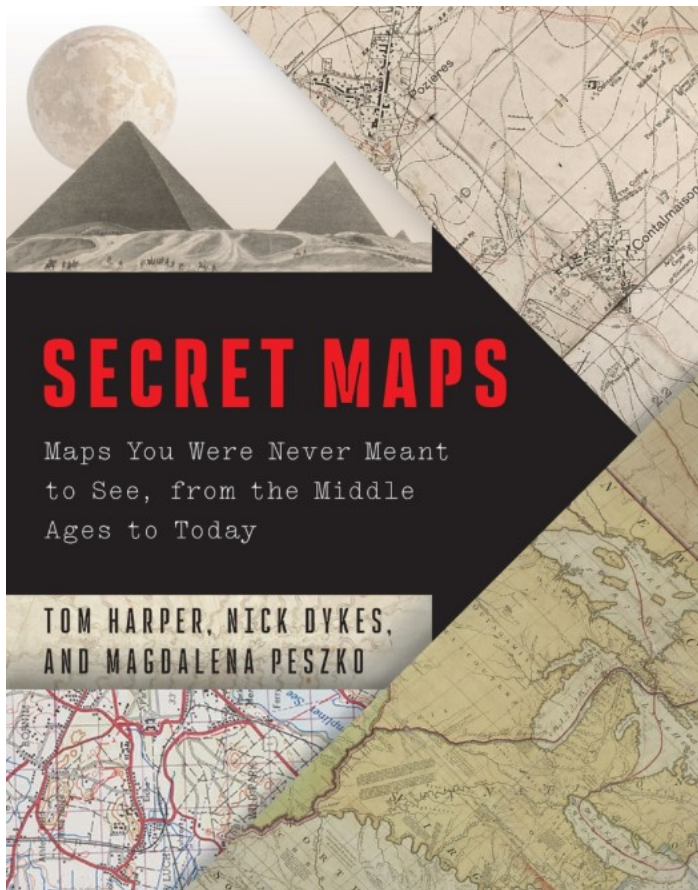




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Book review: **Secret Maps: Maps You Were Never Meant to See, from the Middle Ages to Today**

reviewed by Megan Gall



Harper, Tom, Nick Dykes, Magdalena Peszo. *Secret Maps: Maps You Were Never Meant to See, from the Middle Ages to Today*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2025. 288 p. \$39.00. LC: 2025932534. ISBN: 978-0-226-84616-3

Secret Maps covers the intersection of maps and secrets in Western culture over the past six centuries. The authors break the book into four main sections covering



maps in the imperial context, the state context, the unofficial of societal context, and the private context. They discuss these examples in several ways. One is as secret images, which is the actual content shown on the map. The next is as secret objects, where the map itself is considered a secret. The authors point out that every secret in the book was a secret that got out. There are troves of secret maps that have stayed secret to only the few that knew about them! Third, they explore maps with secret meanings which are codified in some ways, whether it is secretly coded language or signs and symbols. And finally, they explore who decided the map was secret in the first place.

The authors do an excellent job fulfilling their thesis. They explain that the book is focused on Western culture because to create this book for all of history would be a monumental task. Even with these parameters, the book is full of examples each with full-color illustrations and a fulsome description. The maps are printed in enough detail so that the reader can see the writing and explore it themselves.

Equal parts maps and explanatory text, the book succeeds in its goals. The modern examples are eye-opening, like the ways Google Maps actually does keep secrets by blurring some important buildings while fully showing others that even local maps obscure. The content is engaging and historically rich. The chapter titled “Revealing Africa, 1558-1850s” in the Secrets of Empire section explores the duality of maps on the continent by discussing how it was both a land of extravagant wealth and also full of barbarism and how these dualities fed the narratives for European exploration and exploitation. The chapter titled “Secret Navigation at Sea: D-Day and Decca, 1944” discusses a chart used on D-Day that overlaid the Decca Lattice which referenced overlapping broadcasts from radio transmitters. The chart was so successful that it was decommissioned the day after D-Day to preserve its secrecy and subsequent usefulness. The chapter is followed by another chapter on other D-Day maps that were made to aid the invasion. The Secrets in Societies section was my favorite section. It has fascinating chapters about women cartographers, mapping tricks to catch map plagiarism, and in the “Mapping the Secrets of Kowloon’s Maze, 1997” chapter, it showed the fascinating way humans have evolved into tight urbanity with a blown-up portion of the *Grand Panorama of the Kowloon Walled City* that I studied for an hour. The last section titled Privacy explores the tense relationship between maps and privacy including everything from maps of poverty in London in 1887 to the proliferation of maps exploiting our private lives through modern cell phones and convenience apps.

Overall, the book is important for the study of history, geography, and cartography



because of its breadth of content and handling of the materials. It is well-cited and resourced. Beyond being a fascinating coffee table book, I imagine its usefulness in libraries as a reference book for scholars looking to bolster their work in specific topics that are covered, such as the D-Day maps.

Megan Gall
Principal
Blockwell Consulting, LLC

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