

THE ISLAND
LONDON
MAPPED

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BY STEPHEN WALTER

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FOREWORD

I first came into contact with Stephen Walter's *The Island* in the crypt of St Pancras Church on the Euston Road in London in 2008. There were good reasons why I would be interested. I had recently curated an exhibition of old maps of London in the British Library and was in the early stages of planning another on wall maps. Walter's work appealed on both scores. But there was much more to it. It seemed – and still seems – to me that he instinctively understood the essential nature of maps. Contrary to what most people assume, they are not primarily about measurement but are, rather, an effort to make the chaos that is the world and one's immediate surroundings comprehensible through selection and highlighting of information.

This means that every map presents a rationalisation of reality or, to put it in a different way, a vision of how the mapmaker or his or her sponsor *thinks* the area depicted is – or even should be – through selecting, emphasising and intentionally omitting real physical but also social and economic features. Thus, even if a mapmaker thinks he or she is being as objective as can be, every map is a subjective construct which will differ from a map of the same place made by another person or by the same person at a different time or for a different purpose.

This is particularly true of maps of London. The earliest surviving maps by the St Albans monk Matthew Paris, and dating from the thirteenth century, show a London dominated by its religious institutions – with a nod towards the royal (the Tower of London) and the commercial (London Bridge, linking the City with the outer world). In succeeding centuries, the images conveyed by its maps have mirrored the history of our capital city. Sometimes the image has been at variance with the reality. In the late fifteenth century, in the 1550s, in the 1650s and again in the 1680s, when the mapping was sponsored by German merchants seeking royal support, by nostalgic cavaliers or by the king or the court, London was shown as intensely royalist, though the reality was that its burghers and the city institutions that they dominated were defying the royal will. Under the influence of Enlightenment ideas of order and balance, Rocque's maps of the 1740s bestowed on London and Westminster an elegance that was at variance with the grubby Hogarthian reality.

At other times the cartographic image has been closer to the true essence of London because it was financed by Londoners themselves. It was livery companies and individual liverymen who were behind the

portrayal of London as a merchant city in the large-scale 1676 map by Ogilby and Morgan – the first to portray the City, in a no-nonsense, mathematical way, in plan. It was the Phoenix Fire Insurance Company which, keen to assess the risks to which they were exposed, subsidised Horwood's great image of London and Westminster, first published in 1799 – at precisely the time when Napoleon was dismissing the British as a nation of merchants. The Victorian era spawned images of London as the railway capital and as a city of schools and of drunkards. Throughout the centuries the need to keep London on the move encouraged the creation of maps listing boatman and cabbies' fares and showing boat, tram and underground routes. Early socialists, meanwhile, researched the data for Charles Booth's famous Poverty Map of London, revealing a city riven by inequalities in wealth and class. Booth was responsible too for maps which sound a more modern note, highlighting the high percentage of immigrants from other parts of England and where they lived. In a way that foreshadows the tensions of today, others used maps to warn the public of the scale and implicitly the danger of foreign (in this case Jewish) immigration.

Stephen Walter is aware of these maps, and their influence can be seen, sometimes satirically, in the detail on his map. All of these older maps, however, could be said to represent the values of the dominant groups and organisations that one way or the other had a vested interest in society and that paid for the maps either directly or through sponsorship. These groups were invariably and, to varying degrees, rich and powerful. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the first individualistic touches began to appear on maps, notably in the comments and in-jokes hidden away on the maps produced by Eric Gill's brother, the increasingly well-known MacDonald ('Max') Gill, on the colourful map posters commissioned by London Transport.

Stephen Walter has, however, utilised the technical advances in terms of both mapping techniques and technology – think of Google Earth – that have placed mapmaking resources in the hands of Everyman rather than a wealthy elite. In the process he has democratised the mapping of London. His *Island* is a map with an unparalleled vigour and an earthiness and with the lack of deference that characterises modern society. These have never previously been seen in the mapping of London but recall the graphic and literary images of Hogarth and Dickens.

Walter's maps do at first glance give the impression of chaos. The almost microscopic drawings, signs and lettering intensify the dense texture of the image. There is an intentionally folksy appearance to some of the lettering and wording. Misspellings abound. But closer inspection

reveals that the chaos and apparent clumsiness are meticulously and even obsessively controlled. The elements are carefully selected within a recognisable, though not geodetically accurate, framework of roads and districts. And what are these elements? There is plentiful historical information, embracing the important, the anecdotal and the (extremely) quirky, and references to important buildings and institutions. But if this were all, the work would hardly differ from the sort of tourist maps that were popular throughout the twentieth century. There are some 'in-jokes', with meanings that probably only Walter and his friends could understand. But in Walter's maps of London there are also acute observations about the values and ethnic, economic and social geography of Londoners. Their social and sexual habits are labelled and located in a way that is unlikely to be found on any other map (but will be of great interest to future historians). He reveals, for example, the existence and location of 'cruising' on Hampstead Heath – and also challenges the validity of stereotyped views of certain districts simply by putting into words or symbols what large segments of society as a whole may think but in many cases do not dare to say out loud.

His observations frequently border on biting satire, an aspect missing in the gentler humour of MacDonald Gill. They can be expressed in a sign – the Star of David for the areas with large Jewish populations, for example – or an adjective or a distorted name of a district which at first sight looks like a spelling mistake. This satirical spirit is also to be found, writ large, in the title of the map of the map, and the detailed depiction of the outlying suburbs which abound in unexpected bays and ports. For, to Walter, London is an island both because it is self-obsessed and because it is in many important ways atypical of, and isolated from the rest of, the United Kingdom. In this respect the map anticipates the hostility to dominance by London that has become a major issue for the future of the country in the wake of the Scottish referendum.

To an extent Walter's satirical edge resembles what is to be found in the work of Grayson Perry, though Perry's satire is less earthy. It is the personal element, however, which makes Walter's maps unique. Look hard and you will find references to places close to his heart – where his grandmother or perhaps a girlfriend lived, for instance – or the sites of his frustrations. They represent the defiance of the individual in a world that seems increasingly dominated by the anonymous, the homogenised, the mass-produced and the multinationals.

In all of these ways, Walter's practice is closer than he may have realised to the way in which most mapmakers worked in the medieval period – that other great age when the individual counted. Whether one

looks at the great Ebstorf world map, created in Germany in about 1300 (and destroyed by Allied bombs in 1943), or at the happily still surviving great Hereford World Map also of about 1300, one finds a particular local bias in the form of detailed and relatively accurate depictions of the region in which the mapmaker lived and which are exaggerated in size. Sometimes this can get autobiographical: in about 1415, the monk filling out the detail of England on the Evesham World Map (now in the College of Arms, London) made a point of showing the minute Devon hamlet of Taddipport, where, presumably, he had grown up – a Stephen Walter before his time. These same medieval maps, while indicating the location of important cultural and religious sites (notably Jerusalem), also make strong and subversive comments about (and sometimes contain depictions of) the peoples whom the mapmakers disliked or feared.

Walter's *Island* was one of the stars of the show in my exhibition *Magnificent Maps*. I well remember seeing crowds of visitors peering at the map, looking for his take on the part of London from which they came. I hope purchasers of this book will be equally fascinated by Walter's work. It will provoke your curiosity, lead you to look at the detail and – whether you are amused or shocked – it will lead you to think. What more could one ask from art – or a map?

Peter Barber
British Library

INTRODUCTION

As an artist of landscapes I have always engaged in the act of journeying through them. Most notably, in recent years, through cities and the wildernesses gifted to us by nature. These first-hand experiences, and the photographs, sketches and notes that I make, inform my work in many ways. A map, on the other hand, is a separate entity from these physical pursuits. Like a painting seen as a receptacle of meaning about a place, a map is a projection of the principles, opinions, objectives and choices of its maker.

Having spent my formative years as a student searching out beauty spots within the areas where I lived, I would scrutinise these viewpoints further by paring the compositions down with geometrical alterations, expressive mark making and repetitions. Inspired by the likes of Piet Mondrian, what would emerge from these observations and workings was my own set of abstract signs and symbols. Photography entered my work, and I became fixated with the trope of using a window as an intermediary between an inside view and an outside world. Scribing out Utopias from these solitary views, however, was beginning to feel a little too much like a marginal activity for me. I was developing a growing interest in the wider world with its deferring politics, ideas and current affairs. I felt an increasing urge to include ideas of the 'public' within my work, and a growing interest in semiotics grew alongside this. I became interested in the re-representation of things, and in 2001 I began to draw a forest full of tree symbols rather than the trees themselves. Other known signs and symbols from the public arena were used to build up a new picture, as if they were pixels in a digital image. This form of visual public language is also prevalent in maps and their legends. As depictions of shared landscapes, maps are full of these signs and symbols. It was a logical step to start making these myself from both existing and imagined places.

This portrait of London took the best part of two years to create, after my thirty years of growing up and roaming through the city and its suburbs. It was born out of an idea and a system that I developed in 2006–08, which enabled me to merge together the personal and the collective experiences of this place called London. The notes that I gathered from such wanderings form only part of the whole. They are shared alongside the great theatre of lives, the ideas and the stories that London encompasses. *The Island* glories in the macrocosm, and delights in the local and personal nature of experiences. In re-constructing the place of my birth, I was taking back some sort of ownership over the city whilst coming to terms with my own insignificance within it. I would find a way of letting

myself go and getting lost within the maze of information that I gathered.

This London is an island, defined by a coastline running along its outer edges – a wry joke about its own sense of self-importance. The southern suburb of Carshalton Beaches becomes precisely that in this new configuration.

The Island is a celebration of London, the etymology of its place names, its folklore histories and the idiosyncrasies of its past, present and future. It is a tangle of words, drawn elements, epithets, inherited histories, cultural residues and autobiographical references – all pinpointed to certain locations. Sometimes dry history is recorded, important architectural and cultural landmarks shown. Sometimes trivia is depicted, stereotypes highlighted. Signs and symbols abound – childlike bungalows with their pitched roofs litter the map, indicating formless suburban sprawl. Other areas I show in careful detail; yet other entries are purposely vague, hinting at deeper layers and contradictions. Blackheath did not get its name from being a plague pit – it refers to the darkness of its soil. Here the urban myths – the perceptions and reputations of places – matter.

My research took me to a great many sources. These include existing maps, reference books, the Internet, other media and audio archives; much valuable material came from conversations with other Londoners. Once I had plotted out the main roads, railways and green spaces – all contained within a coastline – I moved around the map filling in as the mood took me. Compromises and edits were made in the process. I soon realised that the level of detail needed would have to be miniscule if I were to fit but a fraction of what I wanted into the space provided. The scale of the original drawing is much smaller than shown here. It is almost unreadable with the naked eye. My own artistic expressions were becoming diluted in the mass of others and entering into illegibility.

Looking back, I see this work as that of a young, maybe naïve man. Were I to approach the work again, the map would be different. London is a living entity that evolves continually, and I too have changed. Also, soon after its completion, I remember serving up a pre-emptive snipe at the snobbery that surrounded Wikipedia at that time – talking up the role that the platform played in my research a little too much. It was however this freshness of spirit and irreverence that gives this work its charm today. It is a warts-and-all tour of the city, and an obsessive hand-drawn map with less to say about monarchy or the establishment view than about the cultural history of its people.

Stephen Walter

THE NORTH



1st British Martyr (beheaded) 1st Draft of The Magna Carta drawn er.
ST. ALBAN'S Mkt. sch. Pope Adrian IV + Stephen Hawking wer er.
 Verulamium
 ∴ The 2nd Roman Town
 ↖ LOADS OF ☕ + claims to the Oldest in England
 Ye Olde Fighting Cocks - Walter Raleigh stayed ere.
 Francis Bacon (philosopher)
 Stanley Kubrick, Ali G, Gorat,
 Jimmy Hill + Moly
 woz eres.

RADLETT

↖ George Michael + Denis Wise wr er
 Thurtell, Wear, a £300 debt and the Radlett - Murder (1923)

⚠ Sea Traffic



BARNET HEAD

+ Other D. List Celebs
now! ☀ East Enderst Holby City