

# The Map as biography: thoughts on Ordnance Survey Map, Six-inch Sheet Devonshire CIX, SE, Newton Abbot

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I am not a collector in the normal sense of that word though I sometimes buy and treasure maps for very personal reasons. The Ordnance Survey six-inch to one mile sheet which I will describe is such a map. Like a familiar book or an album of family photographs, I am able to read it as a text whose image has meaning because it brings to the mind's eye landscapes, events, and people from my own past. Personal identity is always implicated in the maps we collect. Sometimes their value is more emotional than monetary and if pleasure in collecting is also aesthetic and intellectual, it is because maps can draw from the roots of our own experience. We read them as transcriptions of ourselves.

My map – like any map – is biography in four senses. First, the map sheet itself has a biography as a physical object designed, crafted and used in a different age. Second, the map serves to link us to the biographies of its makers – draughtsmen, labourers, printers and surveyors who worked to reproduce its image. Third, the map is a biography of the landscape it portrays; a biography, moreover – as F. W. Maitland put it – ‘more eloquent than would be many paragraphs of written discourse’. Fourth, and of most value to me as collector, the map reciprocates my own biography. It is a rich vein of personal history, and it gives a set of co-ordinates for the map of memory. Let me say a little about these four *personae* of my map.

Devonshire sheet CIX, SE is a very ordinary map, and I do not seek to justify it as a work of art, ponder its aesthetics, nor to check a price index to gauge its rarity or value. Indeed, it is like hundreds of thousands of other paper maps produced in the industrial revolution of large-scale mapping in Great Britain. Measuring twelve by eighteen inches, it was printed in black and white at the Ordnance Survey Office in Southampton by a technique known as heliographic. A few genealogical facts are provided in carefully lettered imprints at the bottom of the map. These tell us that it was surveyed in 1885-6, at a larger scale of twenty-five inches to one mile and then reduced, to be further revised in 1904. Sometimes I wonder why cartobibliographers fuss so much about seemingly identical maps but for the pernickety it can be said that it was reprinted on seven occasions in the 1920's and 1930's, in batches of fifty, seventy-five, and of one hundred and fifty.

So my own copy can hardly claim to be the only extant example of this sheet. Many of those reprinted copies will now have been discarded. Others will have found a home in a national, county or local library, in an office of a land agent or solicitor or, perhaps, in a private collection. The uniqueness of my particular sheet lies, thus, not in its rarity, but in the history of how it has been used, understood, and acted upon. To judge from its mint condition, it was a late developer in the world

of action. It must have spent most of the half century since its final printing in 1935 in some Ordnance Survey dépôt, waiting long for the moment when it would be handled, read, traced and understood. Perhaps it was a duplicate, trapped at the bottom of a pile. Then it was made redundant, like doubtless many of the men and women who originally made such maps. Conversion of the large-scale series to metric scales and, later, to the even greater indignity of mere digital co-ordinates, led to quantities of these maps being given away by the Ordnance Survey to worthy recipients. It was after the trauma of this cartographic diaspora that I acquired Sheet CIX, SE. Now freed from the steel prison of some map chest, it adorns the wall of a lived-in room, where it has a gilded frame. It is next to the supply of cocktails so that the only member of the Charles Close Society living in Milwaukee can toast the centenary of its original birth.

So much for the map's own biography. It is the collective biographies of many such maps, suitably generalised, that gives substance to the history of cartography. Of the biographies of the makers of this particular sheet, however, there is less to say. Unlike many earlier Ordnance Survey maps, Sheet CIX, SE presents an anonymous face. We know little, in a personal sense, about the draughtsmen, photographers, and printers who routinely translated the discomforts of field work into such an elegant map image. Equally, not much can be said about the surveyors into whose notebooks the details of the Devon landscape, together with its placenames and the boundaries, were so meticulously entered. On the sheet itself no clues are offered as to the identity of the men, a small party of military engineers and their civilian assistants whose arrival in a Devonshire town towards the end of Queen Victoria's reign would have aroused local curiosity. We can speculate how they were gazed upon – ‘foreigners’ to a Devonshire mind – as they set up their theodolite at street corners, dragged the chain along pavements and stony lanes, levelled the relief of the two hills that overlook the little town, and chiselled Bench Marks for altitudes on the cornerstones of buildings or on limestone walls. We can speculate, too, how – out in the countryside and despite the printed forms that gave the surveyors legal right of entry to private property – a confrontation with an occasional irate farmer might have been sparked off as much by general rumours of a growing bureaucratic threat from Whitehall as by the immediate act of trespass by the government mappers.

As a biography of some six square miles of Devonshire countryside where I lived from 1969 to 1986, however, Sheet CIX, SE is much less reticent. Here the map is a transcription of culture and of individual endeavour as well as a datum line in the social history of a landscape made by ordinary men and

women. Its scale and modest size convey well the intimate character of the hand-made world of the nineteenth century. By good fortune in the lottery of sheet lines, the small town of Newton Abbot stands squarely in the centre of my map frame. Founded as a market borough in the thirteenth century and set between the older parishes of Highweek and Wolborough, Newton Abbot's medieval core can be detected in the layout of its streets. In the rural areas beyond – and every field, fence, trackway, farm and cottage, wood and waste is shown – the map reveals the traces of an even older England. But by 1886, the landscape was increasingly hostage to Victorian values. Like some cinematographic still, Sheet CIX, SE reproduces images of work, of the railway age, of the doctrine of *laissez faire*, and of the consequences for local communities of a society divided by class. So, the largest public buildings on the map, shown in black, are the railway station of Brunel's Great Western line, where Bradshaw served as the guide, and the Union Workhouse, where the poor had no need of a six-inch map. Yet even if these social divisions are muted in the map, with its help we can experience the rapid changes that were transforming the Victorian town. Spartan lines of 'decent' terraces, jerry-built to house the influx of railway workers, and the scatter of gracious, gardened, villas that accommodated a more prosperous middle class stand out clearly in its social geography. Yet in this sense cartography also deceives. The monotonies of the map, with a false egalitarianism, give the same weight to poor and rich alike, and to both industry and the topography of pleasure. We should not forget that in the mills, foundries, engineering works and in the claypits and quarries the labouring men and artisans of Newton Abbot were creating wealth for the few. But there is perhaps a softer image too. A cricket ground and its pavilion, parks, footpaths, a river and its estuary, hint at enjoyments in common on long summer Sunday afternoons when India was still the jewel of the crown and Newton Abbot was almost part of the workshop of the world.

Then, finally, there is the personal biography that lies hidden in the map. Sheet CIX, SE triggers for its present owner the memory of events lived in that place. Personal experiences and cumulative associations give to its austere lines and measured alphabets yet another set of unique meanings. Even its white spaces are crowded with thoughts as I whimsically reflect on its silences. Hung in a room of novels, poetry and music, the map ceases to be solely a document of social relevance or the utilitarian product of government policy: it is there to be read as a personal history, an affirmation that I still belong. To touch these English roots through my map, I have no need of recourse to characteristic sheets, to mathematical grids and graticules or representative fractions, nor do I require an opisometer to repace the pathway across the hill. Sheet CIX, SE is now transformed into a subjective symbol of place, scanned without the artifice of geometry, measured by eye without questioning its accuracy, and understood without awareness of its technical pedigree. The map is interpreted through the private code of memory.

Living for so long in such a small town allowed me to walk over much of the space shown on the map. Every square inch of its paper landscape remains so familiar that it can be read at random, and almost sensed in sleep. Its place-names are not just a roll call of neighbourhoods, but of people, some now dead, others still crossing and recrossing the town's pavements and squares and the fields of the countryside. In such a way, the map has become a graphic autobiography; it restores time to memory and it recreates for the inner eye the fabric and seasons of a former life.

The associations are often quite specific. Two of the schools on the map were attended by my children. Streets are not just the thoroughfares of busy market days but are punctuated with public houses where we can debate whether beer was stronger in Victorian England than it is today. Here is the field, the same as in 1886, with a spring and an old quarry, where a dog romped as children played. Here, too, is the lane where – not long ago – I met a woman on a summer evening: the overgrown wall of her orchard is marked on the map. And there is the trackway that led to All Saints' Church in Highweek Village and now to thoughts of my daughter's wedding. But this is also the place of sadness. The ashes of my wife and son lie buried against a north wall of that churchyard:

'So, the map revives her words, the spot, the time,  
And the thing we found we had to face before  
The next year's prime.'

In these lines of Thomas Hardy, I feel the losses of my own family, and I have also remembered them through a map.

It is thus possible to commune with the maps we collect. I have brought with me to the shore of Lake Michigan a few square miles of English life and landscape: with this talisman I can set foot on the Devonshire soil beneath sheet CIX, SE whenever I choose. The map encompasses not so much a topography as an autobiography. No price can be put on this image of a familiar landscape and the river of life that runs through it. Yet to retrace my steps across the map is far more than a sentimental journey. To rediscover one's own past from afar is to know it better. And, finally, I begin to understand how T. S. Eliot could write:

'... and the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.'

Till other landscapes and their maps crowd it out, this will remain my favourite map.

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