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The Map Librarian as Intermediary between Collection and User

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Introduction: parts played by user and librarian

The cartographic communication process starts with the perception of the real world, passes through the stages of information gathering, information processing, map reproduction, map distribution and ends in that of map use, in which the map is observed, read and interpreted by the user (1). If this process should be allowed to run undisturbed, the picture received by the user should correspond with the view of reality of the mapmaker. But there is dissonance and noise in every stage of the process, even in the last stage. What is the contribution of the

map user to this process, what is his affinity with the material, his knowledge, his experience, what are his expectations, and lastly what "noise" can we expect. Our task is to facilitate the process in this last stage, so that maps can be used in the right way.

Koeman, a well-known and respected visitor of many a map collection in the Netherlands and abroad, describes from the viewpoint of a map user the problems that can occur (2). He gives three examples of short conversations between a map librarian and three visitors who formulated their questions insufficiently clearly because of their insufficient knowledge of the material. One sentence in these conversations is characteristic of the task of the map librarian as an intermediary between map collection and user: 'Can you possibly specify your intention?' In the role of map user himself, however, Koeman chose another way, for he was disappointed in the map librarian as such. In his lecture on the occasion of the first lustrum of our Dutch Map Curators Working Group in 1980 about 'Episodes in the use of map collections in the past' he passed an uncharitable judgment over the maplibrarian: covetous, suspicious and incompetent. In his view, a good catalogue, machine-readable, will solve many problems (3).

In order to gain a better understanding of the respective parts played by map librarian and user we have to examine several factors, which I will do on the basis of my experience in the Leiden map collection. These factors are:

1. knowledge and insight of the user;
2. knowledge and insight of the librarian;

3. the quality of the catalogues;
4. adequate space for collection and users;
5. the presence of an extensive reference library.

The quoted verdict of Koeman on the map librarian presents a violent contrast to the friendly service rendered in former times by Bodel Nijenhuis, the founder of the Leiden collection (4). His biographer tells us how Bodel, small in stature, did not hesitate to mount with a certain agility a high ladder, to take heavy portfolios from the upper shelves, and descend with the volumes balanced on his head. He did this not only for himself, for his greatest delight was to show his treasures to others. I quote: "His rich collections were accessible to everybody, Bodel has been a willing and helpful man. While rendering services he remained humble, well-pleased with the expression of thanks in the preface of a book, which had been realized with his help. Covetousness was strange to him, if it was not that author's copy given to him out of gratitude". Some visitors of Bodels private collection expressed their thanks by dedicating their works to him, as Asher did with his list of maps of New Netherland in 1867. I quote: "To J.T. Bodel Nijenhuis of Leiden, the profound investigator of Geographical Science, who with the utmost kindness and liberality assisted the author with his extensive knowledge and opened to him the treasures contained in his unrivalled collection of Maps and Charts" (5). This is real map librarianship in a nutshell: to assist with knowledge and to open the treasures of the collection.

Map use in Leiden University Library in past and present

The history of public map collections in the Netherlands began just before the death of Bodel Nijenhuis in 1872. In the State Archives in The Hague two collections of maps had just been formed, which originally belonged to different archives: one of the Netherlands, described by Hingman, and the other of maps outside the Netherlands, described by Leupe. These archive maps were filed separately from the original records, and were described without reference to the corresponding document. In this operation only some thousands of maps were involved. We can state, that by the bequest of Bodel Nijenhuis to Leiden University in 1872, the first large public map collection in the Netherlands was created. The great problem was how to manage it, for examples were missing. Policy on cataloguing, filing and conservation started slowly. There was no regular use of the collection until the 1920s. The appointment of Dr. Wieder as director of our library must have been a stimulating factor for the map collection (6). From the visitor's lists and annual and later quarterly reports, retained over the years, we can form an image of map use over time. The map library facilities, however, remained meagre until recently. In talking about map use of our collection, therefore, I will refer mostly to the last fifteen years.

For some years, university libraries in the U.S. have had at their disposal official standards for map collections, respectively dealing with services, collections, personnel, facilities and finance (7). To get some insight into the quality of the facilities which the Leiden University Library has offered map users in the last fifteen years, we can use these standards as a yardstick. In doing so we have to bear in mind that a group of typical professional users does not exist in Leiden. The collection consists of old maps, atlases and topographical prints, primarily used by non-professionals as source material in a wide variety of historical research. 27 % of the users come from the university community, 52 % are researchers from outside the university, 10 % come from abroad and the rest, 11 % are a group with diverse interests: editors, collectors, local historians, genealogists. To give more statistical information: the number of visitors has increased from an average of 30 in 1935 to 130 in 1970, and since 1971 from 210 to 300 per annum. 60 % of the users ask for maps, 13 % for atlases and 27 % for prints and drawings.

The map library facilities in Leiden are as follows: As far as the location of the collection is concerned some crucial events have to be mentioned: in the 1930s we had a separate map room on the ground floor, without doubt an initiative of Dr. Wieder, being himself the main user; in 1964 the collection was moved to the upper floor of one of the bookstacks, very difficult to access. In 1975 we made the best of that location by arranging a complete new students room with a separate secure stack for maps. In 1983 we moved to our new library, in which integration has been effected of the student rooms of the departments of manuscripts, old books and maps. In the first ninety years of its existence - until 1962- the collection had survived without specially-appointed personnel. In that year a part-time map librarian was recruited and in 1971 a fulltime conservator. In the sixties there were more appointments of fulltime employees, and this development indicated that maps had been accepted in university libraries. With the arrival of map curators, strategic management became possible, in which reference service, provision of bibliographic instruction and promotional activities were developed, and publications and exhibitions were guaranteed.

There is no pressure to develop the collections systematically according to a comprehensive policy following changing research needs of academic departments, for these are missing in Leiden. The only guidelines by which new acquisitions are added are not drawn up according to the wishes of the present users, but by the priorities given to the collection by Bodel Nijenhuis himself.

Cataloguing is still a weak point in our user services. We chose the PICA automated cataloguing system in 1984, but we have yet to reach the point where it becomes fully operational (8). The financial resources of the collection are inadequate to the requirements of a fully-functioning university map collection, but the accomplishments within the last fifteen years have nevertheless been

remarkable. In summary, adequate facilities have been developed for map users, facilities, which bear comparison with most of the U.S. standards.

The need for professional assistance

Map use as the final stage in the cartographic communication process has been discussed so far only from one side, the facilities offered by the map collection. But what about the map user and the role of the map librarian? As mentioned before, the number of professional users is small. Most are nonprofessional scholarly researchers who usually consult the map as historical source material, and who look for supplementary or supporting evidence as well as for discrete information. The catalogue will solve many of their questions without the need for assistance from the map librarian. Nevertheless the following statement, made by Rachel Collins in her remarkable essay on the 'Nature and requirements of historical mapcollections' (9) underlines the value of professional assistance. "The librarian function as translator and mediator between patrons and materials is possibly more important in a historical map library than in another type, because so many of the users from the amateur genealogist to the historical researcher are unfamiliar with the potential uses of maps". Map users will often need a guide who can teach them to apply the apparatus of historical criticism to maps, as they are adept at doing to other historical sources. Some visitors want to extract more information from a map than it holds, others have not the slightest idea of the richness of information in one map. That is the reason why intentions of users have to be determined and his questions translated in order to bring him to the map that meets his needs.

The measure and level of assistance needed by the individual nonprofessional map user will differ in accordance with his familiarity with maps. In this respect Muriel Strickland of San Diego University distinguishes three main categories of non-professional map users (10):

- Firstly the visitor who is familiar with maps. There may be some limitations to his map reading abilities, but his approach is open and his questions clear. In the long run he can do without assistance, and when it is needed he will ask for it.
- Secondly, there is the visitor who is not so communicative about the intentions of his visit. He has his own problem, his own ideas of solving it, and he asks for something definite. He prefers to go his own way. It takes a lot of time to convince him that his approach might be wrong, that the maps he is looking for are perhaps not in the collection, or that they do not exist at all.
- Thirdly we meet the newcomer, who enters the unknown territory of the map room for the first time; he is shy and unfamiliar with the procedures, and sometimes lacks any knowledge of cartography. He needs immediate attention and assistance.

Consequently, the attitude of the map librarian must be one of permanent awareness of the uses of his collection; he needs to develop a way of getting to the bottom of the users questions and intentions. Regular active involvement with the users might make an initial impression of nosiness, but will be mostly appreciated when it leads the user to unexpected, unexplored and unknown resources.

Quality of service

Each of us will have examples from experience as to how amateurishly maps can be used by visitors who enter the map room without asking for assistance. This may sometimes lead to serious mistakes.

In the short period of interregnum, just before my coming to Leiden, some members of an interdepartmental Working-group of the Finance Department and of Home Affairs visited the Bodel Nijenhuis Collection in search of old maps, which might give them a simple solution to a very complicated historical question. What was the

problem? Many Dutch towns with historical centres have to spend a lot of money on the maintenance of infrastructure such as canals, sewers and streets. In the early seventies when this financial burden became too heavy for the local administrations, the Dutch State Government decided to place additional finance at their disposal, earmarked for that purpose. But how would they share this fund and which towns were qualified to receive money? This led to another intricate historical problem: what makes a place a town, not only today but also in the past.

The gentlemen of the Working Group were looking for a straightforward solution without time-consuming historical studies, for time was pressing; and they had a brainwave. If modern maps give accurate information about the difference between towns and other places, so will old maps. Nine maps were found in the Leiden collection which were, in their opinion, suitable, for they all showed the whole territory of the Netherlands, they were made approximately to the same scale, and were published in the period 1600 to 1840 at intervals of about ten years. A place was recognised as being a town when it was indicated as such at least on two of the nine maps. The list of official towns was set up and the law has been put in operation in 1973 (11). Since then, hundreds of thousands of guilders have been and still are distributed among the Dutch towns every year, according to a ratio derived from the nine old maps. (Picture 1.)

In this case, the overestimation of old maps as sources of evidence is obvious; it was caused by a reluctance to subject them to the same criticism which is usually applied to more traditional historical source materials. Experiences like these demonstrate convincingly the importance of the role of the map librarian in the last stage of the communication process. Well-founded use of the collection

depends for the greater part upon the quality of the service, which in turn is dependent upon the knowledge and attitude of the map librarian.

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Picture 1: No question at all: Brielle is a town, but Geervliet? (Detail of the wall map "Belgii XVII Provinciarum tabula" by F. de Wit, 1680.