

ASSOCIATION OF CANADIAN MAP LIBRARIES AND ARCHIVES
BULLETIN

Book Reviews

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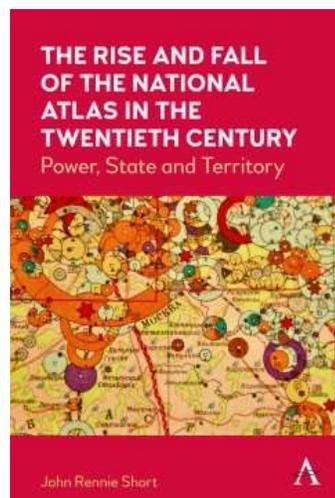
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The Rise and Fall of the National Atlas in the Twentieth Century, By John Rennie Short

Reviewed by Andrew Nicholson, University of Toronto Mississauga Library

Review



Short, John Rennie. *The Rise and Fall of the National Atlas in the Twentieth Century*. London: Anthem Press, 2022. 182 p. \$40.00 US ISBN: 9781839983054

In 1899, the national government of Finland published what scholar John Rennie Short argues is the first comprehensive national atlas. Over the next 100 years, more than 70 countries would follow the lead of Finland in producing their own national atlases.

In less than 200 pages, Short goes on to chronicle this phenomenon in his book *The Rise and Fall of the National Atlas in the Twentieth Century*, in which he performs a close reading of national atlases produced over the twentieth century from over 40 nations, including

multiple editions for several of the countries. To present a balanced perspective, the author selected national atlases from countries that ranged from quite rich to relatively poor. The author was also careful to select national atlases from both capitalist and communist countries in the review. To help the reader, the author provides a listing of reviewed countries and their national atlas editions in the Introduction. For example, the Atlas of Canada is frequently mentioned, with the author reviewing six editions from 1905 to 1993.

Overall, this book aims to explore how nations undertook the publication of a national atlas for various purposes throughout the twentieth century. As the author discusses throughout, the national atlas was often viewed as coproduction between science and state, with national governments, especially in younger nations, seeing its publication as a means to define the boundaries of the nation-state, reinforcing claims to power and governance over a territory. The author frequently brings up the notion of “cartographic anxiety” in governments and the national atlas as a byproduct of this tension.

Although the majority of the book is spent reviewing national atlases of the twentieth century, Short begins the book with a short overview of atlas publishing prior to 1899, noting that there were early national atlases focused on topographical surveys for England & Wales, as well as France appearing in the second half of the 1500s. By the 1800s, national atlases were also being published in many new Latin America countries as they gained independence from colonial powers.

Apart from geopolitics, Short highlights the gradual evolution of the national atlas and how it came to include scientific facts about a country. This was especially apparent as some countries began to issue new editions of its national atlas. For example, the author points out that the *Atlas of the United States* published in the 1970s, took on a more land-based, environmental focus for readers.

National atlases also came to be important for highlighting social conditions of a nation. This often included the use of statistics, graphs, and charts as well as maps. Visualizations depicting births, mortality rates, crime, and economic development were just some of the themes that appeared in the national atlases over the century.

Ultimately, Short determines that the National Atlas reached its peak of popularity and influence between 1960 and 1980, after which many countries opted to publish distinct thematic atlases for separate audiences and for different purposes. While print atlases may have been overtaken by the internet and the use of geo technologies (GIS, GPS, etc) by the end of the century, the author is not convinced the days of the national atlas are completely over.

For a relatively short book, *The Rise and Fall of the National Atlas in the Twentieth Century* includes plenty of history and insights covering politics and social history of the twentieth century. Throughout the text, the author has included many colour illustrations from the pages of atlases being discussed. I highly recommend this book as a fine addition to any academic library collection focused on cartography and world political history,

[Image from: <https://antheypress.com/the-rise-and-fall-of-the-national-atlas-in-the-twentieth-century-pdf>]