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Book review

Figures Infrastructures: An Atlas of Roads and Railways, Bieke Cattoor, Bruno De Meulder. SUN Academia, Amsterdam (2011) Hardback, RRP not provided. ISBN 9789461051189

The strapline on the back of *Figures Infrastructures* is "a unique exploration into the language of cartography", and this is certainly a rather unusual book. It is clearly an atlas, but goes well beyond the usual remit of books described using that term. It is also a history which tells through words and images the story of how transport infrastructure has developed over time in a small-area of North-West Europe. It could also be described as a work of art, containing a large number of bespoke maps ranging from the conventional to the semi-abstract which have clearly been lovingly produced. These bespoke maps are accompanied by interpretive text, photographs, and reproductions of a range of historical maps, all contained in 174 generously proportioned pages printed in colour on high quality matt paper.

The authors introduce the book as a "recartography" of a section of the Michelin road map of the Benelux region, covering the area of Belgium around Ghent, Kortrijk and Doornik. However, the cartographic information contained in the book goes far beyond that which could be gained from even the most detailed study of the Michelin map alone. This single map (which is presented in its original form early on in the book) is disaggregated and revisualised as a whole series of maps. These replace the comprehensive nature of the original with a series of more specifically focused perspectives. In particular, the Michelin map's view of the landscape as stationary at a single point in time is exchanged for one which explicitly accounts for the temporally fluid nature of landscapes by depicting the progressive development of the area's transport geography over several centuries. This format provides an opportunity to link geographical ideas and theories with the spatial reality of a particular area, and this opportunity is to some extent taken up in the text.

The aim of reconstituting the data in a topological atlas structure is stated as being to "highlight the dynamic interdependence of the infrastructural networks and the system value of their combination", and interdependencies between different transport links are clearly highlighted. Several maps focus specifically on the developing form of intersections, and the impact of transport on the landscape (and vice versa) is also considered. The topographical format of the original map is in general maintained (with the relative spatial locations of geographic features preserved), with topography supplemented by topological annotations.

The atlas is divided into three main sections, each covering a different spatial area or "site" over three or four chapters. In each chapter a complex map is gradually built up as the chapter narrative progresses, with additional information added to the map in 'layers' in a manner which will be familiar to anyone who has made use of GIS. The first section of the book examines a "bundle of parallel infrastructures" between Ghent and Kortrijk, describing the historical transport geography of the corridor and the interactions which have taken place between transport systems and natural features. It focuses on three roads and a railway line, describing and illustrating graphically how over time each one superseded its predecessor in importance. The second section looks at secondary patterns of infrastructure which built up around urban areas located close to the large-scale infrastructure configurations considered in part 1, while the third section examines four transverse corridors which intersect with these large-scale parallel infrastructures. These are each based on a different 'national' road, with the narrative exploring the diversity in the history of their creation. The end of this third section is also the end of the book, and this ending comes as something of a surprise, with no concluding section to sum up the message of what has gone before. The reader is left only with a double page epilogue made up of 11 maps (one for each chapter) enclosed in a stylised set of brackets.

The book contains a wide range of interesting information and intellectual stimulation, but does also have some deficiencies which limit its effectiveness. A key part of any map is its legend or key, and unfortunately these are conspicuous by their absence on all the bespoke maps in the book. This can make it very difficult to determine what some of the map features represent and to link the cartographic representations with the descriptive text. The historical maps which complement the bespoke maps appear to contain some fascinating information, but in several cases the reproductions are too small to be legible, and the same applies to a number of the topographical annotations to the bespoke maps. As stated above, the layered nature of the mapping is reminiscent of a GIS, but the book perhaps suffers from comparison with such software, because the reader of a paper book is unable to add or remove map layers at will. While this is no fault of the authors, an exploration of this kind might be better presented in an electronic format which would allow the reader to make their own journey through the data, rather than having their route constrained by the structuring imposed by those who produced the book. The book also feels a little under-referenced in places, as concepts and events are sometimes mentioned in passing with no guidance for the reader as to how they can explore them further.

In summary this is a book which is attractive, intriguing and enigmatic, but ultimately slightly frustrating in that the reader is not presented with any clear 'take home points'. They are instead forced to flick back through the numerous maps to come up with their own conclusions – but perhaps that was after all the authors' intention.

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