

A Map Lesson – About Empire; with George Vancouver

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1. Introduction

I teach historical geography at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland, and with a focus on colonialism and empire. I did my PhD at UBC-Vancouver under Cole Harris, the author of *Making Native Space*, *The Historical Atlas of Canada*, and other notable books on Canada. My thesis was on Native-newcomer relations on Vancouver Island from the beginnings of Native contact with European and American explorers and traders in the 1770s through to the arrival of colonial settlers in the 1850s. My studies have since moved on to other areas and aspects of the colonial past and present, but I still occasionally write on British Columbia.³⁹

Vancouver Island gets its name from the British explorer George Vancouver and I have written on how this association between place and person came about through Vancouver's map of the island from his reconnaissance of 1792.⁴⁰

I have examined how this map stemmed from American, British and Spanish interest in the Pacific Northwest at the end of the eighteenth century, and the influence it had on how imperial sovereignty over the region was settled. To stay on the message of this special issue, maps are alluring objects, and Jerry Brotton's *A History of the World in Twelve Maps* (2012) is a vibrant supplement to McGregor's *A History of the World in 100 Objects*.⁴¹ Vancouver's map does not make it into Jerry Brotton's top twelve, but I use it in my teaching to exemplify how maps work as tools of empire.

2. Map lesson: cartography, colonialism, and context

This, in outline, is my 'lesson plan' for how I use Vancouver's map in my upper-level undergraduate course *Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies* (which usually has an enrollment of around 50 students, around one third of them from beyond the UK). I spring this map on students in lesson five, and on the assumption (which usually turns out to be correct, even for the American students) that they have little or no knowledge of either Vancouver or B.C. history. The students are given no forewarning (i.e. no preparatory materials). However, by this stage in the course they have been introduced to different ways of thinking about colonialism as a project that involves language, texts and images.

³⁹ See Daniel Clayton, "Placing Joseph Banks in the North Pacific" *Journal for Maritime Research*, Vol. 21, no. 1-2 (2019): 97-118.

⁴⁰ Daniel W. Clayton, *Islands of Truth: The Imperial Fashioning of Vancouver Island* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2000).

⁴¹ Jerry Brotton, *A History of the World in Twelve Maps* (London: Allen Lane, 2012).



Figure 1. George Vancouver, *A chart shewing part of the coast of NW America, 1798* (in Lamb, 1984).⁴²

The class is divided into groups of five and each group is given an A3 copy of Vancouver’s map (above) and a magnifying glass (or they can use their cell phone camera zoom).⁴³ The groups are ‘simply’ asked to describe the features of the map and jot down what they find interesting about it. As they undertake this task and ask themselves and me questions (I give them thirty minutes), they discover that while they may not know anything about this specific map, they are accustomed to seeing the world in mapped ways, and by this stage in the course they have already encountered a wide range of maps (some historical, some drawn by me). I ask them to think about the range of map objects they encounter in their everyday lives, and have seen already in the course, and encourage the view that they don’t need to have seen Vancouver’s map before in order to say something meaningful about it. I use this ‘blind’ reading to remind students that while colonialism is undoubtedly about a set of core things (domination,

⁴² W. Kaye Lamb, ed. *The Voyage of George Vancouver, 1791-1795*, 4 vols. and maps (London: Hakluyt Society, 1984).

⁴³ Students are also alerted to various internet copies of the map with software applications that allow one to zoom in to sections of the map.

dispossession, and division being three of its universal features), these things are also matters of interpretation and perspective, and students' views (so long as they are reasoned and thoughtful) matter too! Colonialism looks different to different people on different sides of colonial divides and from different parts of the world. Such differences, and questions about how we recognize them, are integral to colonialism's geography.

In the past student deliberation has generally raised the following questions and observations: What was Vancouver doing there? Did he draw this map alone or with help? Is there any other documentation (a journal perhaps) that explains how and why this map was produced? What do the lines, dots and other symbols on the map mean? Students are interested in the names they find (some sounding familiar, some foreign, and some bizarre), and interested in why the coastline is mapped in detail but the interior of the island is largely left blank.

Then, for the following week (consolidation class), students are asked to read some wider material on cartography and empire, including my own detailed analysis of Vancouver's map.⁴⁴ I point them to Brian Harley's (1988, 279) writing on how maps "'desocialise' the territory they represent . . . [to the degree that] decisions about the exercise of power are removed from the realm of immediate face-to-face contacts', and divulge in my own piece that this, in effect, is what Vancouver's expedition (of 1791-1795) and map accomplished.⁴⁵ He and his crew used a set of mapping methods and instruments to draw together space on a uniform plane (a scale map), and in so doing suspended and subordinated prior Native meanings and ties to 'Vancouver's Island' within a Western system of imperial meaning. Vancouver's mapping and naming contributed to a process of imperial appropriation that removed Native people from the territorial scene. His mapping was not much different in this regard from myriad other mapping projects in the colonial world and over the centuries (during this class students are also given cartographic material pertaining to Spanish Peru, British India, and French Indochina): maps served as practical and ideological accomplices to empire. Maps and mapping point to the proprietorial instincts at the heart of colonialism: how imperial nations and colonial settlers not only saw the alien lands they encountered through their own cultural lenses but also sought to re-imagine and treat those lands as their own, irrespective of Native claims, rights, and forms of belonging.

In Vancouver's era and case, the pretence of science and objectivity was crucial to this imperial (proprietorial) endeavour. The British subsequently used Vancouver's map to claim Vancouver Island as its own, and particularly on account of its fastidiousness, and thus authoritative (at least to them). The British argued that he had mapped this space more fully and precisely than American and Spanish mariners and mappers who were also on the scene at this time. This was a bogus objectivity, of course, but, nonetheless, a powerful conceit. In short, Vancouver's circumnavigation of the island was coterminous with its imperial capture by the British. This is one important conclusion to the lesson, and in this respect, the clusters of dots sprinkled across the map, which are Native settlements, were inconsequential at the time. However, we also think about how, in 'postcolonial' and 'decolonial' critical frames, such evidence of a Native presence (in fact Vancouver saw more settlements than people in some places, because of smallpox, which had ripped through the area a few years before he arrived) might be used to question British claims to the region and recognise Native ones. In other words, Vancouver's objectivity possibly went too far!

In this follow-up class, I also reflect on this 'blind' map reading exercise in order to highlight the importance of context for a critical reading of cartography, colonialism and empire more generally. General theories and models of colonial power and discourse are important, but they need to be contextualised, and questions of power need to be examined carefully. This is one of the (many) things Harris taught me. Legitimate questions can be raised about whether we exaggerate 'the power of maps', for example. Don't the Native dots point to something more complex and ambivalent? Or is that to lose sight of the bigger power picture – how this part of the world was being taken away from Native people?

In a second (shorter, fifteen-minute) group discussion, students are asked to reflect on their further reading on cartography and what it had added to their understanding of Vancouver's map and questions of context. They probe the circumstances surrounding Vancouver's survey: the sea otter trade between Natives and newcomers going on at

⁴⁴ Daniel Clayton, "On the colonial genealogy of George Vancouver's chart of the north-west coast of North America," *Ecumene* Vol. 7, no. 4 (2000): 371-401.

⁴⁵ Brian J. Harley, "Maps, knowledge, and power," in Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels eds., *The Iconography of Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

this time; the Nootka Crisis of 1790, which almost brought Britain and Spain to war over a distant patch of land; and a longer geo-political dispute between Britain and the U.S. over sovereignty which culminated in the Oregon Treaty of 1846.⁴⁶ The students get to see Vancouver's surveying instructions (housed in The National Archives, London⁴⁷), which explain the cartographic notation to be used, and think about the language of science (exactitude) therein and its political (imperial) connotations; and they weigh up how directly his cartography fed into the dispossession of Native people and remains connected to B.C.'s settler colonial present. The overarching point is that context matters.

Finally, I use this map lesson, stretched over two classes, to make the more general point that while textual and visual objects are read and seen in different ways in different times and places, some views and readings of them become more potent, pernicious, and long-lasting than others. In other words, reading and seeing is power-laden, and we need to think about the vantage points (assumptions, prejudices, blind spots) from which we see and read. Objects may have core (potent, stable, enduring) meanings, but we use them in our teaching because they can and should be re-imagined from the vantage point of 'our' own times and places in the world. We need to think about how our acts of looking speak to different kinds of histories, politics, and geographical imaginations. One of the readings students are then given for the following week, which underscores this sentiment, is from Nicholas Mirzoeff's *The Right to Look*.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Robin Fisher, and Hugh Johnson, eds., *From Maps to Metaphors: The Pacific World of George Vancouver* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1993); Clayton, *Islands of Truth*; Stephen Brown, *Madness, Betrayal and the Lash: The Epic Voyage of Captain George Vancouver* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2008).

⁴⁷ "General instruction for surveying" (in the hand of Sir Joseph Banks), 21 February 1791, The National Archives, Kew, HO 42/18, fols. 170-183.

⁴⁸ Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).