“Kerry Musings”

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Kerry Musings

David Archer

I start writing this piece having just been looking for a summer book to read. Something light and refreshing in the middle of this hot and sunny 2022 weather, along the lines of *Tortilla Flat*, or any PG Wodehouse and Blandings novels always come up trumps, a phrase I use in its older, traditional sense, pleasing. For the summer, I do not want anything gloomy or with a sad ending; indeed, at any time, if a novel appears to be heading towards a sad ending, I skip to the back and put it for the charity shop if all is not smiles. Winter books are those that can only be read on short grey days and long rainy evenings, Conrad’s stormy sea stories for example.

Which leads me to wonder whether maps are seasonal in a similar way? Does the weather have any effect on how you feel when you look at a map? Are some better at complementing the seasons than others? Do some maps give the feel of a season? And no, I am not thinking of maps on waterproof paper for the winter. Groan. Please pay attention, this might be a serious piece for once.

Obviously, there are all year maps, which of necessity have to be used regardless of what is going on outside. Route planning and motoring maps are needed to get about at any time. In the same way, the 1:25,000 maps, when used for walking, provide answers to the current weather conditions, summer or winter. How so? If one is planning a walk after a long spell of rain, careful reading of the 1:25,000 map helps to minimise excessively muddy paths, avoid going where stepping stones might be six inches under, or having to battle an exposure to strong winds and driving rain. The 1:25,000 helps keep winter walks on good firm tracks, sheltered from the winds, and free from rain dripping from trees. In summer sunshine, the same maps can guide us to cliff top walks to catch a fresh on-shore breeze, or suggest cool green and leafy meanderings in woods with picnic tables.

So much for the obvious. But this is not really what I am getting at. What I want to consider is whether we feel different when we look at a map in the summer to when we look at it any other time. Do we get more enjoyment under different weather conditions? Do we see the map differently? Well I do, and before I get going, I should state that in this piece it is assumed that we are cheered by summer sunshine and feel low in winter when it rains. That sort of thing.

I wilt in strong sunshine, and if I look at a WW1 trench map on a sunny day in July, I fail to see the rain, water and mud everywhere, as the battlefield is typically portrayed. Rather, I see the summer conditions in the trenches, with the mud now packed hard, dust and flies everywhere, and little shade. I instantly sympathise with those poor souls stationed in that landscape. I see only tufts of grass, bright red poppies and barbed wire in no-man’s-land, with the heat being unbearable in thick khaki uniforms. But when I look at the same map in winter, I see the standard picture of mud, more mud, squelch and horror.

Certainly a lot of the early pictorial covers fall into the summer camp, with Arthur Palmer probably contributing more than Ellis Martin in this respect. In fine weather, seeing the two people striding out on the Chilterns cover makes you want to get out there and walk, whilst the ladies on the Isle of Wight cover suggest the best thing on a day like this is to visit an ancient pile and have a cream tea afterwards. Or better still, just the tea, outside in the shade of course. Look at these in winter, and they are just pretty pictures. The Middle
Thames with a crowded Boulter’s Lock, Bolton Abbey on the Ilkley District cover and maybe the Wye Valley, are all aimed at enticing the sofa-bound out and about. Arthur Palmer illustrations in particular are very strong on high summer come-out-and-join-us scenes, with strong contrast between sunlight and shade to show how warm and sunny it is. See the Isle of Wight, Brighton, Cheltenham, Chichester and Oxford covers, which were issued with the illustrations promising some nice outings for a summer’s day. But look at them in the winter, and this aim falls flat: no way will they entice you out into the cold.

In more recent times, the Ordnance Survey marketing people have occasionally used seasonal-feeling map covers to advantage. The bright yellow bird covers on Outdoor Leisure maps most certainly have a summer come-out-and-join-us feel, whilst the brown bird covers have an equally bright autumnal feel. The blue and white 1965 Cambridge cover is perhaps the freshest and most spring-like of any post-war cover; unlike the 1970s black bordered covers, which really do lack any seasonal feeling. Totally neutral, with not even winter suggested.

Some maps positively bloom in sunlight. I believe the pink buildings on 1:2500 First Edition maps were coloured to be seen in July, especially if the pink covers a large area, as with the Hereford sheet. And if you disturb one by taking it out in February, I promise the sun will come out to see it. Ditto the very stylistically similar 1920s six-inch town maps, lots of sunny pink, with the addition of light green and blue. Even my very worn copy of Southampton radiates freshness and light.

If you find the weather too hot even to think about maps, try opening a refreshing Pathfinder or two. I like these maps, and find the paper appears particularly white and bright, giving a cool feel to whatever is shown on the map, whether town or country. OK, most maps have a white background, but as in a paint shop, there are dozens of whites, warm, cold, and so on.

Pathfinders are printed on a beautifully cool white paper, with spider-web thin contours and only three very light colours, orange, green and blue, which leave the snowy white background to dominate and refresh those looking at the map. Indeed, might I suggest that most modern maps have a summer feel about them, probably because the paper is much whiter than of old. A lot of bright white needs to show through if a map is to appeal in summer, with most pre-1945 maps failing miserably. Hachures on one-inch Thirds give a dusty/grubby feel to sheets showing them, much like fog, with the too conspicuous roads looming out of the gloom, as when buses suddenly towered three feet away in London fogs of the early 1960s.

For an example of maps with links to autumn, I would choose what I call school maps. Those with a box embedded in the top border saying ‘This map is only to be used in Kerry primary school’. At any time of the year, show me one of these and I immediately think of autumn. My first week at secondary school found the days getting shorter and darker, and the first geography lesson offered an introduction to contours, repeating something from primary school. It is not the contours or maps connection, but the box and text mentioning a school and scholar that sets me off on the autumn tack. Very strange.

1 https://maps.nls.uk/view/120896617
Another set of autumn maps are the various Aldershot and Salisbury Plain military maps, especially those on a larger scale than normally found, two-inches or one-and-a-half inches to a mile; activity maps for a fresh October afternoon, dominated by autuminal browns, yellows and reds. Lots of keeping warm things going on and safer done out of doors; manoeuvres, firing ranges, troop movements. The two-inch map of War Department Land on Salisbury Plain, 1898 is covered with beautiful strong brown contours, with a thin red property border and dark orange roads. The whole thing, brown, red and orange, when seen in fading light reminds me of early autumn and vast open spaces when the grass has turned and is about to die back. Spring? Never. For later in the same season, the 1878 one and a half inch map of the District round Aldershot is again dominated by wonderful fine brown contours over the black plate, a combination which allows the medium white paper to show through, resulting in a bird’s eye view of the area under the first light winter snow. Although the summer maps and covers only have a magic effect when seen in sunshine, I find autumn maps work at any time. Whilst writing this, in bright July sunshine, I have just opened Salisbury Plain and then glanced at the trees outside, expecting them to be glorious browns and yellows.

Winter can be depressing for some, and the most depressing map I can think of is the one-inch Ordnance map of the country about Aldershot: army manoeuvres 1875, with very fine blue-grey contours and a black plate, it is certainly the densest, darkest and coldest map I can bring to mind. Impossible to read without a glass, it must be what the inside of a glacier is like: dark, blue and cold. Beyond winter. And the only cover illustration to suggest winter is miserable Burns’ Country, where miserable is too good a word for it. I ask you, would you go out on a night like that, even if you could go home to a roaring fire and large hot toddy? Look again at the Eclipse map, the Brighton bathers and the Thames at night covers, despite being very dark, all have a summer feel to them.

Perhaps the most depressing map series is GSGS 3906, which is like a bleak winter’s day, without even the joyful prospect of imminent snowfall. Reduced from the six-inch scale to 1:25,000, all is unclear; the smaller lettering is unreadable or blurred, black is everywhere, and so upsetting, and with the lifeless dull brown contours, it drives me to the edge. The one good thing about these maps is, is, is, is? Is that I seldom need to look at any; unlike two stalwarts of our society who have included them in their latest tome, and have included a couple of extracts that are almost clear, unlike Plate 13A, which shows what I am on about. Similarly dark maps are the impossible-to-read northern Old Series, but these are far more attractive, with fine engraving on a good solid paper and lovely blind stamps. No real comparison, except that both give a strong feeling of winter.

Are there any maps with a spring association, other than the Cambridge cover? For me, yes. We live in rural mid-Wales, and in recent years, when the trees start to show new leaves, I dig out the local 1:2500 sheets and say that this year I will get down to my

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proposed tree research and write it up for *Sheetlines*. Look at a Second Edition 1:2500 sheet of this area and most fields contain one or two tree symbols. One spring, a few years ago I checked a few of these symbols against the fields and found that they did indeed appear to be accurate. I was pleasantly surprised and previously must have subconsciously assumed single tree symbols to be merely ornamentation. Not sure why. But I now see that they are important records of countryside history, showing where trees have stood for the last 100 years. So yes, each spring I always dig out our local maps with good intentions. But somehow nothing very much gets done.

*Season’s Greetings*