RGS Map Collection

The map collection holds approximately 1,600 maps of historic and contemporary importance and is rich in maps and atlases. The collection began with a donation of old colonial maps and plans by a member in July 1886. Subsequently, a good many early atlases were acquired with the York Gale Library and Thomas Gill, an avid enthusiast on Australian exploration, added further maps to the collection.

The Society's collection of early atlases and maps are of particular importance as they not only show the growth of knowledge of the world but demonstrate the improvement and elaboration of the art of cartography.

Special Items Within the Map Collection.

The Greek astronomer Hipparchus, in about 190BC, developed the work of Eratosthenes by establishing the method of dividing the world into meridians of latitude and longitude, enabling meaningful maps to be drawn. Claudius Ptolemaeus (Ptolemy c75-153 AD) extended this work by producing a map of the known world by calculating the latitude and longitude of every known place - some 8,000 of them. He devised various ways of depicting the spherical surface of the globe on a flat sheet including the conical and trapezoidal projections.

No map has survived from Ancient Greece but the European geographers, emerging from the dark ages, were able to reconstruct them using the coordinates left in the Ptolemiac texts.

The oldest cartographic work (inset map), and indeed the oldest book in the Society's Library, is Francesco Berlinghieri's 15th century paraphrase in Italian verse of Ptolemy's Geographia, printed by Nicolaus Todescho and published in Florence in 1482, ten years before Columbus sailed from Spain to discover the Americas. The handsome volume, superbly re-bound in decorated red morocco, exemplifies the skill of the early printers in the arts of typography and engraving. In fact, the maps are some of the earliest produced from metal engravings.

Another rare volume of Ptolemy maps in the Library is an edition of his Geographicæ edited by Michael Servetus and published in Lyons in 1535. Copies of this book are extremely rare as every volume that could be obtained at the time was burned by John Calvin, along with its editor.

Ptolemy's maps were regarded as authoritative until well into the 16th Century and considering the importance placed on his work, it was unfortunate that he had rejected the more accurate calculations of Eratosthenes. Ptolemy also discarded the correct theory that Africa was surrounded by water, and joined its east coast to the land-mass of Asia, turning the Indian Ocean into a vast lake. The southern shore of this lake was later designated Terra Australis Incognita, and belief in this mythical land persisted well into the 17th century.

The great Flemish cartographers of the 16th century, Gerardus Mercator and Abraham Ortelius, produced up-to-date maps that finally superseded the outmoded Ptolemaic maps. Abraham Ortelius produced his celebrated map of the world on a single sheet using the Mercator Projection in 1570. This he bound in a book with 69 other maps of individual countries and regions to produce what is regarded as the first modern atlas, Theatrum Orbis Terrarum (Theatre of the World), published in Antwerp. Sir Francis Drake had a copy of this atlas with him when he circumnavigated the globe in the Golden Hind in 1577-80. The Society has the 1571 edition of this atlas as well as the last French edition dated 1598, Theatre de l'univers,

contenant les cartes de tout le monde, which contains 119 decorative and intriguing hand-coloured maps, ascribed to many cartographers.

Ortelius's Orbis Terrarum.

Gerardus Mercator was the first cartographer to apply the term 'atlas' to a collection of bound maps in 1595 and the Library has a copy of Historia Mundi or Mercator's Atlas, London 1635, which is one of several editions enlarged by Judocus Hondius. Mercator is best known for his map projection in which the meridians of longitude are drawn parallel instead of converging at the poles, and parallels of latitude are spaced further apart to compensate for this. It allows compass bearings to be drawn as straight lines and is still used today for almost all sea charts.

Terra Australis The Society also has a hand-drawn and coloured copy of the original mapped Nicholas Desliens' 1566 Mappemonde in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, made by Henri Delachaux in 1884. There was no consistent convention of north at the top until the use of the compass became widespread. The Desliens map of the world has south at the top of the drawing. It is also of interest as it shows the 'Java la Grande' which has been the cause of much debate in recent years.

Marco Polo first described the Islands of Java Minor and Java Major but place names from the latter were transferred by some early mapmakers to Terra Incognita. Although many of the early Renaissance maps and charts were French, the names along the coast of this fifth continent on the Desliens map were mainly Portuguese, giving rise to theories that the Portuguese first visited Australia more than 70 years before the officially accepted discovery by the Dutch.

An extensive series of early colonial atlases and maps in the collection is useful for charting the progress of settlement in each colony from the 1830s through to the 1890s. In 2010 an exhibition of the Society's map collection was held, called "Our Place in the Sun : South Australia in Maps 1658 - 1996" The catalogue can be found under Exhibitions.

Early in his Presidency, Allen Simpson formed a subcommittee of the Society in 1925 to prepare a submission to the government on the dearth of Australian Maps. Over 20 years later in 1948 Major-General Browne, Director-General of the British Ordinance Survey was still able to comment that 'Australia is the least mapped country in the world; in fact, it is practically unmapped'.

This situation was redressed with the work of the Australian Survey Corps and National Mapping.

Many of these maps are in the collection and of special interest is a series of military intelligence maps and accompanying notes of North Australia and South East Asia, developed during the war. The Society holds a complete set of National Mapping 1:1,000,000 series along with coverage of the Australian Antarctic Territory.

The Society is producing a number of reproductions for sale of its important maps. These include maps of world interest and maps of significance to South Australia.