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“The Ordnance Survey’s earlier years”

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The Charles Close Society was founded in 1980 to bring together all those with an interest in the maps and history of the Ordnance Survey of Great Britain and its counterparts in the island of Ireland. The Society takes its name from Colonel Sir Charles Arden-Close, OS Director General from 1911 to 1922, and initiator of many of the maps now sought after by collectors.

The Society publishes a wide range of books and booklets on historic OS map series and its journal, *Sheetlines*, is recognised internationally for its specialist articles on Ordnance Survey-related topics.

## ***The Ordnance Survey's earlier years: a new history***

***Richard Oliver***

*The Ordnance Survey in the nineteenth century: maps, money and the growth of government* is a book that I wanted to write, from back in my teens, yet hadn't particularly expected to, at any rate until comparatively recently and in the form that it has taken.<sup>1</sup> When making my slow acquaintance with pre-1920 Ordnance Survey mapping I was particularly fascinated by the six-inch mapping of Yorkshire and the one-inch mapping derived from it, of the 1840s and 1850s: there seemed a certain mystery to be penetrated. I unravelled some of it in an unpremeditated way, when an undistinguished school career was offset by a better-than-expected degree in history, and the chance to combine an interest in the nineteenth century with an interest in maps. The result was a doctoral thesis on the Ordnance Survey in the middle third of the nineteenth century, which was completed in 1985, but persistently failed to be turned into a book.<sup>2</sup> Most doctoral theses don't make it as books, but they usually generate several articles. Mine contributed something to the last three volumes of the Harry Margary one-inch Old Series venture, but there is a lot in those volumes that isn't in my thesis, and vice-versa.<sup>3</sup>

What I intended to do with my thesis was to publish it largely as it stood, but with an additional chapter on details of mapping. This was because the thesis was substantially about the Ordnance Survey as an organisation, and how it came to develop from a hole-and-corner affair producing one-inch maps to an industrial concern dominated by 1:2500 mapping, rather than about map content. The book is still decidedly short on map content, but for the one-inch much of what it might have contained can be found in the study of the engraved one-inch family from the 1840s onwards that Roger Hellyer and I published in 2009.<sup>4</sup> For the larger scales treatment is still fragmentary, despite what I have drawn together in my *Concise Guide*: there is so much that still awaits exploration.<sup>5</sup> As it is, the decision to extend the thesis to cover the 'long nineteenth century' from 1783 to 1914 grew out the work on the 'introductory essay' – about 105,000 words of it – for *Engraved maps*. For 'Margary Eight', covering northern England, I could rely for background on my thesis: for anything more recent – after 1870 – there would be nothing for it but further exploration. And if there was to be enough

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Oliver, *The Ordnance Survey in the nineteenth century: maps, money and the growth of government*, London: Charles Close Society, 2014, hardback, ISBN 978-1-870598-32-3.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Oliver, 'The Ordnance Survey in Great Britain, 1836-1870', unpublished University of Sussex D.Phil. thesis, 1986. The writer would like to think that this will be the last reference to it in print.

<sup>3</sup> Harry Margary, *The Ordnance Survey Old Series...*, Vols I-VIII, Lymington: Harry Margary, 1975-92: the writer's contributions can be found in Vols VI (1992), VII (1990) and VIII (1991).

<sup>4</sup> Roger Hellyer & Richard Oliver, *One-inch engraved maps of the Ordnance Survey from 1847*, London: Charles Close Society, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Oliver, *Ordnance Survey maps: a concise guide for historians*, 1993; third edition, London: Charles Close Society, 2013.

background for the one-inch, why not do the job properly, and go the whole hog?

So the ‘whole hog’ is a book of over 600, instead of 350 to 400 pages, and it goes far beyond the maps to cover the politics of the Ordnance Survey. The original thesis did this, and explained the coming of the 1:2500 as a consequence of an interest in the 1850s in value-for-money in government spending: the 1:2500 might cost about four times as much per square mile as the one-inch, but the indications were that it would be more than four times as useful. By 1900 the Ordnance Survey was a department that seemed to be falling still some way short of its potential, partly because mid-nineteenth century expectations of general land registration had not been fulfilled. Whilst ‘make once, use many times’ was justification for an all-purpose general survey, ‘buy once, use many times’ tended to depress sales, and thus the dividend on the investment. It would take the technology of data licensing to resolve that, long after 1914.

One of the motives for bringing the six-inch to Great Britain in 1840, and for continuing to produce that scale after the adoption of the 1:2500 in 1853-5, was as a suitable base for geological mapping, and hence economic development. Yet mapping the rocks progressed slowly, and the number of copies supplied to the Geological Survey represented a modest return for the sums expended on the topographic survey and its subsequent revision. Geology was at its most influential in the development of the OS between the 1830s and 1860s, and was an expression of faith in scientific discovery: it only needed the skill of the geologist to discover mineral wealth in areas that seemed otherwise remote from any prospect of industrialisation. By 1880 geology had developed sufficiently to indicate that there was no likelihood of coal and iron ore in such places as East Anglia, and it would be a long time before many six-inch sheets bore geological markings.

Geology is one dimension of the nineteenth century Ordnance Survey that has been slow in receiving its due;<sup>6</sup> another is Ireland, at any rate in terms of its influence on the Survey in Britain. True, Ireland was something of an OS backwater between the mid 1840s and the later 1880s, but there would have been no six-inch in Britain had it not been for its successful use in Ireland after 1824, to facilitate land tax assessments rather than geology, and the dominant activity of the OS around 1900 was not the revision of the 1:2500 in Britain, but the remapping of Ireland at that scale. If in the 1840s many of those who were mapping Britain were Irishmen, then in the 1890s and 1900s many of those who were remapping Ireland were Britons. This is not something that has hitherto received attention, and the agitation for grading and pay structures that culminated in Lord Ilkeston’s investigation in 1910-11 seems to owe as much to Irish as to British influence. The remapping of Ireland at 1:2500 was itself part of the ultimately doomed attempt, by reforming landownership, to hold together the United Kingdom created in 1801.

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<sup>6</sup> An exception must be made for the late Roy Boud, who published a number of articles on the history of geological mapping, with its implications for the Ordnance Survey.

How far I may have been successful in telling the ‘political’ story of the Ordnance Survey must be left to others to judge. The semi-official history – ‘Seymour’ – of the OS that seemed to crawl into print in 1980, yet was actually a relatively quick job compared with my own work, has been criticised on a number of grounds, not least for an emphasis on administration rather than cartography.<sup>7</sup> In fact, a problem with ‘administration’ is that it often makes no sense without an understanding of wider politics; for better or worse, that means politics of party and class. The assumption of ‘neutrality’ that underlies the British public service may have great merits in promoting even-handedness, but it is of no help to wider study, particularly in an age that seems dominated by relativities rather than absolutes. ‘Seymour’ is generally rather lacking in politics. It is also wanting in illustrations: two are of atypical specimens of the map series purported to be illustrated, and there are no illustrations at all of any of the associated personalities.<sup>8</sup> With the assistance of Ordnance Survey, I have included portraits of all but one of the heads of the survey up to 1914: the exception is the first head, Colonel Williams, of whom no-one seems to know a likeness. I have also attempted to provide a reasonable sample of map specimens, including one or two that rarely seem to emerge into daylight. Had I stuck to my original scheme of publishing the thesis substantially as it stood, only monochrome would have been necessary; extension to 1914 justifies sixteen pages of colour.

A few of the illustrations are of non-OS mapping. This brings us to another problem: if the OS cannot be treated independent of politics, neither can it be treated independent of other mapping. For this reason there is a relatively substantial section on the tithe maps of *circa* 1837-51, and Greenwood, Bartholomew, Johnston and others are both more than mentioned, and illustrated. A difficulty here is that, whilst we can no longer complain of obscurities in OS history, it is quite another matter with unofficial cartography of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Even the Bartholomew half-inch, that unofficial standard Edwardian map, is not free of obscurity: who had the original concept? Likewise, how many of the tithe maps were derivatives of existing maps, now possibly lost, and how many represented new surveys? Until we have a better idea of such things, we will not know how much capacity there was to present a possible alternative to the Ordnance Survey.

I have attempted to ‘do something’ for the OS up to 1914; it remains to ‘do something similar’ for the next century. Strangely enough, although from about 1930 onwards OS internal material survives in abundance – which it doesn’t, at any rate in Britain, earlier on – external material seemingly does not: what were the politics leading to the appointment of the Davidson Committee in 1935, for instance? What was the convincing argument? And so it goes on...

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<sup>7</sup> WA Seymour (ed), *A history of the Ordnance Survey*, Folkestone: Dawson, 1980. The book was conceived in 1963.

<sup>8</sup> The ‘bad’ illustrations are plates 12 and 13.