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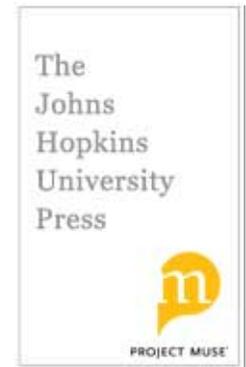
Masters of All They Surveyed: Exploration, Geography, and a
British El Dorado (review)

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Book Reviews

D. Graham Burnett. *Masters of All They Surveyed: Exploration, Geography, and a British El Dorado*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. xv + 298 pp. \$45.00, \$27.50 paper.

In the opening pages of his book, Graham Burnett makes clear what is at stake: “colonial territory came into being as a result of the passage of certain individuals—explorers and surveyors—who made distant land possessable by means of a set of powerful linked texts. Diplomats explored those texts, not jungles, to see who had a right to what” (p. 2). The rest of *Masters of All They Surveyed* is a detailed study of how European mapmakers transformed the land into landscape and nature into culture, making a terra incognita into a mapped and bounded colony of British Guiana. Most of the book is focused on the work of Sir Robert Schomburgk, who mapped the interior and boundaries of the British colony from 1841 to 1844. While Burnett engages with fine historical details of the exploration of Guiana, the strength of this work is his ability to move from particulars to larger theoretical and cultural issues regarding the creation and reading of maps.

Burnett is concerned with what Bruno Latour calls the “immutable mobile” in his essay “Drawing Things Together” (in *Representations of Scientific Practice*, ed. Mike Lynch and Steve Woolgar [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990], pp. 19–68). Maps are mobile representations of a space since they are easily transported from place to place, unlike the things they represent—actual soil, vegetation, and bodies of water. Maps are also immutable: distant places and instances of time are gathered together in a unified and static representation legible to a select audience. Latour explains this power of inscriptions: “You doubt what I say? I’ll show you.’ And, without moving more than a few inches, I unfold in front of your eyes figures, diagrams, plates, texts, silhouettes, and then and there present things that are far away and with which some sort of two-way connection has now been established. I do not think the importance of this simple mechanism can be over-

estimated" (Latour, p. 36). Burnett shows the difficulty of establishing a two-way connection between map and land, and what is gained for the colonizer by the panoptic inscription that such mapping entails.

In the nineteenth century, trigonometric surveys with their scientific objectivity marked the cartographic ideal of British mapping. Such ventures transform the land into a landscape of ordered space through "coordination, uniformity, hierarchical organization, administrative order, and the rule of transcendental law" (p. 9). Burnett contrasts the trigonometric surveying in parts of India (as described by Mathew Edney's *Mapping the Empire*), and in Great Britain's national ordinance survey (in Lloyd Arnold Brown's *Story of Maps*), to the traverse survey used by Schomburgk in British Guiana. Unlike the trigonometric survey, with its coordinated sets of large teams creating triangulated points and countercheck points to capture space between their measuring chains, the work of a traverse survey is done by a small mobile exploration team. The traversing team must create landmarks where it can, and often amid adverse circumstances. Then, beyond the problem of creating fixed points, Burnett finds a unique paradox of the explorer-surveyor: in his traverse of the land, the surveyor must mark the boundaries of the empire while engaged in the act of transgressing these boundaries in the role of explorer expanding the territory. Unlike the "staged space" necessary to assemble empire, the traverse surveyor has mobile encounters with dynamic space. The problem of arriving at the cartographic ideal is eminently clear in Schomburgk's mapping of British Guiana, where he must struggle to create fixed points amid the overgrowth of jungles while seeking to explore and expand terrain. Furthermore, he must contend with economic hardships, uncharted terrain, and bouts of fever that interfere with the desired neatness of maps.

As Burnett explains in chapter 3, "Traversing Terra Incognita: Getting There and Making Maps," "traverse survey constituted a questionable source of geographical knowledge because it was inextricably entangled with a solitary and subjective explorer on a nomadic passage across difficult terrain" (p. 14). Because of the difficulties of subjectivity and terrain, surveyors tried to establish fixed points by astronomical observation and dead reckoning to enhance the reliability of the survey. The authenticity of a map depended upon instrumentation—sextants, almanacs, chronometers—as well as the surveyor's ability to invoke instrumental rhetoric. The land itself can tell us nothing; it is inscription, the use of instruments to scan, read, and quantify the land, that yields representation of a space. Schomburgk is a follower of the Humboldtian geographic program in which adherence to accurate fixed points became both a method and a discourse that validated the veracity of a map. The goal was to attain a reciprocity between chart and map similar to that achieved in naval navigation, such that "the computational quality of the nautical chart transformed a passage into a testable proposition inscribed in graphic form. This 'testability'—the computation that went into making the chart and those that could be made from it—afforded a powerful framework in which to assert the reliability of the positional fixes made on the traverse surveys" (pp. 103–104).

In order for a map to be meaningful or "testable," its abstract points have to be connected to a visible physical space on the ground, as Burnett explains in chapter 4, "Marks on the Land: Landmarks, Aesthetics, and the Image of the Colony." Surveyors created landmarks to bridge the gap between land and map. In the recalcitrant environment of British Guiana explorers had to create clear, stable, visible points by relying on multiple associations: historical, aesthetic, geological, and mythical. One means of helping the land and map to meet was

Schomburgk's *Twelve Views in the Interior of Guiana*, published in 1841. This lush book of color plates provided a graphic representation of place for elite subscribers in the colony and in Britain. The views worked between the formal demands of a map and of a picture by providing both meaningful information for the cartographer and a picturesque quality for aesthetic consumption. The views' accompanying narratives by Schomburgk completed a sense of place. The explorer and his illustrators provide exotic and poetic images of British Guiana, from the beauty of the *Victoria regia* (a flowering water plant named after the Queen) to the picturesque and sometimes even sublime views of Pirara, the site of El Dorado made famous by Sir Walter Raleigh's tale of a prince powdered in gold. The exotic and picturesque are further substantiated by Schomburgk's references to Arabian tales, Sir Walter Scott, and Cowper's poem *The Task*.

Chapter 5 details how the explorer's material engagement with the land remains at odds with the attempt to create an abstract and transcendental overview. As Burnett explains, "The landmark might anchor the surveyor's fixed points, but only by sublating local space within the global context of the cartographic field could the map achieve its authority, becoming an overview instead of merely a view" (p. 167). The explorer's view and his notable landmarks could be repatriated through cycles of representation back in England. The image serves as a sort of homecoming by which the travails of the exploration are flattened onto a legible surface for the admiring public at home. Appropriations of the landmarks often erased the idiosyncrasies of the explorer's experience. For example, in *Twelve Views*, at Christmas Cataracts the death of one of Schomburgk's team is reread as a moment of the sublime in which the wonder of nature and the burial of the body serve as markers of the landscape.

It is not until chapter 6 that Burnett provides a more detailed narrative of Schomburgk's four-year project of mapping the interior of the colony and its borders. It is in this chapter that the details of the tension between surveyor and explorer are most clear. In his traverse survey, Schomburgk uses expansive, nomadic, and boundary-transgressing techniques to demarcate broad and often ambiguous boundaries. For example: "Over the four years the boundary had moved from the right bank of the Rupununi, to that river's western watershed (a line between the Rupununi and the Takutu), and then again right up to the right bank of the Takutu itself. All were abundantly natural; none was a natural boundary" (p. 211). Expanding concentric boundaries show the evolution of Schomburgk's ambition and manifest the tension between his exploration and surveying duties. The task of determining the physical boundaries of British Guiana continued into the twentieth century, as outlined in Burnett's concluding chapter. Disputes between British Guiana and neighboring Brazil and Venezuela were determined not at the sites in dispute but in Europe, by diplomats looking at the history of cartographic representations. It is the representation that creates the nation. Likewise, when Britain ceded control of the territory, the British were not giving the terrain back to the people of British Guiana: the geographical construct of the nation had existed only for the colonizers. Postcolonial states inherit a colonial codification of land and its ideal limits.

Masters of All They Surveyed brings into question much that is taken for granted about inscription and visual representation. Its detailed historical account of British Guiana from Sir Walter Raleigh through Schomburgk and into the twentieth century, and its smart integration of theories of mapping from J. B. Harley to Barbara Belyea, make this work immensely valuable to anyone studying cartography, colonization, and visual representation. Burnett dislodges maps of British

Guiana from their place as immutable mobiles, making them instead problem signifiers of British Empire.

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Michael E. Hobart and Zachary S. Schiff. *Information Ages: Literacy, Numeracy, and the Computer Revolution*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998. xiii + 301 pp. \$29.95 cloth.

N. Katherine Hayles. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999. xiv + 350 pp. \$18.00 paper.

There are already several excellent histories of informatics, a term covering the disciplinary matrix of theories, technologies, and cultural relations of information. Despite the chronology implied in their titles, Michael E. Hobart and Zachary S. Schiff's *Information Ages* and N. Katherine Hayles's *How We Became Posthuman* are not histories of this sort, or not simply so. The fascination and success of both these books, to a greater or lesser degree, lies in their reflexive implication of information in the very possibility of history: these are not only histories of information, but instances of informatics as history. Hobart and Schiff offer a much-needed historicizing of the concept of information, while Hayles once again sets the standard for science and technology studies with an informed account of our becoming-virtual. Both books arrive at certain logical impasses, which are less shortcomings than illuminations of the nonintersection of history and information theory.

Information Ages is the more ambitious in historical scope as well as in trans-disciplinary ambitions. Written against the grain of proclamations that the contemporary is the "information age," the target is the immediacy of the present: the sense that pretechnological, preinformatic history culminates in our age of information and information technologies. We use information as a metaphor that appears to grasp all that can be known, a "general principle of organized phenomena" (p. 3) from social systems to subatomic quarks. Hobart and Schiff displace this self-understanding for a scheme of "information ages" in the plural. In doing so, they trace the changing semantics of information, establishing the historical a priori for the contemporary information age. The book is driven by classification, already evident in the tripartite schema of the subtitle: three information ages (classical, modern, contemporary), each exemplified by a technology (writing, print, computers), and by certain essential features (wisdom and classification, knowledge and analysis, technique and play). This classifying mode is further reinforced by textbook-like examples of characteristic problems and methods from each information age, whether the basics of Aristotelian logic, differential calculus, or computer programming. This is one of the virtues of the book—which indeed reads as a textbook, relegating scholarly apparatus to a bibliographical essay at the end and focusing on a fluid and persuasive presentation of the narrative of the history of information. No new research is offered; the purpose is synthetic and didactic, a constellation of materials as proof of its history of information.