Will C. van den Hoonaard, *Map Worlds: a History of Women in Cartography*


*Map Worlds* opens by considering who is a cartographer; recapping the production of landscape pictures, school children’s embroidery, and other early representations of the world to conclude that a cartographer is anyone who identifies as such. This is pertinent to female cartographers as for centuries many lacked formal training in mapmaking, and entered their profession because of a hankering or capacity for travel, or collected maps and loved globes as a child. Others were self-educated or trained late in life, many ‘mentored’ by significant male and female parents or professional cartographers.

Their occupational identities were tied up with combining nature and art, in their capacity to portray the beauty of their production with the technical precision needed to represent their worlds. Their professional identities were formed through recognition from others, through association and participation in the profession, or a belief in the utility of their map to others. Surveyors, geography teachers, map archivists and allied professionals relied on their maps, while some female cartographers created a ‘critical’ social cartography such as tactile and audio maps for persons with disabilities, or made maps with minority groups and indigenous communities. Street directories and a wide variety of atlases were some of their practical creations, whereas others analysed major planetary formations such as the mid-oceanic ridge, or lunar and extra-terrestrial maps to determine landing sites for space probes. Women were noted to have particularly valued the emotional requirements of the map user.

The book is structured through a presentation of historical moments. The first account is of the medieval period in the West when the Church’s strict hold on mapmaking for religious purposes and the involvement of nuns is apparent. The Renaissance and European exploration of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, aided by technologies such as the printing press and the copper plate, influenced the emergence of map ateliers where maps were composed, engraved, published or outsourced. Women were heavily involved as colourists, engravers, and in other aspects of commercial mapmaking (mostly on a lower income), and quite a large number of widows ran their dead husbands’ businesses (although often needed more persistence to sell their maps).

The next chapters are structured around a presentation of the role of the state and use of maps as political tools; particularly noting the importance of scientific thinking in the 17th and 18th centuries. In this era, map curators, the military, educational and other professions relied on maps as the colonial empires sought geographical knowledge. Although mostly men were involved in ‘scientific’ pursuits such as surveying land, and there is generally little information about women at this time, by the mid-19th century female travellers and adventurers were building on cartographic knowledge and women were gaining education. In particular, many female travellers wished to convey the joy of ‘travelling in the room’ through a cartography that acquainted students and the public with the world. By the twentieth century, women’s employment in cartography was necessary as men went to war. Some were discouraged from public service (e.g. after marriage) and again went free-lance or headed their own cartography businesses.

The last historical moment relies on contemporary vignettes from 38 interviewees. This part of the book particularly highlights the gendered social structures of today, noting that whilst the 1970s and 1980s saw a rise of women in cartography, by the 1990s (mirroring social trends elsewhere) this started to reverse. Today women hold university teaching and professional posts, but are highly under-represented in the executive and governance functions of major associations, editorial boards and working groups of professional bodies. Contemporary female cartographers address gender and power hierarchies in the workplace in different ways – some through mainstreaming gender, others
having parallel associations, whilst many don’t acknowledge a problem or even disavow inequality. Some have moved between these positions at different stages of their lives and career. Most interestingly, the book notes there are more women in cartography in developing nations, except for those employed in private/freelance sector.

The first thing that comes to mind from both the historical and contemporary narratives is the diverse ways in which women have made substantial contributions over the centuries across the breadth of formal fields that make up cartography. Some were mentored and their work celebrated, ran businesses and work areas, instructed men, and made major findings. By the same token, many talked of giving up opportunities for family or caring roles, or giving up a family for work. There are accounts of changing their appearance, being praised for ‘thinking like a man’, having their work published by others, working harder to be noticed or, in more contemporary times, being particularly noticeable in job interviews or when absent from tuition classes.

The second major theme is that of the dynamism and change inherent in cartography, and most of all, how technology is implicated in the evolution of cartography from representing landscapes to manipulating data sets and creating 3D and multimedia visuals. Technological shifts such as the printing press, lithograph and information revolution accompanied the opening up of education to the public and progressively to women. The change from maps as a cultural production to a scientific pursuit was sometimes questioned; with many commenting that computer-generated output is not the sole purpose of mapmaking.

Overriding these themes is the enormous amount of research that is meticulously presented in this fascinating book. Perhaps a disappointment is the limited number of visuals, but given the amount of research presented, and its historical take, this is not surprising. At times the book can be a little heavy-going, but conversely the detail makes the book a great resource and a text to be given due time for reading. Secondly, as the book notes, there are gaps in the historical presentation of some parts of the world. Although the book profiles Russian, Austrian, Chinese, Mexican, and Brazilian female cartographers, there is an (acknowledged) lack of less formalised or well-known mapmaking from other parts of the world. Some of the place-based comparisons are interesting e.g. the acceptance of women in North America in the 1900s compared with other places at the same time.

Overall, an inspiring book that is fascinating and highly-researched. A take away message is that whilst women were always a minority, they have made major contributions to cartography. Their common ground is their love of maps and map making and their belief in the value of their work in teaching others to open their eyes to the world.

Jennifer Carter
School of Social Sciences
University of the Sunshine Coast

National Library of Australia, Mapping Our World: Terra Incognita to Australia


The exhibition catalogue Mapping Our World: Terra Incognita to Australia accompanies the map exhibition of the same title at the National Library of Australia (NLA), from 7 November 2013 to 10 March 2014. The catalogue features the earliest known world map, the Late Babylonian Map of the World (c. 6th century BC) to such “transitional” maps as Fra Mauro’s Map of the World (1448-1453) and illustrates how Australia emerged as an idea from terra incognita to a