

PAYSAGE MORALISÉ: AUDEN AND MAPS

Reflecting on the links between his mature poetry and the childhood ‘private secondary sacred world’ deriving from his fascination with lead-mining and its Pennine landscapes, Auden recalled ‘necessary textbooks on geology and machinery, maps, catalogues, guidebooks, and photographs’ (CW p. 424), in which his fantasy-life had been grounded before he ever visited the North Pennine moors. When, earlier, he told Geoffrey Grigson that ‘My Great Good Place is the part of the Pennines bounded on the S by Swaledale, on the N by the Romans Wall and on the W by the Eden Valley’ (17/1/50; Berg),¹ he offered a quasi-cartographical definition of a locality both physically specific and metaphysically general, whose geographical boundaries were defined as if visualised on a map – which is, in fact, the only ‘place’ on which they could ever be observed simultaneously. Critical commentary has noticed the significance of maps in Auden’s poetry and drama; but as well as constituting a thematic continuity in his writing, maps figure more particularly in its hinterland, featuring in some of the importantly formative books he included in his ‘Nursery Library’ or quoted in A Certain World.² As with that ‘lonely’ schoolboy mapmaker he drolly but self-referentially admonished (EA p. 50), a fascination with maps possibly suggests the ‘autistic’ dimension he later associated with this phase of his life; but there is some evidence that maps continued to be a means by which older Auden evoked his Great Good Place. In view of the emphasis he would place upon this ‘sacred’ landscape and its evolving meanings, such precursive materials have potential interest. I want to explore what can be known about the maps by which that landscape’s existence was foreshadowed, and then maintained in memory.

¹ Quoted in Richard Davenport-Hines, Auden (1995), p. 236.

Auden listed Thomas Sopwith's An Account of the Mining District of Alston Moor, Weardale, and Teesdale (Alnwick, 1833) as part of his 'nursery library', and quoted it at length in A Certain World (which amounted to 'a map of my planet'); as its title indicates, it covers the locality he particularly loved. This small book, which he can have known only in its original printing, has as frontispiece a part-coloured 'plan', showing principal routes and hachured outline of fells, for 'the MINING DISTRICTS OF ALSTONMOOR and the adjoining dales OF THE RIVERS TYNE WEAR & TEES', taking the Roman Wall as its northern boundary, the Tees as its southern, and including Wallsend and Durham city to the east. The 'nursery library' included one other book about this area (despite the fact that it was first published when he was 16): Stanley Smith's Lead and Zinc Ores of Northumberland and Alston Moor (HMSO, 1923). There are reasons for believing that he prized this more highly than Sopwith, along with Westgarth Forster's A Treatise on a Section of the Strata from Newcastle upon Tyne to Cross Fell, third edition (Newcastle upon Tyne and London, 1883): he is reported as having in 1972 asserted that these two were his most precious books.³ His copy of this last – as Nicholas Jenkins has pointed out (AN 6, December 1990) – Auden induced Random House to use as model for The Age of Anxiety, which further suggests its personal significance. Neither Smith nor Forster, however, include maps, as distinct from more schematically localised diagrams.

Another mining-related book we know that he possessed – not because he ever alluded to it but because his autographed copy is in the city library at Carlisle – is John

² See Edward Mendelson, 'Note on Auden's "Nursery Library"', AN (Nov 1996), pp. 36-8; Katherine Bucknell, 'Auden's Nursery Library', AS III (1995), pp. 197-206.

³ See Alan Myers and Robert Forsythe, W.H. Auden: Pennine Poet (North Pennines Heritage Trust, 1999), p. 23. This pamphlet includes the text of Auden's Vogue article referred to later.

Postlethwaite's Mines and Mining in the (English) Lake District, third edition (Whitehaven, 1913), in which there are fold-out geological and geographical maps of the Lake District orefields. Auden acquired this in August 1921; but although he affixed to its inside covers and endpapers captioned photographs of some of the mines it described (presumably recording actual visits) – which surely suggests some degree of personal investment – its impact on his work is far less discernible than that of another book unrelated to mining, lengthily cited in A Certain World. This is Anthony Collett's The Changing Face of England (1926; Mendelson believes Auden possessed the 1932 reprint). Collett's book included two small-scale maps of England and Wales (with southern Scotland): 'Tides, Coast and Rivers', principally showing the direction of tidal flows; and 'Race and Language', delineating the approximate boundaries between Anglian and Saxon dialects and the extents, variously, of Anglo-Saxon, Danish, and Norse settlements. One other book associated by Auden with his 'nursery library' contains maps: L. Simonin's Mines and Miners or Underground Life (1869); translated and adapted for the English market, it contains various geological maps, mostly of world coal-fields.

None of those books contains maps of Auden's Eden landscape (although Dufton, Cross Fell and also Sedbergh come just within Postlethwaite's eastern boundary). The nature of his interest, and its particular focus on the area defined by the titles of Sopwith's, Forster's and Smith's books, makes it plausible to speculate – as Katherine Bucknell does in her edition of the Juvenilia – that he might also have been familiar with William Wallace's Alston Moor: Its Pastoral People: Its Mines and Miners (1890): the title alone would have attracted him, although its focus is more human and historical than

technical and geological. Wallace provides a one-inch scale fold-out map of Alston Moor which takes as its western boundary 'Heavens Water Division Between the Tyne', and elsewhere, Cumberland's county boundaries with Northumberland (north), Durham (east), and Westmoreland (sic; south); it also identifies, among others, 'Cashwell Mine', by the side of Cash Burn below Cross Fell.

A map such as this is particularly resonant, not only because – as will already be clear – its place-names offer potent signifiers in Auden's writing, but also because it delineates an area both actual and, to use his own term (from 'Prologue at Sixty') 'noumenal': maps, to adjust the well-known sonnet from China, can really point to places where life is sacred now (for this reason I do not here consider 'nursery' books containing maps of fictional terrain – such as that in King Solomon's Mines, for example). Humphrey Carpenter's 1981 biography was the first to pay significant attention to Auden's lead-mining landscapes; Edward Callan, in Carnival of Intellect (1983), was one of the first critics to consult an appropriate map and relate the action of 'Paid on Both Sides' to it; John Fuller and Bucknell have visited Alston Moor and its environs, and have speculated on the relation between poems and locations. Alan Myers and subsequently Robert Forsythe have taken further the systematic tabulation of Auden's North Pennine references, which suggest the poet's personal familiarity with its places. All this activity, of course, follows up the hints Auden himself so strongly gave of the area's importance to him.

But although he evidently visited the region from the age of 12 onward, by his own account (to Alan Ansen and elsewhere) its landscape had before then been mediated for him by his reading; and after 1938 it was, again, necessarily to a large degree

mediated. The delineation in ‘New Year Letter’ (III) of his favourite ‘English area’ suggests a map’s apportionment ‘from BROUGH/ To HEXHAM and the ROMAN WALL’. Because he attached such significance to Alston Moor and its adjoining regions (Rookhope for instance isn’t, strictly speaking, part of Alston Moor), it is regrettable that little of the pre-formative material adult Auden remembered having amassed in his boyhood has survived, or been reliably identified. The books he specified, even when his own copy has gone missing, can usually be found in the bowels of research libraries; but we do not know enough about the rest for accurate retrieval of information. A particular case in point is what I’ll call the ‘Bective Poplars map’, alluded to by Davenport-Hines and Jenkins: both agree that (to quote Jenkins) ‘in 1947 Auden had a large map of the Pennines hanging on the wall of the Fire Island shack that he shared with the Sterns’ (AS III, p. 84n). There is some confusion about this: Davenport-Hines doesn’t mention the size of the map (which he asserts is of Alston Moor), and he additionally alludes to an ordnance-survey map of Heysham displayed as well (p. 249). Myers believes the Alston Moor map was later seen at Kirchstetten (op. cit. note 3, p. 8).

Myers cannot recall the source for his assertion, which I have been unable to verify; but the others’ information appears to derive from – and combine – articles appearing in periodicals on each side of the Atlantic in response to The Age of Anxiety: an unsigned two-column review titled ‘Eclogue, 1947’ published in Time (21 July 1947),⁴ and a longer piece by Maurice Cranston headlined ‘Poet’s Retreat’, in John o’ London’s Weekly (6 February 1948). Given his interest in machinery, Auden probably enjoyed having his photograph appear, in the Time piece, alongside a bigger spread

⁴ Mendelson identifies the author as Robert Fitzgerald (AS II p. 191, # 120). Auden wrote a letter to James Stern that makes clear this interview was conducted on Fire Island.

advertising a ‘dragline clamshell and crane combination’ for attachment to crawler tractors; the sympathetic review notes at its close that he is passing the summer in the ‘tar-paper-covered shack’ where ‘On one wall of his littered study Poet Auden keeps an immense map of Alston Moor in Cumberland below the Roman Wall, his childhood country, whose limestone quarries, fells and valleys – and mining machinery – have persisted as bleakly beautiful imagery in all his work’.⁵ Cranston’s piece, illustrated by Auden’s 1930s face, is more about his Fire Island habitation, to which its writer had paid a visit in September 1947 (a couple of months, therefore, after Time); inside the shack, they bemoaned the still-evident New York heat, which led Auden to observe that ‘of course, there are more beautiful places in the world’, and Cranston comments, ‘There was an Ordnance Survey map of Heysham on the wall beside him, and I noticed him glancing at it as he spoke’.

Unlike the Time interviewer, Cranston didn’t follow Auden’s visual hint; had he done so, things might have become clearer; for what he writes does not corroborate that earlier account either of the map’s size or subject. There is no obvious reason why Auden should have a map of Heysham, in Lancashire, on his wall, nor why he should think it an especially beautiful place;⁶ Heysham, moreover, was not big enough to give its name to an area map (nearby Lancaster was). I have before me a reproduction of the 1903 Ordnance Survey map of ‘Alston Moor & Upper Weardale’, sheet number 25 in the One Inch survey; at its top it has printed centrally ‘ALSTON’, and immediately underneath, in smaller fount, ‘(HEXHAM)’, to indicate the northerly adjoining sheet; at

⁵ One senses Auden’s own emphasis here; in December 1943 he had evidently drawn attention to boyhood aspirations as a ‘would-be mine operator’ (AS II p. 191, # 116).

its bottom it has printed centrally '(BROUGH)', for the southerly adjoining sheet. In 1940 Auden had defined the locality he loved as stretching 'from BROUGH/ To HEXHAM': albeit that his composing notebook (in the Berg) shows that 'Hexham' was his second thought for 'North Tyne', it is possible that his amendment was prompted not only by metrical concerns but also by a memory of this sheet's upper and lower margins. My guess is that Cranston wasn't map-minded, and himself did no more than 'glance' at something across a cluttered room, misreading 'Heysham' for 'Hexham' (or this might even be an error introduced at printing).

Even were that so, there remains the problem of scale; the Time interviewer reports an 'immense' map, but Cranston gives no indication of unusual size – which even someone cartographically negligent might have registered, just as he might have noticed if there had been more than one map on the wall (which is how Davenport-Hines reconciles the differing accounts). The history of Ordnance Survey publications is complex, but the authorities I have consulted make clear that, for example, a two-and-a-half inch survey of Alston Moor was not available in 1947 or earlier; nor was there a single sheet covering Alston Moor in the six-inch series. The approximate size of the 1903 one-inch map already referred to is 12" (n/s) by 18" (e/w), plus margins; so a sixfold enlargement would require a display not less than six feet high by nine across; this would certainly look 'immense' – particularly in a beach-shack! – but it could only have been assembled by joining up constituent six-inch sheets (if, however, Auden stuck to the strict boundaries of Alston Moor, as the one-inch map in Wallace does, then a sixfold enlargement of that map suggests overall dimensions of (e/w) 5'6" by (n/s) 6'6").

⁶ Then (as now) it was a possible port of embarkation for the Isle of Man: which for Auden had happy associations, both for its lead-mining and holidays spent there with Michael Yates and family.

Auden might at some stage have cut and pasted six-inch sheets; but these were on stiff, card-like paper, which could not then have been folded for easy transport, either to the USA or, within it, to Fire Island. If that map really was unusually large, I wonder whether in the phase of his boyhood absorption (when he carefully pasted photographs of mines into books) he undertook by hand – ‘with the finest of mapping pens’ (EA p. 61) – a pantographic enlargement of the one-inch map; if so, he would justifiably claim of the locality, in ‘Amor Loci’, that he could ‘draw its map by heart’. His short-sightedness would certainly have given some practical point to such an activity; it is surely noteworthy that the three most autobiographically-implicated references to maps, in Auden’s poetry, refer to the making rather than the mere study of maps.⁷

The ‘English area’ of ‘New Year Letter’ came so emphatically to Auden’s mind as to seduce some commentators into believing he had spent his boyhood there (Arthur Kirsch (2005) is the latest example). He may have ‘grown up’ at Rookhope metaphorically, but biographically he was never more than a visitor – albeit one whose visionary commitment entitled him to stake a claim. The sort of map of England Auden’s heart might draw is suggested by the illustration for his 1954 piece in American Vogue, ‘England: Six Unexpected Days’, which outlined a principally Pennine itinerary. The accompanying map features a central wedge of the kingdom from London to Edinburgh, idiosyncratically magnifying names not normally registered at this scale, such as Keld, Appletreewick (pronounced ‘Aptwick’), Dufton, Alston, Nenthead, and Blanchland; of places normatively constituting a tourist’s-eye view of England, only Oxford commands equal prominence. ‘To the usual visitor in the United Kingdom the North means the

⁷ It is also possible that his geologist brother John, who in a 1917 photograph in Spender’s Tribute is seen ‘compassing’, and who accompanied Wystan on some visits to mines, made such a map for his brother.

Lake District and Scotland’, conceded Auden, his map sidelining the first and his suggested route seeking in all senses to divert an unhurried motorist headed toward the second (a destination of negligible interest to an itinerary whose emotional centre remains in days Three, Four and Five). It is unclear to what degree Auden himself was involved in producing this map.

Walking in the Pennines (1937), by Donald Boyd and Patrick Monkhouse, was in Auden’s library at his death, and is amongst the Auden library material acquired in 1975 by the Humanities Research Center at Austin, Texas. He drew on some of its details when writing his piece for Vogue. It, along with his copy of Forster, may have been one of the books which (according to Ansen) he brought back from England in 1945. Boyd and Monkhouse extol the contemporary one-inch OS series as the best maps available for the 1930s walker; but they also write warmly of ‘the pictorial beauty and accuracy of the old engraved hachured 1-inch map’, on which ‘Every peak and precipice, every nook and cranny, is drawn’ (p. xxvi). These were already collector’s items when they wrote, but if Auden ever saw or even possessed this version for Alston Moor (reproduced in Old Ordnance Survey, vol VIII, p. 43), he might well have been struck by its remarkable depiction of the rumpled landscape as if seen from aloft (in airman’s-eye view), and also by its illustrating how the Cumberland/Durham boundary lies along a watershed east of Nenthead: on this map standing out like the upright of a capital ‘E’.

I do not believe that a copy of that map graced the wall of the beach-shack; my conclusion is that either a later issue one-inch map covering Alston Moor and Weardale, or a home-made enlargement of such a map, did; I distrust Cranston’s identification of ‘Heysham’ for the reasons given. Finally, whether the ‘Bective Poplars’ map was

standard one-inch scale or larger, I am sceptical that it would ever have been displayed at Kirchstetten (although on this point I would be happily proved wrong). Memoirs of the communal interior of what is now the Audenhaus recall the relative absence of pictorial decoration (a photograph of Stravinsky stood out); but in Auden's upstairs workroom, below the roof-pitch and interrupted by the gable window where he worked, there is little wall-space to display a map, even of smaller size. According to its curator, when I visited, the extension of the attic beyond a partition, where now is to be found a collection of Auden memorabilia, had not occurred in the poet's lifetime. Describing his workroom in 'The Cave of Making', Auden stressed the absence of 'family photographs', as part of a decorative strategy to 'discourage daydreams' (WHACP p. 691): a map of Alston Moor might have offered a fatal distraction, and none of the newsreel footage of its interior, in the recent BBC centenary programmes or – more fully – in Robert Robinson's 1981 broadcast, shows any sign of a map on the walls.

ABBREVIATIONS USED:

AN = Auden Newsletter; AS = Auden Studies; CW = A Certain World; EA = The English Auden; WHACP = W.H. Auden: Collected Poems (1991)

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I am grateful to the Interloans Librarian at Lancaster University Library, for going to some trouble to locate copies of the articles in Time and Vogue referred to here.

This piece is part of ongoing research into Auden's Pennine associations; the author would be glad to receive comments, corrections and/or additional information at a.sharpe@lancaster.ac.uk