

A whole new world

The 'Atlas Maior', first published in 1665, is still offering up its magnificent treasures

Maps. Somehow, they will never become merely functional objects. Although it's impossible now to imagine setting off to drive to a new destination without looking at a map, or not wanting to pick up a city map as soon as you arrive somewhere new, the real allure of maps is that they represent images of elsewhere. For generations, cartographers were the true explorers, and maps were highly prized objects, because they contained such valuable and hard-won information.

The *Atlas Maior* was first published in 1665, the largest and most expensive book to be published in the 17th century, and has now been magnificently reprinted by Taschen. The mighty *Atlas Maior* is not a book that you will fit in your handbag or briefcase. It's so heavy it requires a taxi home to transport it, and so enormous it needs its own designated area in the house for storage. Everyone will covet it, but at least it won't be easy to steal.

Taschen is a wildly successful German publishing house of books on fine art, architecture, photography, design and erotica, whose bestseller list - including *1000 Chairs*, *Design of the 20th Century*, *Fashion*, and *Forbidden Erotica* - allows the owners to indulge in a sideline of philanthropic loss-making projects, such as the *Atlas Maior*. It was originally published in Latin, by a Dutch

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Atlas Maior

By Joan Blaeu

Introduction by Peter van der Krogt

Taschen, 626pp. €150

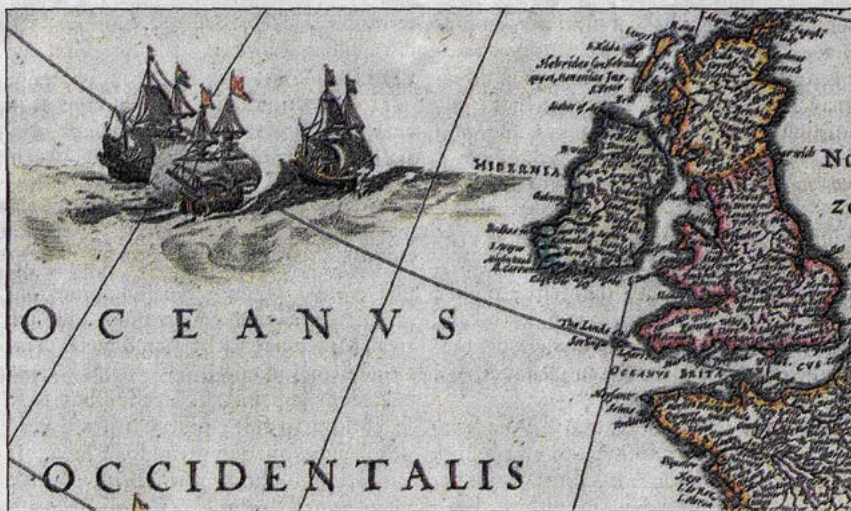
The Map Book

Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 360pp. £25

publisher, Joan Blaeu, and ran to 11 volumes, in full colour. The current Taschen edition is based on the copy held by the Austrian National Library, and has updated text by cartography expert Peter van der Krogt.

Open the *Atlas Maior* anywhere, and you'll linger on the page. There are fold-outs of architectural drawings; sections and elevations and plans of public and civic buildings. There are baroque artists' impressions of countries: America is a four-page fold out, complete with noble savage dressed only in feathers, gold-panning and an imaginary - though possibly imagined - animal that looks like a cross between an otter and a dinosaur. And there are the maps, the heart of the atlas.

To look at 300-year-old maps when one has the advantage of knowing what the



updated version is, is fascinating. Ireland is long and narrow, with far more coves and inlets marked than you ever see nowadays, in an era where we are not forced to always arrive on these shores by boat. Elsewhere in the atlas, there are close-ups of various islands, cities, duchies and counties, along with the bigger depictions of countries. The provinces of China look as if they are composed entirely

of mountains. Blaeu had written in the original atlas: "If you consider the lie of the land and its position and compare them to adjacent parts of the world, you would say that nature itself strengthened it and built it fortress-like to defend it and keep it from others." This is a gorgeous book; one to keep for a lifetime.

The other recently published book in this field is *The Map Book*. Does the world

become a less mysterious place when we know more about it? This wonderful compendium of map-making down the centuries suggests that it does not: that every generation redefines the world around it. This book starts in 1500 BC with a representation and description of the earliest town plan in Nippur, Babylonia, and ends in 2005, with a Geographical Information System map of Detroit, which uses digital cartographic data.

In between are images of maps through the centuries, from a 6th-century mosaic map of Jordan found on the floor of a church, to a 17th-century map of rice output from Japan's first atlas; from the first scientifically measured British navigational chart in the 1750s, to a satellite map of London, taken in 2002.

This book is immensely enriched by the accompanying explanatory text for each image. A veritable army of some 80 cartography experts have contributed text for the period they specialise in. They all have different styles of writing, and the result is a fine marriage of text and image.

The Map Book is not as gloriously extravagant a book as the *Atlas Maior*, but then again, those books only come along every 300 years.

◆ Rosita Boland is an *Irish Times* journalist and writer. Her last book, *A Secret Map of Ireland*, is published by New Island