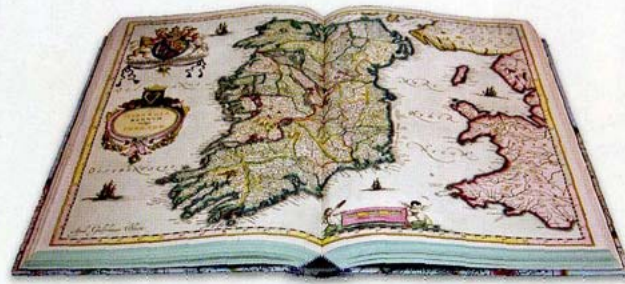


books



ATLAS MAIOR OF 1665 (by Joan Blaeu, with an introduction and texts by Peter van der Krogt; Taschen, rrp £100) In the 17th century, the scale of human understanding stretched rapidly. By 1609, Galileo, eye to his telescope, had picked out the moon's silvered peaks and crepuscular valleys. Less than 70 years on and Antony van Leeuwenhoek's rudimentary microscope demonstrated that man, while being small fry when considered in astronomical terms, was himself made up of many tiny yet significant elements. It is fitting that this disorienting period, when theologians and scientists alike sought to locate man's place in the Grand Scheme of Things, should see the publication of Joan Blaeu's *Atlas Maior*.

It wasn't the first world map: Claudius Ptolemaeus completed his *Geographia* in the second century AD. And the *Atlas* of 1595 by Gerard Mercator – a Dutchman, like Blaeu – was the first published book to bear that name. But Blaeu's achievement was more than cartographic. In 1665, his *Atlas*, produced in five different languages, was the largest and most expensive book money could buy. The French edition alone comprised 12 vast volumes containing a grand total of 597 maps spread over 5,130 pages. It cost the modern-day equivalent of nearly £14,000.

Blaeu, like his father, William Janszoon, was a shrewd competitor among Amsterdam's world-leading map publishers. He never surveyed a piece of land himself, so relied on explorers to bring new charts to port. If this source failed, he was not beyond buying up rivals' copperplates or ordering his illustrators to simply copy existing maps. Yet Blaeu's *Atlas* was not just about quantity. Save for the then-unfamiliar extremities of Pacific Asia and the New World's west coast, it is accurate. It has a beautiful, coherent style – all bold outlines, soft pastels and enchanting cartouches. And in the maps' uncharted territories, one finds unexpected decorative flourishes – a grazing tapir or a Brazilian church parade.

Blaeu planned to expand his 'Geography' to an entire 'Cosmography' that charted the seas and stars and detailed the creation of the universe. Lofty aims, indeed. But Blaeu was no braggart. In a charming preface – included here, in this huge, brilliant, single-volume 'best of' – he pays homage to his map-making forebears and prepares to sing the praises of 'those who we feel have improved our work'. In notes accompanying the *Atlas Maior's* first volume, 'The World and the North Pole Region' – penned long before the full horrors of imperialism revealed themselves – Blaeu writes: 'For even if we invade the entire earth in an attempt to sate our avarice, what will remain after our death? Five or six feet of earth will then suffice us.' While finding one's place in the world, it is perhaps best to remain humble ■ MARTIN HEMMING ▷

To order *Atlas Maior* for £90 (plus £4.50 UK p&p), ring the *World of Interiors* Bookshop on 0870 727 4147