



## MacDonald Gill

### The Wonderground Map and its influence

In 1913 British architect and artist MacDonald Gill (1884-1947) was commissioned by the management of what is popularly referred to as “The Underground” to create a poster-sized map of central London featuring, prominently, the city’s numerous “Tube” stations. Gill’s cartoon-styled map was part of a finely tuned advertising campaign promoting the concept of easy access by public transport to all the marvels of the burgeoning metropolis. The following year the map, having been widely displayed in Tube stations in poster format, was put on sale in a slightly reduced size. (1) The text on the map’s pictorial envelope refers to the folded map within as “The Famous Wonderground Map of London Town,” testifying to the poster’s immediate success in capturing the popular imagination.

A useful key to unlocking the whimsical stylistics of Gill’s map is contained in the image of an open book pictured in the map’s lower left corner. Beneath the cartoon image of a mouse, the text on the book’s page reads: “Little mouse that lost in wonder / Flicks his whiskers at the thunder.” The rhyme is drawn from Algernon Blackwood’s *A Prisoner in Fairyland*, an enormously popular children’s book published in 1913, the same year as the poster’s creation. In his book Blackwood writes, in a passage capturing the world of

wonder and delight that Gill's map graphically evokes: "The Starlight Express is off to Fairyland. Show your tickets. Show your tickets."

The concept of being transported to an astonishing new world surely captured the collective imagination of the early twentieth century as Western societies experienced the extraordinary changes associated with the rise of mass production and a rapidly expanding consumer culture. MacDonald Gill's boldly innovative Wonderground Map represents a unique cartographic response to the representation of this "brave new world." Novel in method and message, its success both as a map and as an expression of an era's self-image was apparent in its immediate public reception and, perhaps more significantly, in its influence on pictorial mapmaking in the twentieth century. Not only did Gill's map spawn a clearly identifiable genre that was to appear in the United States, Canada, Latin America and Australia in the 1920s and 1930s, it marked a resurgence of decorative mapmaking that lasted throughout the century and beyond.<sup>(2)</sup> In honoring Gill's creation of the prototype, it seems appropriate to use the term "wonder map" in discussing this novel genre.

At the turn of the twentieth century the greater London network of bus, tram and underground railways was gradually being absorbed by large consortiums, one of which was the Underground Electric Railways Company of London, whose operations saw a rapid expansion between 1912 and 1913. At that time Frank Pick, a lawyer by training from the north of England, was the commercial manager and responsible for marketing. Pick saw the importance of turning the firm's loosely connected routes into an integrated transport system, making it, and by extension the city, a comprehensible entity, while simultaneously using the power of suggestion (new places to see...new things to do) to generate increased ridership in off-peak hours, holidays and weekends.

In 1913, MacDonald Gill, the younger brother of artist and sculptor Eric Gill, was embarking on what was to be a richly diverse career embracing architecture, mural painting, illustration, typography and design. His commission that year to design the Wonderground Map (the first of seven poster maps that Gill designed for the Underground Electric Railways Company between 1913 and 1932)<sup>(3)</sup> while propelled by commercial motives, reflects an overarching aesthetic Gill shared with Pick; specifically, a belief in the social importance of integrating superior design in the manufacture of commercial goods, a concept rooted in the philosophy of John Ruskin and expressed in the Arts and Crafts Movement.

In *The Avant-Garde in Interwar England*, intellectual historian Michael Saler describes Pick as a "medieval modernist."<sup>(4)</sup> By this term Saler, acknowledging the Ruskinian foundation of this concept, links utilitarian purpose with aesthetic intention in the creation of objects of social relevance and agency. In addition to his contributions to the flowering of poster art in England, Pick's many achievements (his role in founding the Design and Industries Association in 1915 and the Council for Art and Industry in 1932) eloquently support this description. In his outlook, vividly asserted in the Wonderground map, Gill might equally be seen as representative of Saler's "medieval modernist" ideology.

In Western cartography the period from the mid-fifteenth to seventeenth centuries saw "the great flowering of the cartographer as artist"; it was a period, as G. R. Crone observes, when "maps were works of art in their own right."<sup>(5)</sup> By the late nineteenth century emphasis on cartography as a precise science had displaced focus on visual attractiveness, a tendency further exacerbated by the methods of reproduction of maps for a mass market. Eschewing this separation of knowledge and beauty, Gill was

inspired by medieval cartography to create, via text and imagery, an encyclopedic interpretation of place and time.

An examination of the design elements of the Gill map demonstrates how well it fulfilled its promotional and navigational “function,” expressed in a new “form” which drew on earlier traditions of pictorial mapmaking while incorporating these in a radically new package reflective of contemporary design and society. Along with the large poster size of the map, perhaps the most immediately striking feature is the brilliant but simple coloration of red, yellow, green and blue, certain to attract immediate attention. The main roads along which the autobuses run are rendered in bright yellow and are drawn as if viewed from above in an orthographic projection; buildings, on the other hand, are abstracted and rendered in profile or in a rudimentary oblique projection. This combination of perspectives is typical of maps of the medieval period,<sup>(6)</sup> combining the simplicity of a road map or town plan with the visual appeal of pictorial art.

In the Gill map, all the attractions and amenities of London are laid before the viewer in a manner which is both visually exciting and yet within a comprehensible structure; the city is presented in the manner of a medieval walled town, the curved horizon recalling the medieval world map’s enclosing circle, all bounded by a decorative border in which coats of arms evoke a sense of stability and tradition. However, features within the map belie this orderly structure. The Underground stations are pictured as stylized turreted structures with cave-like openings, simultaneously bringing to mind medieval buildings, the star-caves of Blackwood’s novel, and the rabbit hole of Alice in Wonderland. Humor and whimsy reign with the presence of strange creatures, talking animals and, in the most innovative feature of the map, the profuse use of caricature figures who comment in “speech balloons” typical of cartoon illustration.

This design convention, allowing the integration of text and image, had been intermittently employed historically in artistic and satirical works, most notably in the work of eighteenth century British caricaturists such as Gillray. In the early 1900s it was adopted with great popular success in the cartoon “comic strips” of newspapers, a development that bore fruit in the archetypal twentieth century phenomenon, the comic book. Adopting this essential feature of mass popular culture, Gill filled the map with humorous quips and commentary, delivered in the vernacular of the city: on the Harrow Road, a farm worker tilling the soil cries “Harrowing work, this!” an exclamation which is countered by the query “What is work, is it a herb?” delivered by an effete gentleman nearby.

The overt use of medieval motifs in design (the pictographic representation used for Tube entrances, the heraldic devices, the curvature to the horizon, the tight enclosure within a decorative border giving the sense of a walled city) is juxtaposed with perceptibly modern design features (most strikingly the adoption of cartoon figures and speech bubbles) to create an amalgam of old and new, reality and the absurd, which reflects both the tensions and delights of urban society of the early twentieth century. Other features, such as the brilliant color and the rejection of realism recall both the past (the bold color of Medieval stained glass windows and the non-realistic nature of Medieval maps) as well as the sensibilities of modern art movements (for example, the bold colors and abstraction of Fauvism).

In pursuing its Ruskinian “teaching” agenda, the map is determinedly “of the people.” The cartoon images depict the working class and middle class users of the transport system who, seeing themselves depicted in the map, are invited to participate in the manifold experiences available in the world it evokes. In this combination of populism, humor, vibrant color and superior design, Gill, with the Wonderground Map,

produced a prototype that inspired the creation, over time, of a number of city maps both aesthetically engaging and highly informative.



## AMERICAN MAPS

With the notable exception of the realm of architecture, the innovations evident in European art and design of the early twentieth century contrasted with the more tradition-bound focus that dominated in the United States, certainly in the world of commercial art. In the years following the First World War, however, European trends increasingly influenced design in the United States, as exemplified by the keen interest shown by the American public in the 1925 Paris International Exposition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Art (the then U.S. Secretary of Commerce, Herbert Hoover, declined to participate, declaring that America had nothing modern to show at the Exposition).(7) Interest in the art poster movement had earlier been evinced in the 1921 Library of Congress exhibition of a collection of Underground Railway posters.(8) In 1926, Gill's Wonderground Map, then some 13 years old, appeared on the front cover of *Westvaco Inspirations for Printers*, a glossy magazine of the design and printing trade, in an issue featuring British design. While not crediting Gill, the cover image is described as "a reproduction in miniature of the famous map issued by the London Underground Railways."(9) Inside the magazine, the strong British influence on American advertising and design is noted, and qualities such as the British use of humor, the "splendid use of color" and the contribution of "the greatest painters and artists"(10) to graphic design are lauded.

In this same year, 1926—the year of the Sesquicentennial celebration of the United States of America—several maps demonstrating the influence of Gill's map were published in the United States. Bostonians

Edwin Olsen, an architect, and artist Blake Clark signed contracts with Houghton Mifflin Publishers to produce maps of Boston, Philadelphia and Washington D.C. Also that year, *A Map of the Wondrous Isle of Manhattan* by C.V. Farrow was published by Fuesse and Colman of New York City. While these maps were created for different audiences and had unique informational agendas that resulted in a de-emphasis of certain stylistic elements of Gill's map, the debt of each to the design of the Wonderground Map is evident at a glance. Printed in poster format in brilliant color lithography with bold decorative borders, each of the aforementioned maps was issued in a pictorial envelope in a design that quotes the style of the Wonderground Map. Like Gill's map, a hybrid scheme is employed blending an orthographic projection for the street grid (adapted in the New York map by the need to accommodate the city's skyscrapers) with rudimentary oblique or profile projections for the buildings and monuments. Some combination of caricature figures and / or humorous text in speech balloon format is used in all but the Washington D.C. map, where whimsy is restricted to a fantastical river serpent and a limited number of cartoon figures. Of the three Houghton Mifflin maps, that of Boston, the first to be designed by Olsen and Clark, is the most similar to the Wonderground Map; its impact in introducing the features of the prototype to an American audience is apparent in its description as "novel" in a review of the time.<sup>(11)</sup> The headline of another review observes: "Learn of Boston With a Chuckle Seems Mission of New Color Map."<sup>(12)</sup> While the element of "amusement" is still clearly present, albeit with fewer comic figures and humorous quips than the Gill map, the educational and civic intention is emphasized by the elaborate border illustrating historical scenes and early city maps.

C. V. Farrow's map of New York provides a counterpoint, evoking in its design a fast-paced, fun-loving, sophisticated and wholly contemporary image of the city. Interestingly, the map of the "Wondrous Isle" deals both with modes of transport (unlike the Houghton Mifflin maps) and the contemporary character of the people. A cartouche features sketches of both elevated and subway trains and also the profile of a luxurious automobile. More dominant are caricatures of the city's denizens, a high-toned couple in fancy evening dress and their street-wise counterparts. However, the real character of the city is captured in the highly animated decorative border in which pedestrians dodge speeding taxi cabs, clearly the primary mode of transport for a prosperous and perpetually "on the go" middle class. Speech bubbles are absent, but a sprinkling of cartoon figures captures aspects of city life.



## INTERNATIONAL MAPS

The international influence of Gill's cartographic design may be seen in maps published in Australia, Canada and Latin America in the early thirties. The inauguration of the Sydney Harbour Bridge in 1932 is celebrated in Russell Lloyd's poster-sized eponymous map, its proudly patriotic border text (Sir Walter Scott's "Breathes there a Man with Soul so Dead...") echoes the local pride of the public issue of the Wonderground Map's border text ("The Heart of Britain's Empire Here is Spread out for Your View..."). Caricatures and quips in word bubbles fill the Sydney map; the routes of train and tram lines are marked on an orthographic street grid, while buildings in profile or oblique perspective are identified in ribbon texts. The 1934 Wonder Map of Melbourne, published by Wonder Maps of Australia and subtitled A Motor Manual Map, highlights the adoption of another method of popular transportation, one reflecting the almost twenty year gap between this map and its prototype; however, the stylized entries for the city's railway system are clearly borrowed directly from the Gill map. The wording on the map's stiff card pictorial cover, "This is a Peep of the Sensational Wonder Map of Melbourne in Fun & Fact," harkens directly back to text on the Gill map's envelope: "This is a Small Corner of the Famous Wonderground Map of London Town."

Created at the start of a major societal shift with regard to tourism and transportation, MacDonald Gill's Wonderground Map, designed specifically to encourage the public to travel for pleasure, provided a highly effective template for a map intended to both educate and amuse. While "cartographic chaos"<sup>(13)</sup> may be an initial reaction to this brightly colored, whimsical conceptualisation, it was as much a map about a society's relationship to their contemporary world as a transportation map of a particular city; in this function and in its innovative design features its influence has been profound.



- (1) The poster printed for Underground station display is “quad royal” size (40 x 50 inches); the folded retail edition is 30 x 37 inches.
- (2) Examples include: A Map of Honolulu and the Sandwich Islands by A.S. McLeod (1927); A Map of Chicago’s Gangland published by Bruce-Roberts, Inc. (1931); Victoria and Vancouver Island by Peter Hugh Page (1936); Pictorial Map of the City of Mexico and Surroundings Yesterday and To-day by Emily Edwards, published for The Mexican Light & Power Co., and The Mexico Tramways Company (1932); The Sydney Harbour Bridge Map by Russell Lloyd (1932).
- (3) The edition printed for Underground station display is untitled and is catalogued by the London Transport Museum by the first words of its border text: “By Paying Us Your Pennies.” Gill also designed diagrammatic maps of the Underground system in the early 1920s.
- (4) Saler, Michael T. *The Avant-Garde in Interwar England: Medieval Modernism and the London Underground* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) ix.
- (5) Crone, G.R. “Preface” to R.V. Tooley and Charles Bricker, *Landmarks of Mapmaking* (New York: Dorset Press, 1981) 5.
- (6) Schulz, Juergen. “Jacopo de' Barbari's View of Venice: Map Making, City Views, and Moralized Geography before the Year 1500,” *The Art Bulletin*, September 1978, 446.
- (7) Rosenthal, R. and Ratzka, H.L. *The Story of Modern Applied Art* (New York: Harper and Company, 1948) quoted in Karen Davies, *Home in Manhattan: Modern Decorative Arts, 1925 to the Depression* (New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery, 1983) 11.
- (8) “British Posters in Washington,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, 17 October 1921, 12.
- (9) *Westvaco Inspirations for Printers*. (West Virginia Pulp & Paper Company: Series of 1926, No. 12) 240.
- (10) *Ibid.*, 235, 224.
- (11) “Literary Gossip,” *Los Angeles Times*, 6 June 1926, C-30.
- (12) “Learn of Boston With a Chuckle Seems Mission of New Color Map,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 24 May 1926, 4-B.
- (13) Barber, Peter. *The Map Book* (New York: Walker and Company, 2005) 306.

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