in the name of national homogeneity, or under the pressures of time.

W.N.