

Royal roads

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FULL TEXT

A cartographer's picaresque journey contains much uncharted territory, writes Alexandra Harris

The Nine Lives of John Ogilby: Britain's Master Map Maker and His Secrets

by Alan Ereira

Duckworth Overlook pound(s)25, 304 pages

I sometimes wish that modern road atlases looked more like John Ogilby's 1675 *Britannia*, with its beautifully drawn routes, "The Road From London to the Lands End" or "From Kings-Lyn to Norwich" unfurling on scrolls with churches, orchards and hills illustrated along the way. But at least the map in my car shows roads that exist, whereas, according to the ingenious and mostly convincing account presented here by Alan Ereira, the roads in *Britannia* stray from those on the ground, and were drawn to serve the secret intentions of Charles II rather than to help the common traveller on his way. Ogilby's life, like his maps, was characterised by outward shows and hidden purposes. He was prodigiously busy and productive, working close to the centres of power at the Stuart court, in the theatre, and among scholarly friends such as Robert Hooke and Elias Ashmole. Yet he left little trace beyond the extravagant volumes he published as one of London's leading booksellers. Even John Aubrey, when he came to write a "Brief Life" of Ogilby, was stumped. This was a subject who carefully obscured his origins, and worked in the language of signs and subtexts that many royalists by necessity made their own.

He told Aubrey a story from his early life: he had bought a lottery ticket in his father's name and won enough both to free John senior from the debtors' prison and to apprentice himself to a dancing master. This, then, is how the urchin son of an out-of-work tailor came to dance the stately "Old Measures" with the lawyers at Gray's Inn, where the steps of the pavane were celebrated for their embodiment of natural justice.

Ereira smells a rat. Those tickets were expensive, and so was the dancing. What if the lottery win were a cover for another kind of funding? He duly uncovers a possible sponsor by showing that Ogilby was in fact the son of the 6th Lord Ogilvie of Airlie, though he didn't know it until well into middle age, when he started to use (for private consumption only) the Airlie coat of arms. Committed codebreaker that he is, Ereira proceeds through a world of missing letters and tacit subversions, where a family history might be revealed only in the posture of an heraldic lion, and where a few notes on a horoscope, in Ashmole's private cipher, constitute the most reliable record around.

Ogilby's dancing was noticed by the Duke of Buckingham. He was brought to court and played in great masques before the king - until February 1619, when he leapt gloriously, fell horribly, and was lame ever after. He went off to train as a soldier, which took him to The Hague and then to Ireland in the Earl of Strafford's retinue. Exploiting his flair for both performance and entrepreneurship, he opened Dublin's first theatre and served as Master of the Revels, before deciding (though he had no Latin) to translate all of Virgil. Then he found himself a Greek tutor and began on Homer. His versions of the classics, which emphasised deposed rulers and eventual triumphs, were really his preparation for writing a royalist epic of his own. Once he had organised the vast spectacle of Charles II's coronation, a masque occupying the stage of all London, he set to work. During the Great Fire of 1666, however, the entire manuscript of *Carolies* went up in flames.

Though he was nearly 70 by the time he turned to map-making and had no experience as a surveyor, though he had faced ruination over and over, he was still thinking on the grand scale. He was, he wrote, "girding himself courageously for no less

than the Conquest of the whole World". Not even Ogilby could map the whole world; he depended on existing work. But within the smaller compass of England and Wales his achievement was wholly original. With the help of a trundle wheel or "way-wiser", he measured, or organised the measurement of, some 26,000 miles of road.

Ereira produced a BBC series called The Great Map Mystery in 2008 which featured former Python Terry Jones driving along Ogilby's routes and getting stuck in ditches where the roads turned out not to exist. It was a practical experiment, and it yielded serious questions about Britannia . Was a TV crew really revising 17th-century history? Yes, and Ereira has done extensive sleuthing since.

The Nine Lives of John Ogilby is not always satisfying as biography. There is little suggestion of an inner life and I began to long for a gap or two where unknown beliefs and motivations might reside. Mrs Ogilby, Christian Hunsdon, gets only a handful of sentences - in which she marries, looks after the publishing business in John's absence, and dies at 90, the year after her husband of 26 years. I would gladly have swapped some analyses of irregular mapping for a few quotidian moments in the Ogilbys' back-room off Shoe Lane, or a morning on the road with the way-wiser. But Ereira has managed feats of detection. He makes legible an astonishing life-story that was almost blotted out. He reveals one man's endeavours, and in the process opens some of the strangest locked cabinets of the strange and dangerous 17th century.

Alexandra Harris is author of 'Weatherland: Writers and Artists Under English Skies' (Thames & Hudson)

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