



International Symposium on "Old Worlds-New Worlds": The History of Colonial Cartography 1750-1950  
Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands, 21 to 23 August 2006

Working Group on the History of Colonial Cartography in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries  
International Cartographic Association (ICA-ACI)

## Barrel in the Courtyard of the Survey of Israel

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### *Abstract*

Today's map of Israel reflects to a large extent the geodetic, mathematical, and cartographic infrastructure inherited from the British Mandate Survey Department, together with changes and advanced improvements applied by the Survey of Israel. Studies on the British Mandate have focused on the operation of governmental systems in practice. Thus, in order to be able to present a cartographic document for reference at the negotiations table, on the wall of the war-room, or in the court of justice there is special importance to understanding the system by which the country was surveyed and mapped. Maps are essential for touring and studying the country, planning its future development, and determining facts on the ground. Knowing the background of why and how the map was created holds the key to understanding it and enhances its usefulness lest mistaken imputations be attributed to it. The recognition of the map's status makes it an historical, geographical, and legal document intimately connected with the country's history.

With the passing of the 20th century, it was high time to examine and evaluate the cartographic work carried out in Palestine during that century. Since my book on *The Survey of Palestine under the British Mandate, 1920-1948* (Routledge Curzon and The Palestine Exploration Fund, 2005), is now at hand, my paper will deal with challenges raised in my tentative first steps toward such an understanding: whether the British motivation was colonialist or had the best interest of Palestine at heart; whether there is any need to document the mapping activities, and whether historical cartographic documents are still relevant now days.

### *The recognition of the map's status*

Studies on Palestine/Israel in the 20th century in general, and on the British Mandate in particular, have focused on the operation of governmental systems in practice. Thus, upon deciding to study the history of **The survey and mapping of Palestine Under the British Mandate, 1920-1948**, I was committed to the understanding the system, the background and the reasoning behind the establishment of these frameworks, examines the foundations upon which the system was based, and to understand the motivation of those who implemented it.

Knowing the background of why and how the map was created holds the key to understanding it and enhances its usefulness, lest foreign and mistaken imputations be attributed to it. The recognition of the map's status makes it an historical, geographical, and juridical document intimately connected with the country's history; It makes it a cartographic document for reference at the negotiations table, on the wall of the war-room, or in the court of justice. Maps are essential for touring and studying the country, planning its future development, and determining facts on the ground.

My key point approach dependent on the understanding that Historical-cartographic research is based on an integration of several interdisciplinary realms.

The geographer is usually interested in what the map has to tell rather than in its history, the cartographer is concerned with how it is constructed, and the historian looks at maps to understand the past. Thus, historical cartography addresses the history of mapping, the reasons and factors behind the making of the map, and the implications of mapping on the history of the country.

In the informative periodical, *Od Meida*, of the Central Committee of the Israel Bar Association (no.43, 1992), the reviewer of my Hebrew book contributed one more factor to the integration of disciplines: Although 'survey' is usually considered a dry, technical subject, the book reveals it as a coming together of true treasures in the realm of history, geography, as well as of the land laws of the state.

### ***Maps only have to look at***

The chronology of the modern mapping of Palestine teaches us that in the 19th century, scholars and researchers of the Holy land were heavily engaged in exploration endeavors themselves or assessing the reports of other explorers, and also the graphic evidence furnished by photography and mapping. With the passing of the 20th century, it was high time to examine and evaluate the cartographic work carried out in Palestine during that century, under the understanding that survey and mapping are elements of a country's infrastructure.

Following the 19th century trends and World War I cartographic products, my idea was of tracing the history of the topographic mapping of Palestine up to 1948, with the independence of the State of Israel. It was born out of the recognition that charting this administrative undertaking would help to throw light on this chapter of colonial history. But, in any research undertaking, defining it and determining a clear-cut objective often presents some difficulties. Then, there is much fascination in arriving at surprising conclusions and unexpected results. Mapping the topography as my first target, ended up with cadastral maps as the most important tool of administrating the land, and a primary step that precedes the topographic mapping.

In my tentative first steps toward such an understanding, I was confronted with challenges on whether there was any need to document the mapping activities. On the one hand, map librarians used to complained about the difficult task of cataloguing the too many versions of Palestine's maps; on the other I was met with dismissive comments such as:

**All the maps are known and available in archives and map libraries;  
they only have to be looked at.**

When I persisted in seeking the related records, that I deemed essential for an appraisal of the country's mapping, the director of the Survey of Israel confided to me that he did not consider these of any importance, and in any case I arrived too late in time. On account of the lack of storage space, he had such material of the Mandate period destroyed. When I related this to one of my colleagues in the Survey of Israel, he boasted that it was he who had carried out these instructions by burning the material in a barrel in the courtyard of the Survey of Israel buildings. Then, when I complained about this to the director of the Israel State Archives, I was told that there had not been any governmental Survey Department during the British Mandate (sic!), but only a Public Works Department, and that they had no one appointed or empowered to look about the Survey's documentation.

### *From topography to land settlement*

When I began my project, about 1980-1981, the most reliable source of information available to me in Israel was the set of Annual Reports published by successive directors of the Survey of Palestine from 1927. As I continued perusing the material, I came upon the following, rather simplistic statements in one of other publications written by the deputy director of the Survey of Israel:

**When Britain received the mandate over Palestine, she found a backward country...**

**The land laws of the Ottoman Empire were complicated....**

**Therefore, a reform of the land system was necessary...**

This was a challenge. Since the reform that fundamentally affected the character of the Survey of Palestine was only launched in 1928, while the Survey was established in 1920, I could not help wondering what the Survey of Palestine did between 1920 and 1928. Only much later on, 3-4 years later, I found in the Survey of Israel, an unpublished report that summarized the director's activities for the years 1920-1927, crucial to my work. As I delved into these documents, it became clear to me that the critical topic was not topographic mapping, but the cadastral survey for the implementation of **land settlement**: mapping for rural and urban real-estate assessment and taxation, and for registration of title. At first, I was nonplussed, for these matters did not particularly interest me at the time. However, in this way, my whole approach to the history of the country's official mapping was conditioned from an entirely unexpected angle. The connection between land and map was at the root of the existence of the Survey of Palestine during the British Mandate, and I felt that the topographic survey, which actually started in 1933, could wait to chapter eight.

### *We did what we had to do*

Facing the poor result of my early search of relevant documents in Israel, with previous positive experience in the Public Record Office and understanding that the Colonial Office in London should have confirmed major activities, I decided to go ahead with the subject. Despite my instructors' opinion, I have arranged to stay in London for almost a year, and systematically delved into Palestine's records in the National Archive, and other archives. Fortuitously, I found piles of documents, relating to the work of the Survey Department conducted by the mandatory authority, kept in the UK.

The availability of the documents in London served those who would regard the map of Palestine as part of a system that transcends its borders. For them it was such only in the narrow sense that the entire survey was conducted by a foreign element: the British. Notwithstanding Palestine's strategic importance, my conclusion was that the survey of Palestine benefited from the best the Empire had to offer. Most of the senior personnel went to Palestine with wealth of experience, mature professional concepts, and high standards of work quality that they had gained from surveying tasks in other colonies. John Loxton, whom I met and interviewed in 1983 in London served as the last Chief Inspector of Surveys in Palestine for a brief period, asserted that **we did what we had to do**, from a professional point of view.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Loxton, J.W., 'The Survey of Palestine 1937-1948: A Personal Memoir', unpublished paper, Taunton, UK 1988.

### *From case studies into practice: one general example*

In the wake of my research, I was occasionally invited to testify as expert in land law cases. Jews strove to identify parcels of land acquired by their forebears in the past, and Arabs sought to prove ownership of land threatened with expropriation. I came across attorneys and counselors debating vehemently on land matters who did not know the difference between a cadastral and a topographic map, between a fiscal block map and a registration block map, who disregarded the dating of a map, and who were surprised by comparisons with historic aerial photographs in establishing parcel boundaries. Some asked me to clarify matters of cartography before taking their cases to court; others, after gaining deeper understanding, decided to settle matters out of court.

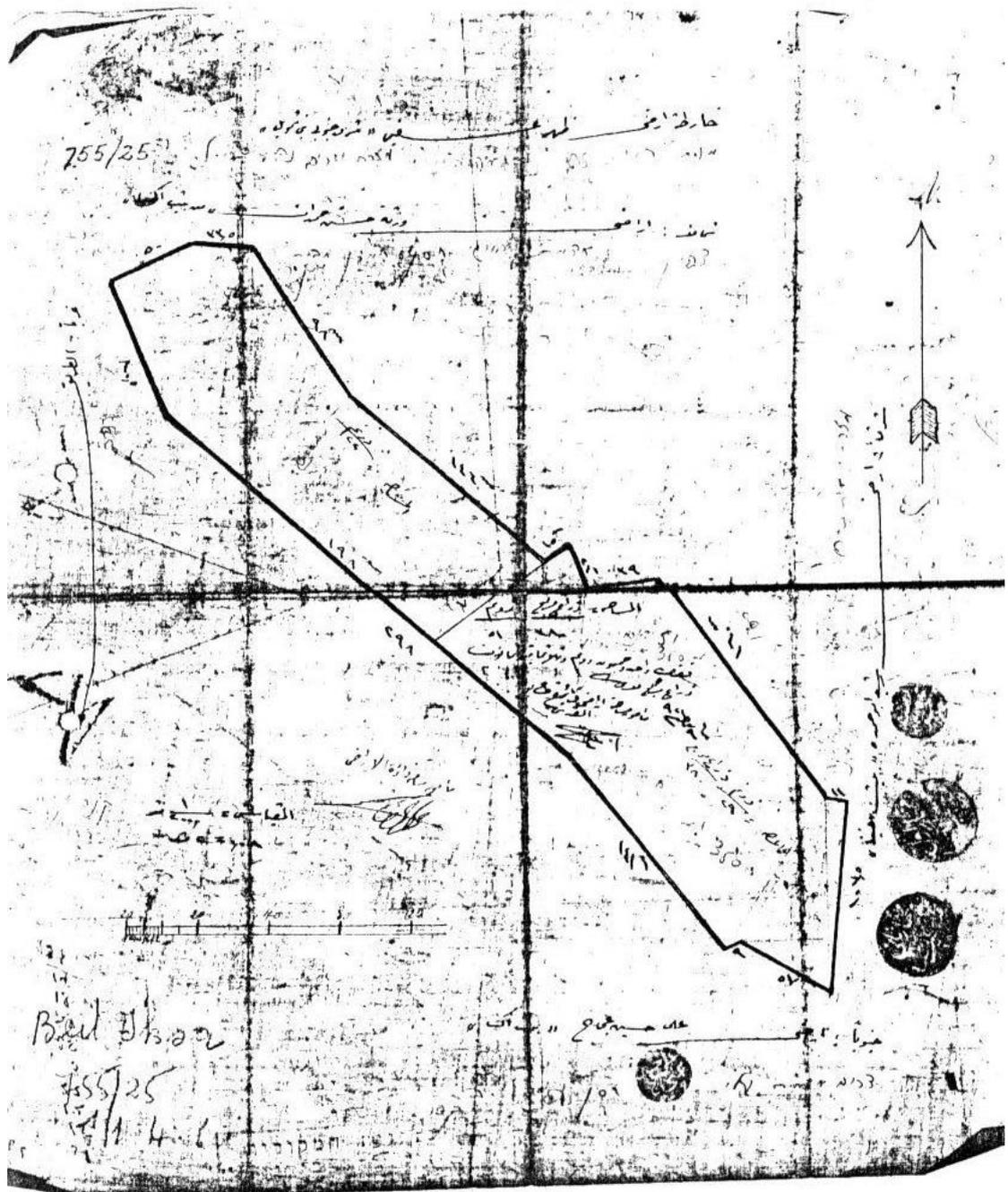
### *A final word: appending a map*

Much has been written in Israel on the British Mandate, but my book is the only one published in Israel, and the only one of which I am aware, dealing with the functioning of a British Mandatory government department and its legacy after the end of the Mandate in 1948. I am proud to add that my research retrieved from oblivion the names and activities of men who unstintingly contributed the best of their professional expertise and knowledge to the cartographic history of Palestine. Among these are all the British directors of the Survey, and in particular, on the contrary, two distinguished personalities none of them served as cartographer:

**Sir Ernest Dowson**, the most important British reformer of land registration in Palestine, whose contribution was entirely unknown in Israel. Dowson was the one who advocated the adoption of the Torrens System that stipulates **appending a map** to the land registry as an essential legal document. No better decision, at the time, did more for the history of modern mapping in Palestine.

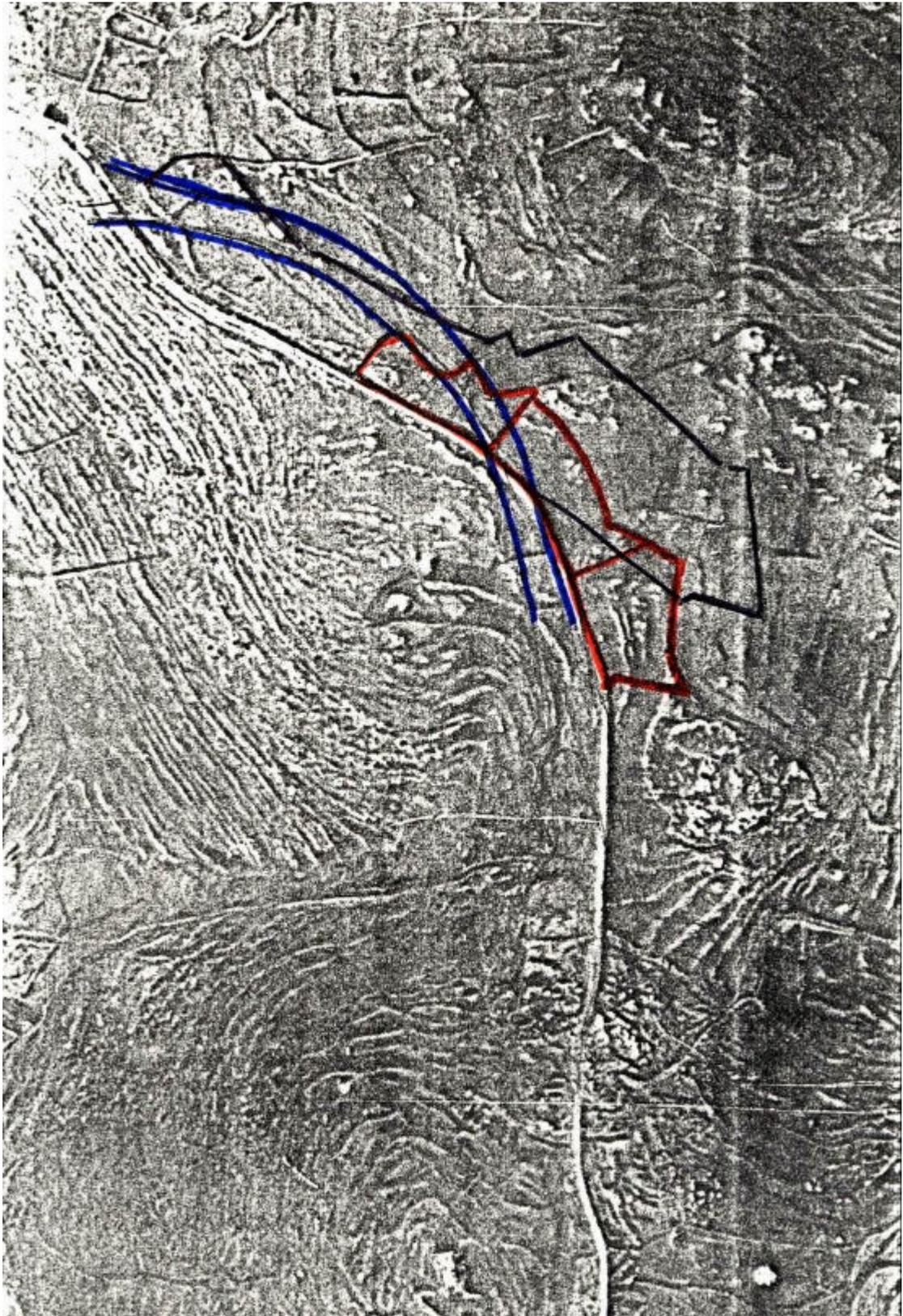
Similarly, I was able to reveal the substantial contribution of **Sir John F. Spry**, who served in Palestine as Chief Inspector of Land Registration and assistant Director. Later he served as Colonial Judge in the countries of Eastern Africa. After the United Nations resolution on the establishment of the State of Israel of 29 November 1947, as a precaution in the event that the original land registry books and maps were destroyed in the subsequent fighting, Spry initiated and assumed responsibility for backing up all this material and bringing it to London. Since this episode was not a cartographic enterprise as such, I have dealt with it in separate article [*Archives*, 22 (October 1996) 95:107-120].

As a final word, I would say, that I was confronted with challenges on the country's cartographic attraction to the British, whether their motivation was colonialist or had the best interest of Palestine at heart; whether there is any need to document the mapping activities, and whether historical cartographic documents are still relevant now days. To sum up, no maps have been produced without a proper need, therefore, let go and reveal new chapters in the history any territory conducted by maps as milestones.



55/1925  
 המנהל הכללי של שטחי יהודה ושומרון  
 תל אביב

*I was called to court in order to locate the parcel shown on the right hand side. The map includes a title in Turkish from which one could have understood that the general location is north of Jerusalem with some vague topographic elements as source of orientation. It includes names of neighbors in Arabic and their seals. The map was not connected to any system of coordinates, and the scale was unreadable.*



*Air-photograph of 1945, taken by the RAF, on which the parcel was located.  
Blue – a new road that has been constructed and cuts the parcel.  
Red – one of false setting.  
Black – the correct location agreed by court and all sides.*