

Aerial Aftermaths: Wartime from Above

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The spectre of the aerial photograph, imaging the surface of the planet beneath, is riven with emotional response; as much for what is imagined than what is actually seen. Bombarded with looping footage of claimed precision interdiction, our lives and those of others are enmeshed with images that obscure and deny causation and affect.

Wartime aftermath is the aphorism applied throughout this stimulating volume, specifically the technological approaches taken to envisioning warfare and the social outcomes following wars leveling affect. The account is deftly trimmed to focus on the point where confusions of place - as topographies, histories, mythologies – are crystallised for the purposes of control, even suppression and latterly, as imperialist resource. The weapons are the lens, the eye and the camera, (these are related to but not included in Matteo Ramelli's 'theatre of machines' – see LDR review Sept 2015*).

The five chapters examine different periods in which this fixing

moment is engagingly argued to have occurred. The Scotland of Celts and Picts had been a thorn for neighbouring Romans, Danes and Saxons for centuries eventually becoming pacified by the English through a combination of ruthless military invasion and subtle prefiguration of the topography. The unmapped 'wasteland', a place of great mythological significance for its inhabitants, became disciplined using the new techniques of the Board of Ordnance surveyors; they were formed into a corp of Military Survey charged with the task of completing this novel process of pacification. Painters employed to invent the interpretation of altitude and gradient on a map, used their brushwork to augment income by painting bucolic scenes beyond the picturesque, an aesthetic generated for the production of editions of prints delivering news of their imperialist successes back to the King and the populace. Cartographic practice was enshrined in Britain from then to this day – Ordnance Survey maps – along with banal scenes of loch, moor and heather.

European wars and revolution had their aftermaths – in the 1780s it was the aerostation, or balloon – sweeping up populations in balloonomania spectacles; and for the individual in the basket, the ecstasy of silently floating in the clouds. Bird's-eye view enthusiasts measured and mapped, finding "vision from above to be fragmented, uneven, and confounding, even if sometimes startlingly clear." In this era, "..the watchtower moved into the air and became personified as the 'eye' of the general..". Such privileged viewpoints led rapidly to permanent constructions, panoramas of places, (such as the trophy city of Edinburgh, delighting to the observer perhaps in the same way as Google Street View has done in more recent times?); and events; "..battle scenes and sites of territorial aspiration [bringing]

events and information that would otherwise circulate in more distanced ways into immediate sensation". The spectacles of warfare, "...so much a part of British life.." back then, are today augmented by globalised motion picture and game.

During World War One in Mesopotamia the innovative adaptation of technology, initiated through the lens of the airborne camera, led to a re-organised air wing, again the military working closely with professional cartographers able to produce maps only days old; these could be dropped by the same aircraft to commanders about to initiate an advance, giving them invaluable intelligence and thus advantage. Following the Armistice, the British applied the concept of "empty map" to Iraq (as they had applied *terra nullius* - empty earth - to Australia 120 years previously), and with the French used the new cartographic technologies to replace earlier Arabic topographic systems and means of navigation. The politicians redrew borders as a deliberate act of dispossession, the aerial archeologists to enable their grabs for ancient loot. The wartime aftermath introduced the iniquity that we see today in the military exercise of political objectives using technology to callous and brutal ends. Arab rebellions were countered using 'air control', following reconnaissance flights and bombing of entire villages, economically more effective than using ground troops alone, with Winston Churchill in 1922 defending the invention of what was to later become known as blitzkrieg or 'shock and awe'.

The author's usage of the literature is deft, keeping the text moving with discussion and a contemporary turn of phrase. In the final chapter, the imaging of contemporary conflicts from the First Gulf War to today, artists, photographers and filmmakers join the flow, starting with Jean Renoir, continuing through with Robert Capa, Man Ray, visual artist Jananne Al-Ani, and Sophie

Ristelhueber's installation *Fait*, in which “..the flattened logic of the fact mingles with the unspooling history of the photographic artifact to generate the disturbances of time and space of wartime aftermaths.”

The book format precludes actual reading of the many maps instanced but the fulsome references enable originals or larger copies to be found. The book is well designed and fully indexed making it a valuable resource for interdisciplinary study and discussion.

* Matteo Ramelli's 'theatre of machines' (Valleriani in 'Mapping Spaces: Networks of Knowledge in 17th Century Landscape Painting', Gehring & Weibel (eds), p319, reviewed LDR Sept 2015)

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