

JOHN C BARTHOLOMEW (1923–2008) MA FRSE FRSGS FRGS: A Memory

My first encounter with John C Bartholomew was in June 1973 when he briefly visited the then Map Room of the National Library of Scotland on Edinburgh's George IV Bridge. I was new in post, and remember a tall, slim, elegant man, possessed of a natural air of distinction (though modestly shown) and with an old-world courtesy. I didn't then appreciate he was Honorary Map Curator of the Royal Scottish Geographical Society, a post he held for many years and, in that sense, a fellow curator and responsible for another of Scotland's finest map collections. I saw him only as Cartographic Director of John Bartholomew & Sons, a firm known all over the world, particularly for its long-honed mapmaking skills, its Half Inch Map Series and its association with The Times Atlas.

It was to be one of many fleeting encounters with him in my first ten years in Edinburgh, and I couldn't help observing even then his astonishingly retentive and detailed memory, his wish to know everything new about the Map Room and its staff (and to remember it) and the way in which his eye was immediately engaged by any map or atlas lying on a workplace nearby. Invariably, without being asked, he would give informed comment about it, be it early atlas or the latest map off a foreign production line. His informed comment contained full appreciation of the design (or remarks on the lack of it) as well as of the information content, particularly the rendering of the place names. He came over as a highly trained and superlatively knowledgeable cartographer and editor.

In 1984, to mark 25 years of its Map Room (one year late), the National Library of Scotland took the bold step of making its major summer exhibition a celebration of maps. Entitled, 'I'd Like A Map', it was the first time maps took the dominant role in a lengthy public exhibition in the National Library, thus selection and display had to be paramount. This formidable task fell to me. John, amongst others, was duly consulted about the selection as it was necessary to do justice to Scotland's major role in the production of maps and atlases, notably in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. But the Library also needed to display contemporary Scottish mapping and items from overseas, not least to illustrate the Scottish diaspora. John was of great help here and also acted as a sounding board for ideas on what to have as the 'Icon' for the exhibition poster. I remember him being very pleased when I decided upon the map of Treasure Island as being both novel and quintessentially Scottish, and he gave me a lengthy account of the Bartholomew input to this after the original manuscript map went missing somewhere between R L Stevenson and the publisher. Today, the original copper plate is lodged in the National Library.

Clearly, John was the right person to open the exhibition. The only snag was we had ordered a celebratory cake, iced with a rather good map of Scotland on its top. Would John really commit cartographic sacrilege and cut it up? He did, with much amusement, and Ian Kinniburgh, then a Deputy Director at Bartholomew's, recorded this in The Map Collector, Issue 29, December 1984, with a photograph of John cutting the cake to prove the point.

Between 1987 and 1993 John was President of the Royal Scottish Geographical Society, a role he took great pride and interest in, devoting much time to visiting all the Society's Centres throughout Scotland and encouraging young people through the Scottish Association of Geography Teachers and the Society's own educational programmes. He remained a Vice President to his death and, with Ginette, could be seen attending the Society's Annual Business Meeting, Dinner and its Edinburgh Centre Talks until his health no longer permitted.

After his very moving funeral service on 23 January, those present were invited to the Braid Hills Hotel, perched high on north-facing slopes to the south of the city, with splendid views across the Forth Estuary to the Kingdom of Fife. The Hotel is situated but some 200 yards from John's home, so after leaving it, something made me go a bit out of my way to travel along Braid Farm Road past his house. I couldn't resist putting my right hand up in salute as I drove past. John was a part of the Edinburgh cartographic and geographical scene for so long and in some measure his passing marks the final curtain of the city's illustrious era as a dominant world map-making centre. I am so glad to have known him.

Margaret Wilkes 27 January 2008

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