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Review of The Cartography of North America, 1500-1800

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The Cartography of North America, 1500-1800.

By Pierluigi Portinaro and Franco Knirsch.
Revised and translated from the Italian
edition. New York: Facts on File, 1987.
Introduction, illustrations, biographical
notes, and index. 320 pp. \$60.00.

The main attraction of this stunning book is the series of 171 full color reproductions of many of the most important maps of North America fashioned by cartographers from 1500 to 1800. Each plate is accompanied by a brief description. The book also includes brief introductory essays on the history of cartography, the production of old maps, and a survey of North American exploration. These chapters include additional illustrations, many in color.

The reproductions begin with the well-known portolan of Juan de la Cosa of 1500, the first representation of the New World known to exist, and continue through the work of distinguished cartographers such as Martin Waldseemüller, Sebastian Münster, Gerard Mercator, Ortelius, Guillaume de l'Isle, Nicolas Bellin, and Antonio Zatta. Because the book translates the work of Italian scholars, we can understand the disproportionate representation of Italian cartographers in the final section.

Throughout the three centuries treated here, mapmaking was much more than mere representation of scientific knowledge. Maps were works of art and they often represented triumphs of imagination. If reliable knowledge was in short supply, as it often was, cartographers frequently supplied the lack by inserting features that seemed logical or appropriate. For example, in 1778 Antonio Zatta produced a map that depicts a majestic mountain range stretching north along the western shore of Lake Michigan. Nor did cartographers always feel obligated to seek out and chart the latest discoveries. Thus, startling myths and misrepresentations persisted, sometimes for decades after more accurate information was available.

Examples of rampant cartographic error

include the notion that California was an island, that the Strait of Juan de Fuca led to a huge interior *Mer de l'Ouest* covering much of what is British Columbia and Washington, or that extravagant northwest passages such as the Strait of Anian led through the continent to the Orient. Sometimes cartographers perpetuated misinformation supplied by explorers, among them Lahontan's 1703 report of a *Longue Riviere* and its series of connected lakes on the northern Great Plains.

In general, this is a captivating book. It documents the gradual accretion of geographic information and cartographic skills over three centuries. It demonstrates how little was known of the northwestern quadrant of North America, especially in comparison to South America. As several world maps included in the book reveal, only Australia rivaled Alaska and western Canada as *terra incognita* as late as 1800.

The quality of the reproductions is excellent, though not outstanding. Inevitably some maps are hard to read because they are greatly reduced from their original size. The index is inadequate and the editing is weak. But map buffs will not be detracted. The deficiencies of this book are heavily outweighed by its virtues.

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