H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Martin Gilbert. *The Routledge Atlas of American History: From the First Exploration to the Present Day.* London and New York: Routledge, 2003. 149 pp. $29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-28152-2; $100.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-28151-5.

Reviewed by Lorraine Coops (Publisher Relations Associate, JSTOR)
Published on H-Survey (January, 2004)

I suspect that many who first open Martin Gilbert's updated (note updated, not revised) atlas will be taken aback when seeing that all of the maps are in black, white, and gray. In an environment where especially textbook publishers seem to go all-out to produce books replete with stunning full-color illustrations, Gilbert's atlas seems at first glance to be too muted, too understated to draw much attention. Could the achromatic, two-dimensional (or planimetric, i.e., having no contours or relief) maps presented here have much to offer in today's world of thousands of shades of red, blue, and green?- And would anyone (especially teachers and students, in keeping with the focus of this review) be enticed to venture beyond the stoic presentation? Under certain circumstances, as I will discuss in this review, I think the answers to these questions could be yes (or, at least, maybe). At the same time, I think the roughly $20.00 price along with sometimes quite obvious flaws in the atlas will lead many professors to leave Gilbert's atlas off their required book lists.

When pondering how to assess Gilbert's atlas, I considered several points, in particular the quality versus the price of the manufactured product as well as the range, depth, and accuracy of the topics covered. In addition, I considered how beneficial the atlas might be as an adjunct to history course texts, by which I mean under what circumstances the atlas would be useful, especially to teachers of survey courses. To assist in the assessment of the current edition, I utilized at random several other items: first, the original 1968 edition of Gilbert's atlas (a copy of which I found in my local public library); second, the lower-priced, but full-color, *Rand McNally Atlas of American History*, eighty pages and list priced at $6.95; and third, a combined edition of *Out of Many: A History of the American People*, list price about $75.00.[1] I included the latter as an example of the type of highly produced textbooks that entice professors with quality writing, numerous illustrations, and an abundance of support materials, including overheads, lecture outlines, and online student study-guide sites. Together, these works provide a comparison for Gilbert's maps and also serve as a way to judge whether and/or when Gilbert's work might prove useful for professors and students alike.

In the preface to the first edition, Gilbert prefers not to limit the purpose of the atlas, stating that his aim is "to provide a short but informative visual guide to American history," designing the maps so they may be used in the "widest possible way." He keeps these comments for the fourth edition, but adds that he hopes the maps "will be of interest and service to teachers, students, and the general reader." While succeeding on the first point, in the sense that general readers may find enough to interest them here, the atlas comes up a bit short on the second point, especially for academics looking for an accurate up-to-date reference book.

As to the quality of Gilbert's atlas, the manufacture seems good, although with a glued binding it is hard to say how the book will withstand repeated usage. Unfortunately, hands-free consulting is cumbersome, as the atlas needs considerable coaxing (in the form of a weight) to stay open at any particular page. The book measures 9 3/4" by 6 3/4" with one map per page, except for the doubled-up maps 70-71 and 94-95, and four-part map 135. There are a total of 149 maps.[2] The maps follow a mostly chronological order and, as with textbooks, some topics receive broad and sometimes inadequate treatment (for example, map 29, "Medicine and Public Health 1738-1886") and a few almost inexplicably detailed treatment (such as the nearly blow-by-blow account presented in map 6, "De Soto's March, 1539-1543").[3] As well, the initial 112 maps from the first edition have not been reworked and have a slightly cruder appearance than the later, cleaner-lined maps of subsequent editions. Nonetheless, most of the maps are well drawn and often present a wealth of information in a confined space, even if the maps at times appear bare-boned. Thus, while the black, white, and gray maps in Gilbert's atlas are at a disadvantage in terms of appearance when compared with the color renditions in the Rand McNally

atlas and *Out of Many*, Gilbert generally presents more information and more commentary for each map than do the other two. Unfortunately, Gilbert's information is sometimes outdated, and occasionally incorrect, making the uphill climb for Gilbert's plainer approach that much more difficult.

Indeed, many of the problems with Gilbert's atlas arise because it is an updated, not a revised, edition. Despite Gilbert's statement that the second edition (1985) was a revised edition, as far as I could tell all of the 112 maps produced in the original edition are reproduced unchanged in the current version. The lack of revision does not have a great effect on the map renditions themselves, but it is noticeable, sometimes blatantly so, in some of the descriptors or inset comments used in conjunction with the maps. For example, the first map, "The Origin of Settlement in America, 50,000-1,000 B.C.," rightly places the future migrants in central and eastern Asia, but uses the outdated term "Mongoloid Peoples" to classify them. Similarly, the use of the word "Negro" with maps that deal with slavery and civil rights (maps 24, 51, 53, 57, 105, 106, 107, 108, and 109) is not only outdated, but is also inconsistent with the use of the term "black Americans" in post-first edition maps.

Outdated usage is also apparent in the otherwise intriguing "The Indian Tribes of North America Before 1492" (map 2), which names and positions the many dozens of First Nations peoples who occupied pre-contact North and Central America. Being familiar with Canadian history, I noticed several out-of-date names, such as Micmac instead of Mi=kmaq and Malecite now Maliseet, as well as the use of Eskimo where instead Inuit (now also subdivided into separate groups such Baffin Island Inuit, Labrador Inuit, Caribou Inuit, etc.) should be. Such imprecision hinders the atlas's appeal and usefulness and might well lead some professors to consider not using it. (One way around the problems with the earlier maps might be to have students analyze the changes in knowledge and terminology that have taken place since 1968, but this is really a band-aid approach.) Without belaboring the point, suffice it to say that while the first-edition maps appear in general to be accurate, there are instances where the terminology is outdated and, in a few instances, where the facts do not agree with currently held opinions. This latter point is evident in map 3, "The Vikings and America, 800-1015," in which Gilbert proposes rather extensive Viking explorations to North America and suggests that the "Vinland settlers may also have survived until about 1300." In 1968 this may have been considered a possibility, but today only one archeological site has received general acceptance, this being the briefly established L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland. There is no evidence to suggest that the Vikings successfully established long-term settlements anywhere in North America.

While historical atlases can be useful for showing snapshots of varying lengths of time, they can also blur the passing of events. In "European Settlements 1526-1642" (map 10), for example, Gilbert fails to indicate the important French settlement of Port Royal (founded in 1605) in present-day Nova Scotia, although he does list Quebec 1608 and Montreal 1642, noting these latter two were French settlements. The absence of Port Royal (later Annapolis Royal to the English) presents a bit of a problem for map 12, "English Land Grants 1621-1682," which indicates that the Canadian Maritimes had been granted to English officials, when in fact control (or possession) of various portions of the Maritimes (and Maine) flip-flopped between the French and English (not to mention the First Nations) over half a dozen times up until the Conquest in 1759 as the two European powers waged their on-going battle for North American (and global) supremacy. The point here is that a map can be very useful for giving hindsight perspective, but some topics are hard to map or may be misleading without adequate explanation.

It is unfortunate that the first three maps in the atlas contain the errors noted above. A knowledgeable potential purchaser might open the book, look at these and conclude that the atlas contains many similar, mostly minor but annoying, faults. In truth, however, the faults are few, which makes their lack of correction all the more curious. It seems that the problems either should have been corrected or reasons given as to why they were not. The faults of the atlas are all the more frustrating because in terms of the depth of coverage given to the topics covered, Gilbert's atlas holds its own against the competition, often supplying more information (in the form of labels, charts, and commentary) than one would think possible on a map and doing so without interfering with the drawing itself. This is certainly a strong point for the Gilbert atlas, but one that still must be weighed relative to each professor's needs. The goal of any particular course is a crucial factor in determining if the content of Gilbert's atlas is suitable and, therefore, in the following sections I will discuss the content of the atlas, using the Rand McNally atlas and the *Out of Many* textbook for comparison.

Gilbert's atlas, like any survey of American history, covers some topics or events in greater detail than others. To give some examples, as with the other two books

used for comparison in this review, Gilbert begins with the pre-contact era, followed by a selection of European explorations to the New World. Gilbert provides a bit more depth than the Rand McNally atlas or *Out of Many* regarding the origin and development of early European settlements and conflicts with the First Nations, whereas he provides just one map dealing with the American Revolution, compared to seven in Rand McNally and five in *Out of Many*. A similar treatment of the Civil War battles is apparent, with Gilbert providing one, Rand McNally four, and *Out of Many* seven maps. All three books give periodic "big pictures," such as Gilbert's "North America 1783" (map 28) and each also provides various immigration and ethnic-origin maps.[4] But Gilbert provides quite a few maps for topics and events not mapped by the other books. For example, Gilbert includes "Social Problems 1792-1860" (map 31), "Education 1784-1888" (map 45), "Social Discontent 1876-1932" (map 60), "Civil Aviation 1918-1940" (map 80), "Berlin Airlift 1948-1949" (map 99), "American Land Based Surveillance Systems 1982" (map 113), "Major Natural and Accidental Disasters 1975-1993" (map 121), "United States Military Personnel Overseas, 2000: Europe" (map 141; "Global" map 142) and "Pollution: Hazardous Waste Sites, 2000" (map 146), to give an idea of the diversity.

In order to give a sense of the range of topics in Gilbert's atlas, I have categorized the maps as follows: six maps, mostly in the earlier portion of the atlas, deal with Native Americans; twenty, again mostly early, maps deal with exploration and settlement; fourteen maps in the early to mid sections of the atlas deal with immigration and ethnic or geographic origins; forty-three maps appearing throughout the atlas focus on military or defense topics; nineteen maps, concentrated in the middle portions of the book, deal with economic, trade, or transport issues; fourteen maps in the middle and later sections deal with social or religious topics; twelve deal with political matters; and twenty-one maps in the mid to later sections of the book deal with global interests and issues. While considering these categories, it should be remembered that there is often some overlap, so that, for example, maps that have a primarily global focus might also contain issues relating, for example, to military matters or immigration. Map 116, "The United States in the Pacific, 1823-1993," for instance, presents a global picture with inset explanations of the U.S. involvement in the acquisition or political development of over a dozen Pacific island groups via militaristic, political, or other means. In fact, I have estimated that 45 of the first 112 maps and 30 of the last 37 maps have at least a partial global component.

Looking at some specific examples of content, although I criticize the second map, "The Indian Tribes of North America Before 1492," for being somewhat outdated, on the positive side Gilbert locates the many dozens of North American First Nations, from the Ciboney in the Caribbean to the Eskimo in present-day Alaska, using pointer lines to indicate approximately where each community lived. This one simple map illustrates powerfully just how diverse the First Nations were and, by implication, what sweeping changes occurred with European contact. In contrast, the Rand McNally map "Where Native Americans Lived" (p. 11) follows a current trend of dividing the continent into color-coded "culture areas," with only the names of the most prominent Native groups applied to the map. A similar large map is used in *Out of Many* (p. 7), with three small regional maps used to focus on First Nations living in first contact zones (i.e., Southwest, Southern, and Northeastern "Indian Groups," pp. 13, 14). As a result, neither the Rand McNally nor the *Out of Many* maps have quite the impact that Gilbert's map has.

No one book can cover all topics, and even when certain subjects are mapped they may be done so in a way that does not satisfy all users. Such is the case with Gilbert's treatment of urbanization (map 145), which is too simplified and lacks depth. In this case Gilbert provides a simple outline map of North America, labeled with nine major urban centers and an inset comment box describing the rise of the "Megalogpolis" and "urban sprawl." The Rand McNally atlas provides a much better perspective using a choropleth map (i.e., a "thematic map in which areas are colored, shaded, dotted, or hatched to create darker or lighter areas in proportion to the density of distribution of the theme subject").[5] Rand McNally uses the same types of maps (each with an accompanying chart) to illustrate 1990s statistics for "Median Family Income," "Lifetime Expectance," "Percentage of U.S. Population Below Poverty Level," and "U.S. Unemployment Rates" (pp. 68-69). Gilbert does not provide anything like these, while *Out of Many* provides one small map and two simplified charts. The point here is that professors wanting to provide an atlas for their students should review the options available to see what each one offers before making their decisions. From a brief survey I have done of Barnes and Noble and Amazon.com, however, it appears that there are in fact few atlases still in print that span the entire history of America. Several previous atlases, such as *The Penguin Historical Atlas of North America*, the pricey but pleasing *Mapping America's Past: A Historical Atlas*, and the *Longman American History Atlas*, appear to be out of print.[6] Publishers seem to have

turned their focus to atlases that concentrate on certain topics such as ancient North America, women, religion, specific wars, etc., so there may not be that many choices remaining to compare or compete with Gilbert.

Even with only a few choices available, however, I cannot recommend Gilbert's atlas without reservations. Given the depth of coverage that major textbooks such as *Out of Many* (or, to cite another example, *The American Promise*) provide, I cannot see how Gilbert's atlas would add enough content to justify the expenditure of $20.00.[7] The major textbooks either contain enough maps of their own or provide overheads or allow access to web sites with additional maps and charts to make a book like Gilbert's atlas seem an unnecessary luxury.

Where Gilbert's atlas could be useful is for courses that rely primarily on the written word. History courses designed without the use of many illustrations, such as documentary studies of U.S. history or courses in which the professor has put together his or her own course pack might want to consider using Gilbert's atlas to provide another way for students to view historical events and developments. In other words, in courses which do not rely on the large, highly illustrated textbooks and the numerous overheads that are supplied with these texts, Gilbert's atlas could prove quite useful. I would suggest that professors review the materials they plan to use and determine how many of Gilbert's maps might fill the gaps in their presentations.

Even in courses that rely primarily on the written word, I am still somewhat reticent to fully endorse Gilbert's atlas. I return to the problems mentioned earlier and feel it is a shame that for whatever reason (perhaps copyright, production costs, or other) time was not taken to rescan the original set of maps and adjust at least the content to keep in tune with present-day knowledge. This would make the expenditure of a newly redesigned Jackson $20.00 bill on Gilbert's atlas seem more appropriate.

Notes

[1]. *Rand McNally Atlas of American History* (Skokie: Rand McNally & Company, 1999); John Mack Faragher, Susan Armitage, and Mari Jo Buhle, *Out of Many: A History of the American People*, brief 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2001). Rand McNally lists the *Atlas of American History* for use in grades 9-12, but the maps are sufficiently sophisticated for a comparison with Gilbert's atlas.

[2]. The Routledge web site lists the atlas as having 320 maps. How this figure was arrived at I cannot tell. The number of maps is as I indicate in the review.

(3) Perhaps I am being a bit too critical here, but these two maps do illustrate the difficult choices facing the mapmaker. Just how in depth should one go? "Medicine and Public Health 1738-1886" uses labeled urban centers and inset comments overlaid on a simple outline map of eastern North America to trace the development of public health. The map begins with the label "Hospital 1738" in Charleston and ends with the inset comment "1884 Tuberculosis sanatorium opened." "De Soto's March 1539-1543" uses inset comments to follow the expedition, beginning with "18 May 1539, Left Havana, Cuba" and ending with "10 September 1543. Moscosco [who led the expedition after De Soto's death] returns to Spanish settlements on the Gulf of Mexico."

[4]. In the Rand McNally atlas see "North America, 1783," p. 28; in *Out of Many* see "North America after the Treaty of Paris, 1783," p. 117. All three maps show possession/control of the North American continent (with Gilbert and Rand McNally going as far south as northern South America) from a European perspective. None of the maps indicates areas controlled by the First Nations.

[5]. Definition of choropleth taken from http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/glossary.html

[6]. Eric Homberger, *The Penguin Historical Atlas of North America* (London and New York: Viking Press, 1995); Mark C. Carnes, Patrick Williams, and John Arthur Garraty, *Mapping America's Past: A Historical Atlas* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997); and David Dalton, ed., *Longman American History Atlas* (New York: Longman, 1999).

[7]. James L. Roark, et al., *The American Promise: A History of the United States*, compact 2nd ed. (New York: Bedford/St. Martins, 2003).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Lorraine Coops. Review of Gilbert, Martin, *The Routledge Atlas of American History: From the First Exploration to the Present Day.* H-Survey, H-Net Reviews. January, 2004.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8700

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for

nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.