



Folio (435 by 300 mm), engraved additional title with the achievement of Charles II, letterpress title in red and black, four letterpress sectional titles, the Theatre with sixty-eight double-page engraved maps, five letterpress tables of road distances, the Prospect with twenty-eight double-page engraved maps, including a double-hemisphere world map, totalling ninety-six maps; the British Isles map replaced by that of the British Islands (with the correct text), the map of Surrey replaced by the contemporary Anonymous-William Smith map with Overton imprint (without text on the verso), the Bohemia with paper flaw affecting the lower border, contemporary panelled calf, spine in six compartments, separated by raised bands, with red morocco label lettered in gilt, rebacked, boards slightly scored and worn.

THE FIRST WORLD ATLAS PUBLISHED BY AN ENGLISHMAN

The Theatre of the Empire of Great-Britain... Together with a Prospect of the Most Famous Parts of the World, viz. Asia, Africa, Europe, America....

Author

SPEED, John

Publication date

1676.

Publisher

Thomas Bassett and Richard Chiswell,

Publication place

London,

Physical description

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Dimensions

Notes

A fine example of the first world atlas by an Englishman published in England.

John Speed is perhaps the most famous single figure in the early history of the English map trade. He was a member of the Merchant Taylors' Company, made free in September 1580, and later Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries. By training he was probably a rolling-press printer, but by interest he was a historian, and Queen Elizabeth granted him a sinecure in the Customs House, to give him the opportunity to pursue these interests. His earliest cartographic publications were historical; in 1595, he published a wall map of the Holy Land, Canaan as it was Possessed both in Abraham and Israel's days, a two-sheet map of The Invasions of England and Ireland with all their Civil Wars since the Conquest (1601) and a wall map of England, Wales and Ireland showing the same information, [1603-1604]. In 1611 he prepared two Bible maps, the larger inserted in folio editions of the great King James Bible, the smaller in octavo printings; Speed also secured a privilege, dated 31st October 1610, to ensure that the map was inserted in every copy of the Bible sold, a lucrative arrangement that the Stationers' Company eventually felt impelled to buy out from his heirs. Speed always considered his History of Great Britaine (1611) his major work, but his reputation was established by the companion atlas volume 'The Theatre of the Empire of Great Britaine'.

The 'Theatre' followed the model of Ortelius's 'Theatrum orbis terrarum' - first published in English in 1606 - in its title and its format, with map-sheets backed by historical and geographical texts and gazetteers of place names.

This was the earliest English attempt at producing an atlas on a grand scale, with the first detailed maps of the provinces of Ireland, the first set of county maps consistently attempting to show the boundaries of territorial divisions, and the first truly comprehensive set of English town plans - a notable contribution to British topography. Perhaps as many as fifty of the seventy-three towns had not previously been mapped, and about fifty-one of the plans were probably Speed's own work.

In 1606, Speed might have been helped by his son John in surveying towns. A balance is struck between the modern and historical, with information placed on the edges of the maps about antiquarian remains, and sites and vignettes of famous battles, together with arms of princes and nobles. This additional information is one of the 'Theatre's most significant contributions. Scotland is covered in less detail, as Timothy Pont was surveying there.

Individual maps for the Theatre were prepared from about 1602, plates were engraved by Jodocus Hondius - noted for his skills in decoration - from 1607, George Humble was granted a privilege to print the 'Theatre' for twenty-one years from 1608, and the 'Theatre' and 'History' were published together in 1611-12. They were an immediate success: three new editions and issues of each appeared during Speed's lifetime, and a miniature version was first published about 1619-20. The maps in the 'Theatre' became the basis for subsequent folio atlases until the mid-eighteenth century. By 1625 Speed had lost his sight. Nevertheless, in 1627 he published 'A Prospect of the most

Famous Parts of the World', the first world atlas compiled by an Englishman and published in England, although the maps were engraved in Amsterdam, using Dutch models. Again, this was printed with English text on the verso, and reprinted thereafter. While early editions are rarer, perhaps the most important edition was the 1676 printing (the present example), which added newly prepared English maps of New England, Virginia, the Carolinas, Barbados and Jamaica.

Bibliography

Provenance

Price: £125000

Inventory reference: 24363

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