

## *X ≠ Special Water Feature*

I've been searching for the map ever since I read of its existence. It was, according to the Colonel in charge at the time of the army's departure from the mill, a "...*detailed scale model - once used for planning military operations [that] shows every building, outhouse and unapproved road or laneway in the south Armagh area.*"<sup>i</sup> I was startled to discover it existed, it certainly has the hallmark of an urban myth: an army surveillance map made from cloth located in what used to be a linen mill really reads like a work of fiction. I imagine it being a canvas map with no reference to the colours of the landscape it depicts. I imagine that it has been stitched, and the buildings are cubes of fabric that have been hand sewn onto it. I wonder about its specifics: does it have any writing on it? Or a Legend of symbols? The sheer impossibility of it makes me think of that Jorge Luis Borges story *On Exactitude in Science* where the "*Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it*"<sup>ii</sup>, I mean South Armagh is for the most part countryside containing mountains, bogs and farmland, there's a lot of features to fit onto a relief map.

On my secret visit to the mill, I found the *Map Room*<sup>iii</sup> and I scanned it with my torch searching for evidence of my quarry. The structure that supported the map is still there, like a carcass with the ribcage exposed. Its rear section was elevated so that the map faced the absentee pilots who sat opposite, taking their instructions for sorties. I stand on the tiered elevations and face my missing map head on. Even at that moment I wonder if it really existed, the skeletal remains in front of me telling me that my prize may indeed have been here, but stubbornly denying me any evidence to support

my story, framing me as a mythmaker since after all, right here, right now, there is no map.

Recalling the article that brought it to my attention, I think again about its predicted relocation, its repurposing as a museum artefact somewhere in England, but since all my enquiries to curators and museum directors have brought no success, right now it could be anywhere in the world, and I imagine that because of its described physicality it would be well suited to somewhere like the *Musée des Plans-Reliefs*<sup>iv</sup> in Paris, but given this map's absentee status, I conclude that perhaps it might actually turn up in another of Paris' institutions, a 'Lost and Found' office established two hundred year ago by Napoleon on the Ile de la Cité: *a museum of lost things*.

But its isness is assured by my tour guide. He caught a glimpse of the map once during an official visit to the mill through the door of the Operations Room as he passed and remembered seeing the fabric mountains of South Armagh clearly rising and falling.

Maps seem to be a recurring theme in my life and in my art. Spectral, in the way proposed by Hal Foster when discussing Derrida's hauntology; the map "*repeats itself again and again*". I have made my own lithographic maps of non-places with the Ordnance Survey lithography stones that were once used to print the maps of Ireland, and if it weren't for the boundaries and divisions in Northern Ireland I wouldn't have become a champion orienteer. Orienteering was invented in Sweden in 1886 and requires the participant to navigate terrain with the help of a map and compass, it was designed for training infantry. Back in 1980s Northern Ireland, it was offered as an extra-curricular opportunity to participate in cross community bonding, designed to help break down sectarian prejudice and mistrust in the younger

generation. So I joined Lagan Valley Orienteers and spent weekends in the Mourne Mountains with some school friends and people from ‘across the divide’: learning to read maps removed our borders.

Korzybski’s *the map is not the territory, the map is not the territory*, repeats in my head every time I think of the army map but the champion orienteer in me can’t even begin to contemplate the territory it depicts: no legend exists to help navigate its complexity. X does not mean Special Water Feature<sup>vi</sup>.

39th Infantry Brigade is on the case. That’s what my contact in the Northern Ireland Office told me. The difficulty in tracing the map’s whereabouts transforms ‘my contact’ into an informant, who passed on information: what truths might this map be concealing? And I think to myself that this secret map may never be found and that perhaps the drawing in progress in my studio - graphite on linen, a map of my search for the map - will be only thing that survives it, and be destined for the museum of lost things.

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<sup>i</sup> Clonan T (2006), Packing up their Troubles. *The Irish Times*, 30 Jun

<sup>ii</sup> Borges wrote a one-paragraph short story "On Exactitude in Science" (1946) that describes a map that has the exact same scale as its territory. Borges predates Oulipo but is considered to be an anticipatory plagiarist’ of the group’s work.

<sup>iii</sup> I’m wishing I had the Staff of Ra, and I could use it to discover the present location of the map.

<sup>iv</sup> A relief map museum in Paris that houses scale models of fortified cities used for military planning.

<sup>v</sup> Foster, H, 2002, The funeral is for the wrong corpse, p 135

<sup>vi</sup> Symbol used on Orienteering competition course maps