

Schulten, S. (2001),
The Geographical Imagination in America, 1880-1950,
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“Give me a map”, wrote Christopher Marlowe in his 1587 epic *Tamburlaine the Great*, “and let me see how much is left for me to conquer all the world.” Three centuries on, Englishmen visualized their empire cartographically, with conquests extending around the globe colored red. The geographical and imperial imagination has worked just as strongly in the United States. In 1898, U. S. President William McKinley scurried to a geography text seeking a map to envision the U. S. Navy’s entry into Manila Bay in the Philippines. An eager public, meanwhile, consumed cartographic products in increasing numbers, laying out maps on their dining tables, hanging them on the walls of their homes, and studying them in store windows. In the process they, like McKinley, followed the course of U. S. empire.

The power of the geographical imagination and the links between geography and power are the subject of Susan Schulten’s superb book, *The Geographical Imagination in America, 1880-1950*. Across nine clearly written and concise chapters, Schulten examines the relationship between geography, cartography, and the situatedness of the United States in the wider world as evidenced in the development of mass market cartography, the rise and phenomenal success of *National Geographic* magazine, and the transformation of the discipline of geography in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While the book is too complex and nuanced to be summarized so neatly, the main thrust of the work is captured nicely in Schulten’s discussion of the rise and fall (and persistence) of the Mercator projec-

tion: it reveals “how political, cultural and social imperatives have shaped ideas about geography and space, and how these ideas have in turn influenced American history and culture.” [3]

There is much to commend here and a review of this length cannot even begin to do justice to the breadth of topics covered and the complexity and nuance with which such issues are discussed. Yet if one prominent motif rises to the fore quite early, it is the following: the story of the geographical imagination in the United States is inextricable from another story, that of the rise of the United States as a global and imperial power. Indeed it is two wars that temporally bracket the book: the Spanish-Cuban-American War of 1898 and World War II. The story of U. S. geography – both academic and popular – is the story of the rise of U. S. empire. Whether it be the science of academic geography or the popular Geography of *National Geographic*, both were intimately connected to, and the latter’s success was dependent upon, U. S. expansion.

As Schulten deftly shows, strategic and commercial interests were the midwives to the birth of university geography departments at the end of the nineteenth century, a relationship exemplified by the fact that the University of Pennsylvania’s geography department was founded as a part of its Wharton School of Finance. At the same time, the discipline served to legitimate U. S. expansion in two ways. First, Schulten notes that, unlike history textbooks at the time, geography texts were almost unanimous in endorsing U. S. expan-

sion. And second, the discipline as a whole, although adopting pretensions to scientificity and political neutrality, assumed as givens the socially-constructed categories (i.e., race and environment) that served to validate U. S. imperial aims. Similarly, the work of the *National Geographic* magazine intersects powerfully with the rise of U.S. hegemony. For example, Schulten points to the ways in which the magazine's text and images stressed anthropological concepts –such as the timelessness and boundedness of discrete cultures—that dovetailed nicely with the universalist claims and pretensions of U. S. administration defending dubious activities in the world. In places such claims strikingly resemble the intellectual positions of mid-century modernization theorists. In a caption from a 1917 photograph showing three young white girls from the United States walking, the magazine claimed they were "just plain Americans with no strange customs." [166] In the age of empire and mass consumption, culture and custom were themselves synonymous with the exotic and the primitive.

By World War II, the geographical imagination had shifted again, this time toward the field of geopolitics. Particularly interesting here is Schulten's examination of the rhetorical structures of mid-twentieth century maps. She sharply shows how the *Goode's School Atlas* and the homolosine projection situated the U. S. "more fully in the world" [195] and disrupted the geographical imagination of the U. S. reading public. So too did the popular cartographic projects of Richard Edes Harrison which reconfigured the public's understanding of the geographical relations between the western and eastern hemispheres. In both instances we get a wonderfully rich analysis of how no maps, even the current "objective"

products of science, are ideologically neutral.

This is a remarkable book. Schulten is a sophisticated and articulate historian, one able to avoid the many pitfalls that can plague histories of representation. She is adept at examining images with a sharp eye for details and idiosyncrasies and at the same time at writing a broader social, cultural, and political history of geography and cartography. Particularly impressive are her efforts to understand the reception and consumption of texts and images rather than just focusing on their production and textual deconstruction. She wrestles admirably with the dialectical nature of the geographical imagination, of how geographical texts and products condition consumers yet at the same time are shaped by those consumers. She also nicely avoids one-dimensional explanations for change in the geographical imagination and disciplinary practices. In chapter two, for example, in tracking how cartography shifts from a craft to an industry after the Civil War, Schulten connects such shifts not only to the economic and territorial expansion of the United States but also to technological changes in map production. Similarly in her last chapter she avoids any easy readings of Harrison's maps, showing that they could be viewed from an array of perspectives, from those of the most ardent hawk to those of the most humanistic internationalist. Her analysis of *National Geographic* magazine, and its eponymous institution, is wonderfully comprehensive and subtle, providing a much more contextualized reading of the magazine than previous studies and is worth the price of the book alone.¹ Part of the success of Schulten's book comes from the fact that, despite the extensive research and sophisticated analyses, she does not claim too much nor does she force her evidence to

conform to a preconceived argument. This is a refreshingly carefully argued and reasoned text.

The book is not without its flaws. Domestic politics and social realities get short shrift in the book in comparison to international politics. Moreover, it would have been useful for Schulten to situate developments in U. S. geography not only in relation to the place of the United States in the world but also in relation to developments in the discipline and understanding of geography elsewhere. One thinks especially of France and England, which followed remarkably different intellectual (and political) trajectories and would have offered some interesting comparisons and contrasts, but also of Latin America where geographers understood and discussed race and its relation to geography in very different ways. Indeed she devotes very little space to how intellectual currents in geography and map making in other countries may have shaped the disciplines and practices in the U. S. One cannot help but get the sense that the U. S. functioned in intellectual isolation, an impression that inadvertently reasserts U. S. hegemony.

Such quibbles should not overshadow Schulten's remarkable achievement. Nor should it obscure the contemporary relevance of her book, which can hardly be overstated. The current administration of George W. Bush touts a geographical sensibility (and notions of

imperial absolutes and universality) strikingly similar to those of its predecessors in the 1890s. The repeated quotations Schulten marshals from geographers and U. S. officials in the pages of *National Geographic* regarding the moral task of freeing people from tyranny (and reaping the supposedly incidental rewards of trade, commerce, and resource control) could have come straight out of the current Bush administration's barrage of verbiage on Iraq. The assertions of Gilbert Grosvenor, one of *National Geographic*'s founding fathers, to the effect that American values were universal is likewise mirrored in the current administration's rhetoric with respect to their folly in Iraq, their discourse on terrorism, and their vacuous understanding of liberty. The analogies abound to the degree that, by the end of the book, one can hardly argue with Schulten's resounding indictment of U. S. geographical knowledge: it has worked conservatively, both by avoiding change and by functioning in the interest of U. S. power.

¹ See for example, C. A. Lutz and J. L. Collins (1993), *Reading National Geographic*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Raymond B. Craib
Cornell University