

October Geography Report

by Jane Harrison

Professor Alastair Bonnett, of Newcastle University, gave a fascinating and amusing talk on “The Mapped and the Unmapped”. He is the author of several atlases but is also well-known for his work on Racism and the Geography of Nostalgia. His books have been translated into 19 languages.

Alastair presented a selection of maps to challenge our conceptions about them and how we perceive the world through them. Many early maps convey a sense of identity and belonging to a particular place. One of the earliest known maps, dated to the Neolithic, was found at Çatalhöyük, in Turkey, and appears to show the settlement and the twin volcanic cones of Mount Hasan. A much later, beautiful 3D ‘stick chart’ from the Marshall Islands, used curving palm fronds and cowrie shells to show the relative positions of the islands and the directions of the currents.

Maps are used for navigation even more widely today as people use smartphones. Maps can now be collaborative: Open Street Map is an example. We may expect maps to be objective, but maps often reflect the political interests and influence of their consumers. Google’s maps of Kashmir, for example, show different borders for Indian and Pakistani markets. Some places are excluded from Google Street View. Hollywood celebrities pay for their streets to become invisible whilst the shanty towns of the poor are often forgotten. If you are unmapped, how is sanitation planned or the fire service dispatched? Humanitarian Open Street Maps help to map cities such as Monrovia in Liberia.

Cartographic imagination has also grown. Some maps are now so complex that they are difficult to comprehend. A map of Shinjuku Station, in Tokyo, which tried to give a 3D view of the many different levels, entrances, and platforms was utterly bewildering.

Maps today are also used as tools for communication and research. One map showed the spatial dimensions of the relationship between Douglas Fir trees and Rhizopogon fungi. Another showed the potential of astro (or planetary) mapping showing the relief of Olympus Mons on Mars, which is a mountain the size of Poland.

When it got to question time, we were curious to know about the Geography of Nostalgia. Alastair explained that memories and a yearning for the past are often linked to places of significance in childhood. We also learnt a new word “cartocacoethes” – an urge or compulsion to see maps everywhere!

Next meeting: Thursday 18th January at 2.10pm in the Witham. Details to be confirmed. (There is no meeting in December)