

John Bartholomew

Cartographer and publisher

Born: 15 January, 1923, in Edinburgh. Died: 16 January, 2008, in Edinburgh, aged 85.

JOHN Bartholomew, with his brothers, Peter and Robert, were the last generation of the Edinburgh cartographic family to run the business of John Bartholomew & Son Ltd. The trio maintained the firm among leading map publishers of the world until their retirement in 1980 after a buy-out by Reader's Digest.

When eldest brother John took over as cartographic director, the business was already a world leader, supplying maps and atlases to a global market. He took over as editor of the Times World Atlas from his father, also John, when company output included productions whose popularity never masked their scholarliness – Reader's Digest Atlas, Bartholomew's Concise Atlas, gazetteers and many school atlases.

Yet the business never lost the homely touch. Under John's direction, Bartholomews maintained and expanded a huge team of volunteer local "map revision officers" – cyclists and walkers who ranged across their particular patches of the UK submitting changes and alterations for the renowned "Revised half-inch contoured maps". For nearly a century, "Bart's half-inch" retained such a reputation for accuracy and detail that no touring cyclist would venture out on a run without a Bart's map stuffed into the rear pocket of his or her cycling vest.

John Christopher Bartholomew was both an academic and born explorer. Indeed, his parents, John and Belgian-born Marie Antoinette, included the whimsy of his middle name Christopher to recall Columbus. Educated at St Trinian's (source of Ronald Searle's legendary St Trinian's) and Edinburgh Academy, he became a contemporary of Prince Philip at Gordonstoun under headmaster Kurt Hahn.

Tall and slim with a white beard, Bartholomew cut an imposing if slightly ascetic figure. A geography graduate of Edinburgh University, he held a fascination for the natural sciences that lasted throughout his life. Astronomy,

meteorology, geology and oceanography formed for him the wider bounds of his beloved geography. Modest and quiet spoken, he loved to converse, and ranged easily across social scales. As president of the Royal Scottish Geographical Society, like his father and grandfather before him, he shared the company of astronaut Neil Armstrong and naturalist Sir David Attenborough.

His personal exploration cut across lands, libraries and faith. He travelled in six of the world's seven continents, his final expedition being a rugged camping trek at the age of 68 to Patagonia in January 1991 – after a hip replacement operation. He failed only in a lifelong ambition to reach Antarctica; indeed, he intended to apply to the British Antarctic Survey after graduating, but his father, suffering increasingly from arthritis, required his talents in the company.

Commissioned into the Royal Engineers at the outbreak of the Second World War, Bartholomew served in Palestine and Africa – mapping and surveying, of course. On one occasion, driving his colonel, he unceremoniously halted and, to the astonishment of his companions, had the temerity to order his commanding officer out of the vehicle and some paces ahead. Warily, the officer moved out. "You are now standing, Sir, exactly on the Equator," came Bartholomew's explanation.

His huge collection of books – almost all non-fiction and covering travel, earth and space sciences – was a source of constant reference. He'd sit on the balcony of his Braids home, referring to a book while scanning the night sky for a comet, or noctilucent cloud, the bright phenomena visible in deep twilight, forming bright colours in the mesosphere 50 miles above the surface of the earth.

His faith meant much. A spiritual man born into the Kirk, he was deeply knowledgeable of Christian Science and for a period was active in Moral Re-Armament before in 1954 being accepted into Roman Catholicism. To the end of his life, he remained motivated by matters ecumenical.

John Bartholomew & Son Ltd traces its roots back to George Bartholomew, born in 1784, an engraver apprenticed to Daniel Lizars in Edinburgh in 1797, and whose work covered engraving a map of Edinburgh of 1825. When Bartholomew graduated from Edinburgh University in 1951, his father insisted his son have experience in maps before taking a role in the family

business. So he served a cartographic apprenticeship.

He took active roles in a great many societies and organisations, and he retained interest in the John Bartholomew Award for Small-Scale Mapping, now sponsored by Collins Bartholomew. He took part in the judging almost to the end of his life.

The family through the company created an extensive reference library, with source information on atlases, maps and gazetteers of their own as well as those from rival UK and foreign publishers. This John Bartholomew Collection included an unrivalled set of antiquarian atlases, dating from 1525, built up over generations. In 1995, some 36 items in 53 volumes were donated by the family in memory of John Bartholomew senior (1890-1962). The Bartholomew Collection now runs to some 40m of shelf space.

His own collecting habits reflected his abilities as a communicator. He lectured and gave talks throughout his life, and was an in-demand pundit on cartography. In addition to his books, he leaves behind a minor mountain of newspaper cuttings, pamphlets, photocopies, handwritten notes and hand-drawn maps.

He bequeathed three physical legacies – an indicator for the summit of 612ft Berwick Law; with retired solicitor George Russell the initiation of a 360-degree hill indicator for the Braids (a two-ton piece of local basalt topped by a full-colour guide); and a sundial in Hermitage of Braid, next door to his home below the Pentlands.

He is survived by his wife, Ginette (née Achard-James), five sons, John Eric, Philip, Christopher, Patrick and Ivon; and 11 grandchildren.

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