

*The True Geography of our Country: Jefferson's Cartographic Vision.* JOEL KOVARSKY. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014. Pp. x+144, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00 cloth. ISBN 978-0813935584.

In *The True Geography of our Country*, Joel Kovarsky reviews the role of maps and geographic information in the life and career of Thomas Jefferson. In the introduction, Kovarsky states that he intends to “demonstrate the importance of geography and maps as the foundational scaffolding for his [Jefferson’s] varied lifelong pursuits” (p. 3). The eight chapters describe Jefferson’s interest in land surveying, his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, his geographical library, his role in planning government expeditions to explore the American west, his correspondence on geographical and cartographic topics, his role in the development of the ideology of Manifest Destiny, and his interests in astronomy and other geographically-related subjects. Kovarsky has succeeded in compiling a review of materials and sources related to Jefferson and geography, but he has neither provided the reader with a cogent thesis nor with any new interpretations or analysis of Jefferson’s geographical work or significance. These limitations of the work are troubling for at least the following reasons.

First, there is already an ample – perhaps bloated – body of literature on Thomas Jefferson that includes published versions of his writings and other primary documents. It is thus puzzling that so much of the text of this book consists of lengthy quotations from Jefferson’s correspondence and other writings. For example, if Jefferson’s instructions to Meriwether Lewis had never been published, then it would be understandable for the letter to be quoted at length. Kovarsky even prefaces this quotation with an acknowledgement that Jefferson’s instructions are “well-known, lengthy, detailed, and oft-quoted.” Similarly, the chapter about Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia* is largely a summary of Jefferson’s descriptive work with several lengthy quotations. The chapter on Jefferson’s library is only four and one half pages in length and consists mostly of quotations and lists. More troubling than the superfluous text is that there is rarely an attempt by the author to interpret Jefferson’s writings or to discuss the historical or geographical issues raised by the text that he quotes. Kovarsky simply informs the reader that these writings provide information about the maps and geographical knowledge that Jefferson possessed or sought. My criticism is not so much that Kovarsky wastes ink by publishing lengthy quotations of primary sources that have been published before, but that he fails to engage the reader in an analysis of the historical and geographical significance of these materials.

Second, Kovarsky does little to engage the secondary literature on Jefferson. Although multiple sources are cited, there is little discussion, analysis or interpretation of this work in light of the primary materials that the author has reviewed. The reader is left wondering what Kovarsky has to offer that has not already been presented by Donald Jackson, John Logan Allen, James P. Rhonda, or other scholars concerned with Jefferson’s place in the history of geography and cartography. The author seems to dodge the question of how this book contributes to Jeffersonian scholarship (or scholarship on the history of cartography or the American West) by dismissing the prior literature as voluminous and discussion of it as beyond the scope of the book. This is particularly unfortunate. Despite the strengths of the scholarship of Jackson, Allen, Rhonda, and others, there is still much that could be learned, brought up-to-date, or otherwise revised and improved upon when attempting to understand the enigmatic Thomas Jefferson and the early years of American geography.

Third, if the author is excused for not being a Jeffersonian scholar, then it might be expected that his expertise in cartography would shine some new light on Jefferson within this field. While Kovarsky presents a few maps that are more limited in availability, most of the maps in this book are easily accessible online through the David Rumsey Collection, the U.S. Library of

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Congress, or other sources. Not only are these maps readily available, but they are printed in this book in grayscale, in a small format, and are occasionally broken across the binding. I question what purpose it serves to publish small and unreadable versions of well-known maps such as Humboldt's *Carte Generale Du Royaume De La Nouvelle Espagne*, Arrowsmith's *Map Exhibiting all the new Discoveries in the Interior Parts of North America*, or Melish's *Map of the United States*. More importantly, why are these maps presented with so little original interpretation or analysis of them in the text? Once again, the inclusion of numerous previously published primary sources and, more importantly, the failure to engage in interpretation and evaluation of those sources in the text is upsetting.

Finally, if there is a central thesis of the book it is that maps and geographical knowledge were important to Jefferson. Not only is this thesis rather weak and uninteresting, but it is argued through circular logic: Jefferson wrote about maps and geography therefore maps and geography were important to Jefferson.

In sum, this book will prove to be a disappointment for those seeking original and substantive scholarship on Jefferson, his influence on American geography and cartography, or his geographical knowledge. The one exception is the chapter entitled "Foreshadowing Manifest Destiny". In this chapter, Kovarsky discusses the roots of Manifest Destiny and Jefferson's geographical thought. This chapter is an exception in that Kovarsky relies less on lengthy quotations and is more focused on interpretation beyond description. Unfortunately, the remainder of the book fails to provide many fresh insights or interpretations. Charitably, the book offers a worthwhile description of key sources and would be a useful introduction for those seeking a brief review of the landscape of Jeffersonian geography.

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