The PORTOLAN

Issue 119 Spring 2024 JOURNAL OF THE WASHINGTON MAP SOCIETY

Page 7

2023 Ristow Prize for Academic Achievement in the History of Cartography

Polar Hemispheres: The Overlooked Alternative to Nautical Planispheres in Renaissance Iberia

by Luis A. Robles Macias

Detail. World map in PAE projection dated 1524 that claims to be the work of "Juan Vespucci of Florence, pilot of the King of the Spains". Harvard Map Collection, Vespucci1524.

In This Issue

https://WashMapSociety.org

WASHINGTON MAP SOCIETY
EXPLORING THE WORLD OF MAPS

The Washington Map Society

OFFICERS, 2023–2024

Jeffrey Katz
President

Ron Grim
Vice President/Programs

Peter Porrazzo
Treasurer

Harold Meinheit
Secretary

OTHER DIRECTORS 2023–2024

Kris Butler, John Docktor, Cassandra Farrell, Carissa Pastuch, Amelia Raines, Andy Rhodes, Tom Sander, Eliane Dotson *(ex-officio)*

Thomas F. Sander
Editor, The Portolan
Fulfillment, The Portolan
wms.ThePortolan@gmail.com

Andrew Adamson
Associate Editor, The Portolan
editor@wmsdc.org

Matt Mingus
Book Reviews Editor, The Portolan
reviews@wmsdc.org

Louis Miller
Recent Publications, The Portolan
louis.miller@maine.edu

Manuel Knight
Advertising/Institutional Liaison
manuel.knight@gmail.com

Deepak Bhattasali
Ristow Prize Chair
Bhattasali@cox.net

Eliane Dotson
Webmaster
webmaster@wmsdc.org

SEND ALL NON-PORTOLAN CORRESPONDENCE TO:

John W. Docktor
3158 Gracefield Rd., Apt. 103
Silver Spring MD 20904-0817
washmap@gmail.com

EDITORIAL ADVISORY BOARD

Dick Pflederer – Chair, Imre Josef Demhardt, John R. Hébert, Peter van der Krogt, Don McGuirk, Nick Millea, Marguerite Ragnow, Rodney Kite-Powell, Luis Robles

The Word Express, Inc
Portolan Design and Layout

The Portolan (ISSN 1096-1925) is published three times per year by the Washington Map Society. The Society is a non-profit, tax-exempt organization under section 501(c)(3) of the IRS code. All donations are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law. Annual print subscription rates: US: $65 (1st yr student rate $25); Canada $70; All other countries: $85; Single Copy to U.S: $14.00; Canada $17; Other countries: $21. Annual digital subscription rates: New member $25 first year; then $40. All payments are to be made in U.S. currency. Internet Address: *https://WashMapSociety.org*. Address all editorial correspondence to the Editor. Viewpoints of the authors do not necessarily reflect those of the Society.

Contents – *The Portolan* – Issue 119 – Spring 2024

From the Editor

You will see that the contents of this issue again cover the earliest to the most current period of the history of cartography, and the subjects take you around the world. That is the goal of the Society and the journal you are reading.

After returning from retirement to edit the past three issues, I am pleased to hand over future Editor duties to **Andrew Adamson**, who has closely followed my preparation of this issue. He is eager to continue the traditions of the journal, and, we expect, bring his own flavour to the journal. Yes, flavour—Andrew is British by birth. His 'day job' still involves international travel; no problem—I have found the editorship can easily be done from afar via the internet. The journal is in good hands.

I wish all our readers the best as I step back to emeritus status again. It is you, the membership, that keeps the journal alive with your contributions as writers, book reviewers, and saying YES when a call for help is issued. My sincere thanks to you all.

Cheers, and remember, without geography you are nowhere.

Tom

Mapping the Last Pool of Darkness[1] A Tribute to Cartographer Tim Robinson (1935–2020)

I wanted [my maps] to engage you with the surface of the ground somehow, and to involve and delay you like thickets that you got into and that held you there. Most maps seem designed to help you get out of a place as fast as possible; I wanted these maps to draw you in and keep you there as long as possible. – Tim Robinson, Interview, 2013[2]

By John Hessler

Those of us who create maps, no matter if we draw them with pen and paintbrush, or with the most advanced machine learning and geographic information systems, keep in our minds and close to our hearts a list of cartographic inspirations.

For me one person stands out as the mapmaker, who throughout the years, has had the deepest influence on my approach to mapmaking and on my reflections on the philosophy behind the creation of these beloved two-dimensional abstractions of our three-dimensional world. I am speaking of the cartographer Tim Robinson, who passed away from COVID-19 in April of 2020.

Tim was an extraordinary spatial artist and one of the most original cartographers of the twentieth century, yet I would hazard a guess that many readers of this journal have never heard his name. He worked on his own, traveling and living on the remote islands off the coast of Ireland, mapping in exquisite detail places like Árainn Mhór, Inis Meáin, Inis Oírr, the Burren, and Connemara, in the northwestern reaches of Ireland.

Besides his maps, Tim left an amazing literary legacy of geographic and travel writing that has inspired many of today's most thoughtful adventure writers. His books, like the *Stones of Aran*, and his essays, especially the collection, *Setting Foot on the Shores of Connemara*, tell the tale of what it means to make a map.

The simple beauty of the maps Tim created, and the descriptions of their making in his books, inspired me decades ago to track him down and to follow in his footsteps onto the Aran Islands. I assign the reading of his essays and the study of his maps in my advanced GIS courses, as few authors have captured, in words and ink, the process of mapmaking with such clarity.

As a writer Robinson had a special way of discussing the craft of mapmaking, not from a technical point of view, but rather from a deeply emotional, personal, and reflective perspective. In his essay, 'Interim Reports from Folding Landscapes,' he writes what, at least in my opinion, is one of the most insightful definitions of a map ever penned,

> "…a map is a sustained attempt upon an unattainable goal, the complete comprehension by an individual of a tract of space that will be individualized into a place by that attempt."[3]

For Tim mapmaking was an intellectual exercise that stretched our concept of spatial perception and, in its purest form, mentally defines our definition of place. He explained that when making his maps he felt, "free to concentrate on that mysterious and neglected fourth dimension of cartography, which extends deep into the self of the cartographer."[4]

This special fourth dimension becomes visible to a map's viewer, only when they look intently at the choices a cartographer makes during a map's creation. These decisions, such as picking how to represent particular landscape and built features, or choosing what to leave blank, to name just two, all come from a cartographer's mind, not from the landscape itself.

Reading about how he put his maps together and about his work in the field, it is easy to see Tim as a bit of a throwback to a simpler time. When creating a map Robinson walked and bicycled the complete breath of the places he was mapping, carrying with him, "on this tangled tightrope of a journey the dozen sheets of the six-inch Ordnance Survey maps that cover the area, on which I note my finds—a few rare plants, a number of archaeological sites, endless hundreds of tiny landing-stages, and above all the Irish placenames I collect from the people of the region[5] [**Figure 1**]."

Figure 1. Tim Robinson's field annotations on old Ordnance Survey Maps. Courtesy of the Robinson Archive, University of Galway Library.

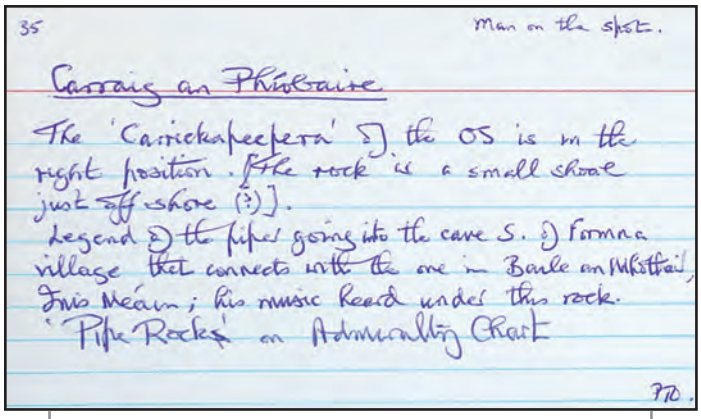

Figure 2. Example of a place name card made and used by Robinson in the making of his maps. Courtesy of the Robinson Archive, University of Galway Library.

It is in this linguistic regard that the maps of Tim Robinson are truly special and modern in their sensibility. In his archive, now preserved at the James Hardiman Library at the University of Galway, there are thousands of cards on which he wrote the ancient and original Gaelic place names used on his maps, correcting the spelling, and replacing names given to them by nineteenth century English surveyors, who, for the most part, ignored the original Gaelic toponyms **[Figure 2]**. Robinson collected this information from the people who lived in the places he was mapping, and like the playwright, J.M. Synge,[6] who came to the Aran Islands earlier in the twentieth century, he recorded a folklore and a language that had faded from view.

Robinson made his first map of the Aran Islands in 1975 and corrected it a few years later after intense field work **[Figure 3]**. To explain the map's complex linguistic content and symbolic presentation he published, in 1996, the pamphlet *Oileáin Árainn*, which details his cartographic and artistic process. In these notes the geography of Robinson's maps come alive, for example, in the details he gives about the stone walls **[Figure 4]**, which are a major feature of his maps and dominate the island's remote and sparsely populated landscape,

"There are about fifteen hundred miles of drystone walls in the islands, dividing most of the land into tiny fields. This amazing monument to human labor, is mainly the work of the land-hungry generations of the mid-nineteenth century."[7]

Compared to most modern cartographic creations, Robinson's are simpler, but are spectacular collages of design, history, and archaeology. They are complex records of a forgotten past layered onto the modern geography of the places they represent **[Figure 5]**.

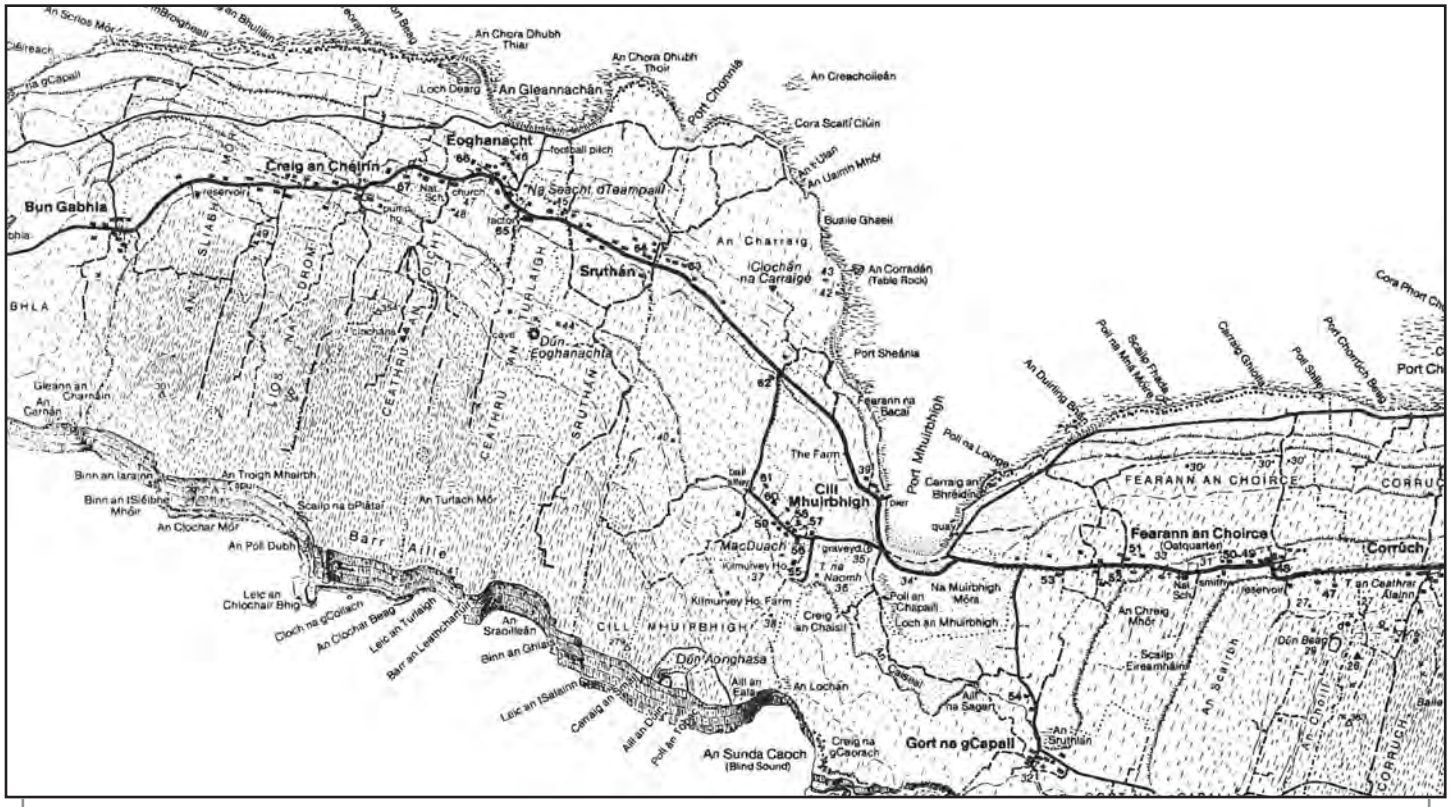

Figure 3. Detail of Robinson's published map of the Aran Islands/Oileáin Árainn. Scanned from the example in the authors collection.

Figure 4: The stone walls of Aran. Photograph by author, 2015.

After completing his map of the Aran Islands, Robinson turned his attention to the region of the Burren, and to producing his large map of Connemara, which was completed in 1990. All of his maps are the work of a lone cartographer, and he self-published all of these materials, creating with his wife Máiréad (who passed away from COVID-19 two weeks before Tim), the publishing house, Folding Landscapes.

It is in Robinson's essays however, that the true nature of his reflections and philosophy of mapmaking become apparent. He writes as a thoughtful geographer, observing the complexity of the interaction, both historical and modern, between humans and the landscape, although as a trained mathematician, he preferred that 'landscape' be called 'space'.

Tim's musings on the conceptual foundations of cartography are perhaps nowhere more clearly presented than when he explains why he chose to begin his mapmaking career on an island,

"There is something compulsive in one's relationship to an island. […] With an island, it is as if the surrounding ocean, like a magnifying glass, directs an intensified vision onto the narrow field of view. A little piece is cut out of the world, marked off by its richness and significance. So an island appears to be mappable. Already a little abstracted from reality, already half-concept, it holds out the delusion of a comprehensible reality."[8]

In many places and interviews Robinson remarked that he was not at all interested in representing geographic

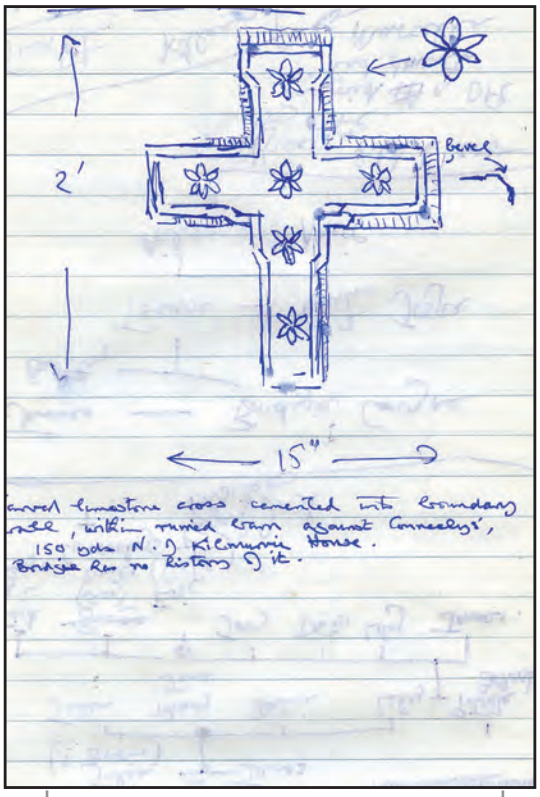

Figure 5. Page from Tim Robinson's field notebook. Courtesy of the Robinson Archive, University of Galway Library.

Figure 6. Author near Gort na gCapall on the windy southern coast of Aran. Photograph by Katia Sainson.

and geologic features on his maps in the standard and conventional manner. What he was after was something deeper, using texture, geometry, and shape, in a way that would reproduce, as closely as possible for the map's user, Robinson's own experience of being in the place.

To make this vision a reality Robinson had to struggle with both design considerations and the difficult physicality of mapping a harsh landscape, in person and in the field. In a particularly striking episode, recounted in his essay 'Islands and Images,' he focuses on the wind, and on the fact that the sheer cliffs, which make up most of Aran's coastline **[Figure 6]**, had never been represented accurately and to scale. He writes,

> "I stood wrapped in semi-invisibility on the hillside. I felt my task was impossible, that no scale of miles could express the remoteness of this place. Often during that summer, struggling along briary paths in rain, or on the cliffs trying to sketch the headlands with the wind ripping my notebook apart in my hands, I felt that this obstinate island was not returning my love."[9]
>
> Being in the wind, and experiencing the remoteness of the Aran cliffs, over many days, is an experience I will never forget, and Tim describes their loneliness, while he worked to draw them, even better than my memory,
>
> "I met nobody during these days I spent working on the cliffs, peering over the edge and trying to work out how the strata run. After a spell of this it was often a relief to turn away from the wind and the aboriginal clamor of the gulls, and recross the creigs to the other side of the island, the cherishing side, of cups of tea in friendly kitchens. […]" [10]

One of the first things that most people notice about Robinson's maps is that they are completely black and white. This is a design choice that few cartographers in our current computer and GIS driven world would make. Here, once again however, Tim's descriptions of his techniques allow us to see deeply into the mimetic foundations of mapmaking and peer into the very core of its representational power,

> "…it does strike me now that these black-on-white maps, in which shingle banks and beaches and bogs and crags and lake water and mountain heights are all represented through thousands of dots and twirls, are elaborate disclaimers of exhaustiveness. Everywhere are these minute particulars of ink, mimicking the rough, the grainy, the oozy or the dazzling, the sensuous modalities of walking the Earth's surface; while equally everywhere, the white abyss of the undiscovered, shows through."[11]

Throughout his life Tim Robinson thought deeply about the process of mapmaking. He spent decades reflecting on the power of graphic representation and on how mapmakers cognize the landscape before they reduce it to two dimensions. He often talked about mapmaking as a way of seeing the world. He also thought, like his contemporary, Eduard Imhof, that a mapmaker had to be embedded for a time in the actual landscape and had to experience what they were mapping in three-dimensions, before they could reduce it to two in an original way.[12]

Philosophically, Tim and I had many of the same inspirations, and shared a fascination with the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Perhaps it was Wittgenstein's aphoristic and fragmentary style of writing, or his groundbreaking approach to mathematical logic that drew both of us in. Wittgenstein himself provides a better clue, at least as far as Tim is concerned, when he describes his philosophy as a journey, traveling over a wide field of thought, "The philosophical remarks in this book [*Philosophical Investigations*] are, as it were, a number of sketches of landscape which were made in the course of these long and involved journeys."[13]

So, I think it fitting, that I end this brief tribute, to Robinson's work and life, with one of Tim's favorite Wittgenstein quotes, with which he began the second volume of his Connemara trilogy, and which for him summed up the complexity and mystery of the cartographic gaze,[14]

> "The concept of seeing makes a tangled impression… I look at the landscape, my gaze ranges over it, I see all sorts of distinct and indistinct movements; this impresses itself sharply on me, that it is quite hazy. After all, how completely ragged what we see can appear! And now look at all that can be meant by 'description of what can be seen'."[15]

John Hessler is a lecturer in applied mathematics and Geographic Information Science at Johns Hopkins University and the Director of the Biomap-Lab (https://arcg.is/05uzmW) . He is currently at work on the forthcoming book, *To Map the World: Lectures on Mereotopology and the Ontological Foundations of Geographic Information Science* (Cambridge).

ENDNOTES

1 Title taken from Tim Robinson's book, *Connemara: the last pool of darkness*. Robinson took the phrase from the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, who in one of his Cambridge lectures commented that he "could only think in the dark," and that in Connemara he had found "one of the last pools of darkness in Europe." For more see the records of George Hetherington in, F.E. Flowers, *Portraits of Wittgenstein*, vol. 4 (Bristol: Bloomsbury Academic, 1999)

2 Tim Robinson Interviewed by Jo Smith and published in *Politics of Place*, Exeter Centre for Literatures of Identity, Place and Sustainability University of Exeter, 2013. *https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/repository/handle/10871/16302*.

3 Tim Robinson (1996). "Interim Reports on Folding Landscapes," in *Setting Foot on the Shores of Connemara* (Dublin: Lilliput Press) 77.

4 Tim Robinson (1996). "Setting Foot on the Shores of Connemara: the tangled tightrope," in *Setting Foot on the Shores of Connemara* (Dublin: Lilliput Press) 19.

5 Tim Robinson (1996). "Setting Foot on the Shores of Connemara: the tangled tightrope," *in Setting Foot on the Shores of Connemara* (Dublin: Lilliput Press) 18.

6 J.M. Synge spent several weeks each year from 1898 to 1902 on the Aran Islands at the suggestion of the poet W.B. Yeats. While there he was inspired to write many of his famous plays, like *Playboy of the Western World* and also wrote his history and description of the islands, *The Aran Islands*, which was first published in 1907.

7 Tim Robinson (1996). *Oileáin Árainn: a companion to the map of the Aran Islands* (Roundstone: Folding Landscapes Press) 17–18.

8 Tim Robinson (1996). "Islands and Images," in *Setting Foot on the Shores of Connemara* (Dublin: Lilliput Press) 1.

9 Tim Robinson (1996). "Islands and Images," in *Setting Foot on the Shores of Connemara* (Dublin: Lilliput Press) 4.

10 Tim Robinson (1996). "Islands and Images," in *Setting Foot on the Shores of Connemara* (Dublin: Lilliput Press) 9.

11 Tim Robinson (1996). "Taking Steps," in *Setting Foot on the Shores of Connemara* (Dublin: Lilliput Press) 212–213.

12 Eduard Imhof writes extensively about sketching in the field in order to understand shape of landscape. See his *Cartographic Relief Representation* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1965).

13 Ludwig Wittgenstein (1958). *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell), Preface page 1.

14 Tim Robinson, *Connemara: the last pool of darkness* (London: Penguin Books, 2008) 2

15 Ludwig Wittgenstein (1958). *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell), 200.