

Corners of the globe

Among the many literary hoaxes perpetrated by Jorge Luis Borges and Alfredo Bioy Casares was a fragment purportedly from *Travels of Praiseworthy Men*, written by J. A. Suárez Miranda in 1658, which begins: "In that Empire, the craft of Cartography attained such Perfection that the Map of a Single province covered the space of an entire City, and the Map of the Empire itself an entire Province. In the course of Time, these Extensive maps were found somehow wanting, and so the College of Cartographers evolved a Map of the Empire that was of the same Scale as the Empire and that coincided with it point for point". The fragment goes on to outline how succeeding generations let the map fall into disrepair, until now "in the western Deserts, tattered Fragments of the Map are still to be found, Sheltering an occasional Beast or beggar". The titles and dimensions of both atlases under review recall the grandiosity of the map-makers of Borges and Bioy's anonymous Empire – although the Amsterdam cartographer Joan Blaeu, in the 1665 Preface reproduced by Taschen in their reprint of his *Atlas Maior*, humbly asks the "Benevolent Reader" to "take pleasure in our labours and whenever something is lacking in either map or description, bear in mind that a mistake is easily made when describing a place one has never seen and that forgiveness is nowhere more appropriate than here". Atlases are simultaneously powerful stimulants to the imagination and functional, practical reference works. In his memoir *The Diving-Bell and the Butterfly*, the bed-bound Jean-Dominique Bauby, paralysed aside from an eyelid, recalls acts of wild imperialism in the classroom, colouring in territories in a school atlas in acts of imaginary conquest; and, indeed, cartography has been closely associated with actual expansionism.

Bulk (the *Philip's Universal Atlas of the World* weighs 4.5 kilos, the Blaeu 6.5) and atlas status aside, at first the books seem to have little

SEAMUS SWEENEY

Joan Blaeu

ATLAS MAIOR OF 1665
 Introduced by Peter van der Krogt
 594pp. Cologne: Taschen. £100.
 3 8228 3125 5

PHILIP'S UNIVERSAL ATLAS OF
 THE WORLD
 560pp. Philip's. £90.
 0 540 08744 0

in common. The former, carrying the imprimatur of the Royal Geographical Society, features computer-designed maps using the most up-to-date in digital cartographic techniques, as well as charts of the ocean floors, charts of the night sky, charts of the moon and a beautiful section of spectacular satellite photos. The other work, of 594 maps first published in eleven volumes between 1662 and 1665, features, to modern eyes, many errors and lacunae – the coasts of Australia, New Guinea, the Asian coast north of Korea are all inaccurate, there are no Himalayas indicated and the alignment of the Ganges and Indus Rivers deviates considerably from reality. Naturally, in the representations of the interiors of many land masses there are approximations and omissions. Of course, the inaccuracies and unknowns of the Blaeu atlas evoke a more romantic era of mysteries – there is something saddening about the ultra-modern, ultra-accurate atlas which depicts a world entirely mapped and thus entirely conquered.

Cartography developed in tandem with exploration, trade and imperial ambition. It is no surprise that seventeenth-century Holland became a centre of mapmaking, with dynasties of cartographers such as the Blaeu and Hondius families. The Dutch East and West India Companies drove much of this, their agents being charged with surveying the territories they traded in.

Amsterdam rose as a cartographic centre with the increasing role of the United Provinces on the world stage and the decline of the great German trading cities. Ironically, the publication of Blaeu's atlas immediately preceded the eclipse of Netherlandish cartography – the founding of the Académie des Sciences in Paris in 1666 led to French dominance in the field.

Taschen have used the copy of the *Atlas Maior* in the Austrian National Library in Vienna for their reprint. This reproduction is at times overwhelmingly beautiful – certainly the scale of the volume heightens the sheer visual impact, with fold-out sections devoted to particularly striking items, such as the frontispieces showing personifications of the continents. One effect of this approach is that one gets little sense of the physical experience of handling the eleven-volume atlas itself, as opposed to admiring a beautiful reprint.

Blaeu worked at a time of great Dutch self-confidence in the visual arts, in science, and in philosophy. He was a contemporary of Rembrandt and Spinoza, and it was around 1665 that van Leeuwenhoek read Hooke's *Micrographia*, which inspired his own work on the microscope. Dutch advances in optics during the seventeenth century were a source of patriotic pride and helped inspire a new emphasis, in art and cartography, on the visual world. There is a sense of seeing the world as it really is in the *Atlas Maior*, made explicit in Blaeu's confident preface.

The humble note mentioned above aside, Blaeu discusses the world-conquering glory of geography – "no exploit great or small is performed without location, nor can any place on earth be accurately defined without Geography". "Geography has paved the way not only for the happiness and glory of humanity but for its glory. Were kingdoms not separated by rivers, mountains, straits, isthmuses and oceans, empires would have no confines nor wars a conclusion."



Chicago; from *Philip's Universal Atlas of the World*

The Philip's and the Blaeu atlas share a modern self-confidence in their scientific approach. The oceans of the *Atlas Maior* are decorated with sea monsters – but these are whales and turtles, or the King of Spain off to the New World to exercise power over his dominion. There are no hyperboreans or Herodotus-style legends depicted here. The Philip's atlas is untouched by any postmodern considerations of cartography as a representation of the world that reflects contemporary preoccupations – although in its preface, it does draw one's attention to the final pages, featuring maps of Iraq, Sudan, and of the regions affected by the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami.

If Blaeu's cartography is a blend of art and science, this is also true of the Philip's atlas. After all, why include the striking satellite images that merit a section of their own, if aesthetic considerations are not present? Both atlases reflect commercial considerations – the Philip's is a prestige piece, a reference work that is perhaps more likely to inspire reveries of travel than to be used to plan journeys in detail. It can hardly be regarded as portable. The Blaeu reprint, of course, is of an even less utilitarian nature – it would be an interesting exercise to go on holidays based on the *Atlas Maior* – but its sheer visual impact, scale and expense make it a collector's item.