

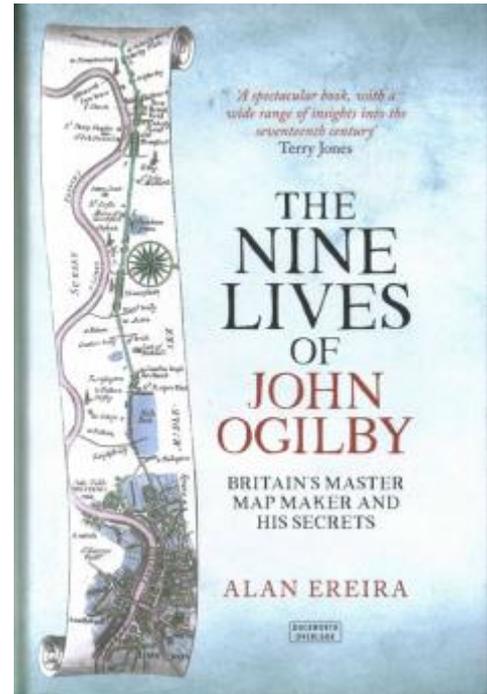
Alan Ereira

***The Nine Lives of John Ogilby:
Britain's Master Map Maker
and His Achievements***

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Bob Gilbert

bob.gilber122@gmail.com



One of the luminaries of Livingmaps, I recently learned, ran away to sea in his youth and became a trawlerman. Another spent some of his earlier years developing community arts projects in the East End. Contemporary cartography may, for all I know, be packed with such interesting characters but they would have a long way to go to match the colourful life story of John Ogilby, the seventeenth century map-maker who rose to the position of Charles II's Royal Cosmographer.

At the age of eleven he was already a professional dancer and performing at court. When an accident cut short this career he sought out another, becoming by turns a dancing teacher, a sea captain and a soldier and part-time spy, including a spell as a prisoner of war in Dunkirk. Moving to Ireland he became a theatre impresario, opening Dublin's first theatre, and when this fell apart, he returned to England, surviving both shipwreck and arrest, to become a poet, one who had the dubious distinction of being satirised by both Dryden and Pope. Belatedly learning Latin and Greek he published his own translations of Ovid and Virgil before turning to the publishing of scientific and mathematical works, during which period he also happened to serve as pageant master for the coronation of Charles II.

You might be forgiven at this point for wondering where the cartography comes in. Indeed, if you were reading the book you would have to get through 172 pages and eight chapters before learning that his work as a publisher led him to the production of atlases and eventually to his most famous publication *Britannia*, now hailed as the precursor of the modern road atlas.

This intriguing life story, set as it is against a backdrop of rebellion, civil war, conspiracy, upheaval and plague, is painstakingly researched and set out in detail (sometimes too much detail) by Alan Ereira. Interesting he certainly was, and reputedly charming too, but for all that Ogilby does not come across as a likeable man. His multiple careers seem to have had a single motivation - his own advancement alongside that of the royalist cause. His ardent support for the monarchy permeates the whole story and provides an interpretation for many of his actions. While he is in Ireland, for example, he secretly joins the service of the Lord Lieutenant and, suggests Ereira, is involved in the efforts to raise an Irish Catholic army in support of the king. Back in England during the Commonwealth, and while building a new life

for himself as a translator, he raises the subscriptions to his books from secret royalist sympathisers and his choice of subject matter, the *Eclogues* and the *Aeneid*, contain coded messages on the inevitable return of the monarchy. Ogilby was, in fact, not just a royalist but a believer in an absolutist monarchy and in the divine right of kings. It is in this context that the meaning of *Britannia* should be seen.

It is to *Britannia* that the second half of Ereira's book is devoted. The Commonwealth has collapsed, the monarchy has been restored and Charles II is now on the throne. But the struggles between king and parliament continue. Parliament remains jealous to preserve its powers while the king would like to sweep them away and to return to the absolutist monarchy of the past and of many of his European contemporaries. What stops him is his dependence on parliament's revenue-raising powers. It is a time of plotting and counter-plotting culminating in the secret Treaty of Dover, in which the king agrees to convert to Catholicism in return for financial assistance from the French that will do away with his need for a parliament. The French will even send in an army, if necessary, to crush any resistance. It is in this feverish atmosphere that Ogilby is commissioned to produce *Britannia*.

Britannia is not an atlas in the conventional sense. Rather, it sets out in a linear fashion the routes that link significant parts of the country, showing settlements, resources and main features along the way. It maps more than 7,500 miles along 43 routes, all of which were walked and measured by Ogilby and his team. It is the first time that mapmaking has been carried out on this scale and with such a scientific approach to measurement, and in the layout of his routes you can almost see the origins of the Satnav. But it also raises intriguing questions of what is included, and, even more, of what is not. As Ereira points out, all but one of the routes depicted, lead, eventually, to harbours. Some link destinations along roads that do not actually exist whilst others, that do exist, are omitted entirely. Centres of population, and of manufacturing, such as Sheffield, Bradford and Wolverhampton simply do not appear in Ogilby's atlas. It seems that far from being an innocent road atlas, *Britannia* has a far more sinister purpose. It is, as Ereira argues, produced as a tool for the king and his secret plans. It sets out to evaluate the critical resources he will need and the routes to and from them. It sets out the economic potential of the kingdom and, above all, it details the routes and distances to harbours that would assist in the invasion and rapid movement of French or Irish troops.

The flaw in the theory is Liverpool. Ereira devotes a whole chapter to what he calls 'Eliminating Liverpool'. It is not just that it is absent from the atlas but that missing too are all the roads that lead to and from it. But since Liverpool was the port that linked directly to Dublin and for imports, its exclusion seems odd. Ereira's argument is that it was a source of opposition to the king and that he did not control its approaches. Its omission from the atlas was part of a bigger plan to break its power, to cut off its trade and to reduce it to helplessness. The aim, literally, was to wipe it from the map.

There is much to complain about in Ereira's book. His arguments are not always convincing, nor are they always easy to follow. His writing can be over-detailed, verbose, and irritatingly repetitive. He could have done, in short, with a much more rigorous editor. But what does come through is a startling lesson in the subjectivity of mapmaking. Despite the fact that *Britannia* is a major step forward in the scientific measurement and physical presentation of the map, it is crafted for a specific political purpose. 'It is obvious' says Ereira, 'that Ogilby did not think of his maps as slavish representations of geographic truth' and he goes on to pose the crucial question 'whose truth was being mapped?'

It is a question that has been relevant throughout the history of cartography. It applies to the imperial maps of colonial power, imposing administrative boundaries across tribes and nations. It applies to maps which excluded indigenous peoples or redefined land rights or

redrew the boundaries of Palestine. It applies to the modern OS maps which show the locations of major military confrontations but not of mass popular campaigns. It is a question that is even more relevant today as satellite mapping and digital technologies make a supposedly mimetic mapmaking seem ever more possible. It is the consideration of this question, even more than the colourful life of John Ogilby himself, that makes this book worth reading.