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Book Review: Stitching the World: Embroidered Maps and Women's Geographical Education

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BOOK REVIEW:

STITCHING THE WORLD: Embroidered Maps and Women's Geographical Education. By JUDITH A. TYNER. xxii and 142 pp.; maps, ill., bibliog., index. Farnham, U.K.: Ashgate, 2015. \$99.70 (cloth), ISBN 9781409426356

Recently I visited a major exhibit on historic Irish art and design and was struck by a lovely embroidered map of Ireland. In the midst of outstanding examples of Irish furniture and art was an elegant girl's/woman's map, signifying her mastery of both geography and stitchery. Now, Judith Tyner has published *Stitching the World: Embroidered Maps and Women's Geographical Education*, an examination of this short-lived tradition of embroidering map samplers or globes as material artifacts of women's geographic education. The slim volume is a noteworthy contribution to our understanding of map history, history of geographic education, and women's history.

From approximately 1770 until around 1840, girls and young women produced embroidered map samplers in the British Isles and United States. Today these maps are held in various museums and collections, with an occasionally sampler cropping up on Ebay or at auctions. A typical sampler might be on linen with minute stitches outlining the shape of continents and political borders, locating and naming cities and other features, indicating orientation (such as a north arrow or a compass rose), and composing decorative elements like an elaborate border and/or cartouche. Until Tyner began to explore map samplers twenty-five years ago, very little scholarly work had been conducted on them, with map samplers often categorized as "cartifacts": map oddities or curiosities. Tyner, a professor emerita of cartography, approaches map samplers both as a cartographer, but also as an experienced needlewoman. Tyner saw far more than a quaint cartifact; she saw an overlooked practice of cartography and geography. As Tyner began to investigate, more map samplers and eventually embroidered globes came to light. Through her work, she has identified over 200 British map samplers, over 60 American map samplers, and 39 globes, and more continue to emerge.

Tyner begins by considering the classic question of "What is a map?"—as how you define a map dictates what is considered a map. She points out that who does the defining is also significant, resulting in bias against maps that don't fit the defining cultures' definitions, such as map samplers. In approaching samplers as maps, she employs David Woodward's framework for studying historic maps, which emphasizes map production and the product, adapting the framework for idiosyncrasies of map

samplers, having elements of classic cartography (subject, shape and size, cartouche, orientation indicators, scale), as well as elements of embroidered samplers (patterns, fabrics, threads, stitches).

In studying map samplers, Tyner establishes from the start their educational context and function, created at schools or as part of home education and used as a learning experience, that “it was the making of the map, not its use that of primary importance” (p. 3). As maps, samplers may be unremarkable but pretty, but represent what Tyner phrases “lost lessons in geographic education,” extant examples of female student work in geographic education, “tangible products of past pedagogic practices” (p. 6). She carefully situates map samplers temporally at the end of the Enlightenment and beginnings of the Industrial Revolution, considering not only the role of geography in this age, but also their educational practices and geographic education, especially for women.

Once Tyner has established the context, she considers the production details: the history and construction of samplers. Samplers, “schoolgirl pieces that were used to teach needlework skills” (p. 23), recorded as well as demonstrated mastery of stitches. Viewed as “crafts,” their study was largely neglected until after 1900. Most map samplers seem to have been produced by schoolgirls, but some display such superior workmanship that they may have been produced by adults. Patterns for map samplers could be purchased, some were published in women’s magazines, or they would be created by teachers or pupils based on available maps. Very few paper patterns for map samplers can be located today; the act of transferring the pattern to fabric or stitching through the pattern destroys them.

Tyner’s earliest map samplers are from the British Isles, where the practice appears to have originated. In Britain, geography was seen as a subject necessary for an accomplished person, male or female, and geography books, map puzzles, cards, and games were produced and used to nurture geographical imaginations. Whether at home or at schools, geography was taught to girls with map samplers being a means to learn geography, a means to demonstrate their stitchery skills, but also a “treasured possession” once completed (p. 52). Examining extant map samplers, Tyner identifies “schools” based on their similarities and differences. For example, a cluster of six samplers was made at an unidentifiable school or schools in Tottenham, with the six samplers virtually identical except for “the lettering in the cartouche” (p. 55). Tyner believes that they were made using the same base map, hand drawn on the fabric, possibly copied from a printed map or from a copy in a magazine. Map samplers created in the British Isles most often depicted England and Wales, followed by Europe and world maps, but also Ireland and Scotland, individual counties, and, very late in the study, Palestine. Broadly, British and American map samplers can be divided into two groups: simpler, less ornate versions produced at Quaker schools, and those with elaborate borders and cartouches associated with non-Quaker schools. Quakers usually focused on more practical needlework, but map samplers were acceptable as

they had their educational purposes. In either case, effort was made to faithfully imitate conventional maps, to produce a product that would be perceived as a “real” map (p. 61).

Given the strong cultural, political, and economical ties between the United States and Britain, it is not surprising that the educational practice of map samplers diffused. Tyner believes the diffusion may be a result of map-sampler teachers who immigrated, British mothers who made one and wanted their daughters to do so also, and/or magazines publishing map-sampler patterns. Spatially, Tyner found the practice largely tied to the mid-Atlantic states of New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and New Jersey. Through their construction and documentation, Tyner has identified a number of specific schools who taught map samplers, such as Susanna Rowson’s Academy for Young Ladies in Boston and the Pleasant Valley Boarding School in New York State. An advertisement for the Pleasant Valley Boarding School breaks down their girl’s curriculum by price, beginning with reading and plain sewing. “Working maps” were part of the most expensive curriculum offered, “thus it was the wealthier girls who would be taught to make map samplers” (p. 82). Twenty-three known map samplers are attributed to Pleasant Valley, including maps of the world in two hemispheres, of North America, and of the United States. Samplers were also produced of Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Virginia and several have surfaced of Washington D.C. (pp. 84, 86).

Finally, Tyner addresses the embroidered globes of Westtown School, of which she has located thirty-nine existing globes, all produced between 1804 and 1844. Founded as a Quaker school in 1799, Westtown is the only school known whose female students produced embroidered globes. Tyner believes that the globes were made specifically to teach “mathematical geography,” astronomy and use of globes. The extant globes are small, approximately six inches in diameter, in silk over canvas, and were clearly designed to be used, with many mounted on wooden stands or kept in wooden cases. Though there is much variation in the existing globes, both terrestrial and celestial, all feature graticule, ecliptic, and horizon circles. This example of applied craftsmanship would be in keeping with the Quaker tradition and their focus on practicality and usefulness.

The closing of the Westtown sewing room in 1843 coincides with the last of the Westtown globes, as well as the decline of map samplers in general, suggesting a link between the end of the age of embroidered maps and globes and the decline of needlework in the early nineteenth century. Tyner in particular focuses on the changing nature of American education, away from “accomplishments” curriculum in women’s education and towards public education, and away from needlework as the industrial revolution led to the availability of home sewing machines and eventually inexpensive manufactured clothing. While needlework is still practiced today, and some needlewomen still craft embroidered maps, map samplers have ceased to be the “certificates of accomplishment” that they once were.

Tyner's work makes important contributions in a number of areas: in map history, in the history of geographic education, and in women's history. Tyner has long been among those scholars researching and documenting women's practices of cartography. Through *Stitching the World's* solid, rigorous scholarship, Tyner bridges research in a number of fields to shed new light on what we might call the practice of public cartography—cartography outside of formal realms, such as academia and government—and of cartographic culture: the understanding of the practice of cartography by a society. Both public cartography and cartographic culture involve the creation, circulation, and discussion of maps by average citizens. Tyner's work establishes that at least some young American women were being educated in cartography and geography, and being provided with the knowledge and vocabulary to participate in discourse about their new nation. Her approach, considering them equally as maps and as needlework, addresses the whole of the evidence while placing them firmly in the context of geographic education.

It is however, a rather terse study and the one area in particular I wished for more extensive discussion was on the cartographic culture of the age. Tyner does provide brief context in the introduction, without calling it cartographic culture; in fact, the term is not even in the brief index. Expanding the discussion of the cartographic culture of early America and situating map samplers more firmly in this context would benefit the study as well as add to our understanding of the role of geography and cartography at this point in American history. In particular, I am thinking about recent work by Martin Brückner on ornamental maps and the work they performed in eighteenth-century America. Map samplers were very much tied to this tradition and a more extensive discussion of the "social work" of maps would strengthen the scholarship.

Overall, *Stitching the World* is a fascinating study and an excellent contribution to our limited understanding of women's cartographic culture. Through these "lost lessons," Tyner illuminates the learning of young women and their creation of lasting testaments to their geographic knowledge. The map of Ireland I encountered at the exhibit was no mere pretty picture: it was a proclamation of its creators' accomplishments as a scholar of needlework and geography. It is a shame we no longer value such "certificates of accomplishment": what evidence will we have in future of our students' expertise in geography?

—CHRISTINA DANDO, University of Nebraska Omaha