

John Bartholomew

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JOHN Bartholomew not only inherited the name of his forebears but also the mantle of their reputation as cartographers, and he wore it with distinction. Tall, erect and slim, he was an imposing and charismatic figure. He had a certain formal stiffness, but this was a superficial shell protecting a modest man who did not assert himself, and it disappeared when he became engaged in conversation. Whatever the occasion, he gave time and care to the people involved – to royalty and children, to international gatherings and local society meetings.

As the grandson of John George Bartholomew, there was never any question, to John or his father, but that he would follow in the Bartholomew footsteps as a mapmaker. John displayed an adventurous spirit as a boy and this undoubtedly influenced his father in deciding to send him to Gordonstoun, a school renowned for encouraging individualism while guiding it into a constructive way of life. John emerged as a confident and quietly self-assured, young man with precise and slightly clipped speech, ready to take up his role as a cartographer and publisher.

Three strands ran through his life. First, he was fascinated by maps and the physical world we live in. He regarded maps as not simply useful and informative but also enjoyable in their own right. With old maps, he understood and appreciated the purpose of the mapmaker, even when the content was fable or wishful thinking rather than fact. With modern maps he looked for accuracy, clarity and attractive presentation.

In 1984 the Queen visited the headquarters of the Royal Scottish Geographical Society and John Bartholomew showed her some of the old and treasured maps in the society collection. His feeling for maps was evident and, in her thanks, the Queen complimented him on his "loving expertise". It was a singularly fitting tribute.

The second strand was the concept of family. Bartholomew's was a family business and there was a strong bond between all the members of the firm.

Mr John, as he was called, knew and cared about all the staff. They knew that if they had problems, he always had time to listen and to assist them in overcoming their difficulties. As cartographic director, he prepared the material for the draughtsmen and women which they converted into maps for printing. It could have been irksome to have John constantly examining their work in detail and requiring a slight change in the appearance of this name or that line, but in practice it was effective and accepted, as preparing a map or atlas is a team effort.

John was always conscious of the Bartholomews who preceded him. The founder of the firm, John George Bartholomew, his grandfather, was a man of great influence and had been appointed cartographer to the King. He was instrumental in founding the Royal Scottish Geographical Society, established the Geographical Institute (the location of the firm), and played a major role in the creation of the geography department at the University of Edinburgh. His son, in turn, was another strong personality and co-founded the Scottish Rights of Way Society, now called Scotways. In both of these societies, John participated throughout his life. Indeed, not long before his death, and despite having limited mobility and strength, he insisted on attending a meeting of the Scotways council.

The third strand was woven into his life when he met and married an attractive French girl who was working at the French Institute. Ginette Achard-James brought French practical common sense to their marriage and remained his teammate and rock for 52 years. His concept of family now had a new dimension and emphasis as five sons were quickly added to it. Like his father, who used to take his family on a touring holiday in Europe each year, it was John and Ginette who now took five boys on regular visits to their relatives in Grenoble, all packed into one car.

Only after he retired did John have the time to spend with his children and grandchildren. Here, his imagination came into play, devising games and activities. He always had time to listen, never raised his voice, and had a genuine interest in all their activities.

In his last years, the care and devotion of Ginette sustained John through many crises as his health deteriorated. It was also then that he demonstrated his strength of character – never complaining, he showed quiet and indomitable courage, while his love of maps remained undiminished to the end.

Born: 15 January, 1923, in Edinburgh.

Died: 16 January, 2008, in Edinburgh, aged 85.

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