

Knowledge Is Power to the People: The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge and Their Map Series

by Joe McAlhany
Old World Auctions

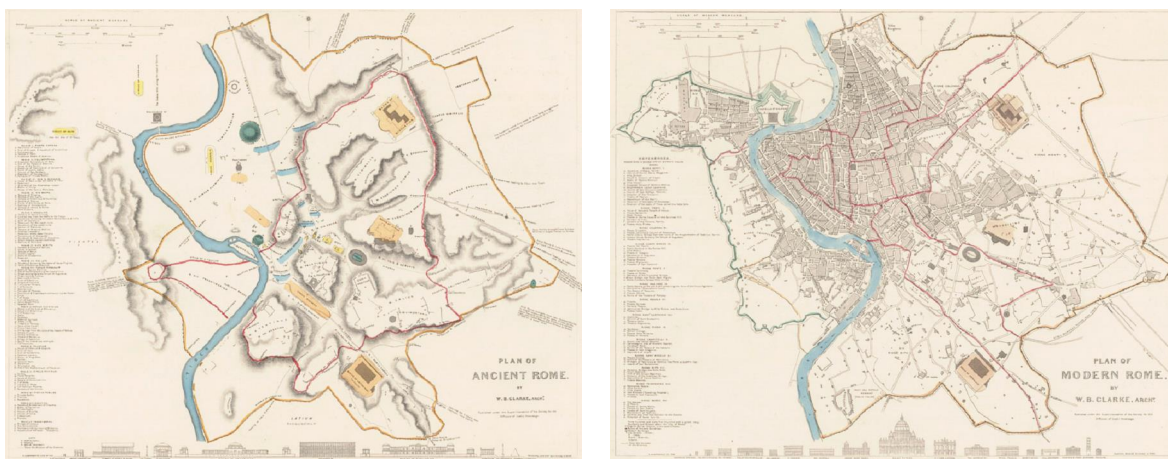
In 1826 Henry Brougham and a team of likeminded Whigs, lawyers, educators, Utilitarians, and other assorted reformers established the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (SDUK). Based in London, the SDUK set out to provide the masses with inexpensive and educational reading material, to grant them access to the kind of up-to-date knowledge that had previously been the all but exclusive property of the upper classes. Brougham, a Whig politician with a hand in seemingly every reform of the era, believed that "the peace of the country and the stability of the government, could not be more effectually secured than by the universal diffusion of this kind of knowledge." The demand for that knowledge was there too, as the English economy, society, and culture gradually became more integrated and the population -- increasingly literate, especially after the launch of countrywide parochial schools to educate the children of the poor in 1807 and the introduction of infant schools in 1818 -- yearned for something to read. Fortunately, this increase in demand coincided with improvements in printing and distribution that enabled the SDUK to publish informative and affordable works for all.

The earliest works printed by the SDUK were sixpenny treatises in the *Library of Useful Knowledge*. Mainly focused on the sciences, most of these treatises were authored by professors at the University of London, a newly established secular alternative to Oxford and Cambridge that shared founding members with the SDUK. These early texts sold between 20,000 and 25,000 copies. Subsequent publications included the *Library of Entertaining Knowledge* (1828), a less challenging series covering a wide range of topics such as brewing, insect architecture and transformations, and secret societies in the Middle Ages; *The Penny Magazine* (1832), which was very popular in its earliest years, selling 200,000 copies in its first year alone; and *The Penny Cyclopaedia* (1833), an encyclopedia consisting of 27 volumes and 3 supplements that Herman Melville consulted throughout the writing of *Moby-Dick*.

One of the SDUK's most radical and enduring publishing ventures was its Map Series. As the British Empire expanded, all strata of English society became fascinated by colonial possessions and faraway lands, but maps and atlases were excessively expensive. The SDUK pounced to fill the demand for mass market maps. The initial idea for the project came from Charles Henry Bellendin Ker, who was described by publisher Charles Knight as "the most fertile in projects of any member of the committee." Ker recruited Captain Francis Beaufort, a founding member of the Society and an experienced surveyor and cartographer, to head up this map project. Beaufort envisioned producing a quarto atlas that would "find its

way into every house in the Empire." His boundless enthusiasm would come to shape the Map Series -- as would his often maddening perfectionism.

The Map Committee of the SDUK was officially formed in November 1828. One of Beaufort's first orders of business was organizing an informal survey of several contemporary map and atlas publishers, including Arrowsmith, Cary, and Walker, to get an idea of the costs involved in undertaking such a project. In order to reach the widest audience possible, it was crucial for the SDUK to be able to offer their works at a low price, which involved not just lowering the cost of production but also the profit margin. The challenge was striking a mutually beneficial deal with profit-conscious publishers. After much negotiation, the Society reached such an agreement with Baldwin and Cradock, already one of the primary publishers of SDUK material. Baldwin and Cradock would cover everything from printing and coloring to marketing and distribution, while the SDUK was responsible for designing the maps and overseeing the engraving process. Their arrangement was somewhat convoluted and never formalized with a contract: the publishers paid the SDUK a small rent based on the number of maps printed and covered the upfront engraving costs up to 30 guineas per plate. However, the SDUK had to repay the publishers for the engraving expenses by forfeiting the rent for the initial 8,000 copies of each issue. Any further costs were also the responsibility of the SDUK. Profits of course went to Baldwin and Cradock.



Plans of Ancient and Modern Rome, published by Thomas Letts

Thanks to these negotiations, subscribers would receive a "Number" featuring two maps for the price of just one shilling. The first Number was released in September 1829 and included both an ancient and a modern map of southern Greece. On the back of the wrapper of this maiden edition was a prospectus that set the expectations of many subscribers by promising a series consisting of "at least fifty plates" to be released in intervals of no less than every two months. It seems most subscribers ignored the "at least" part of the equation; many thought that at the end of four years, they would have a complete set of fifty maps ready to be bound together in an atlas. However, there was no fixed end to the Map

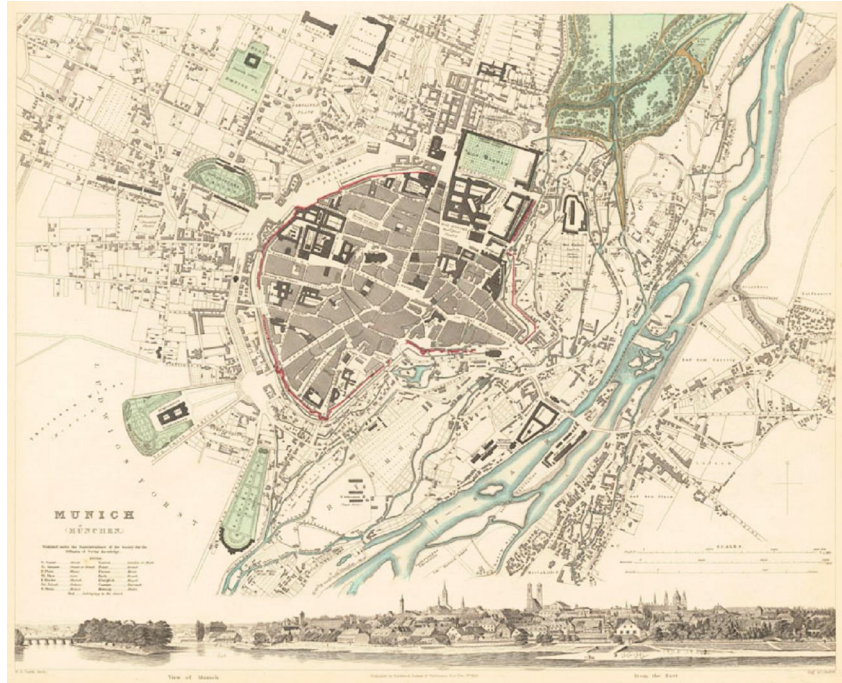
Series; it spanned more than fourteen years and at its conclusion consisted of 209 unique plates.



This example of the SDUK's 2-sheet map of Ireland was published in 1838 and printed by J. & C. Walker.

How did the Map Series grow to be so expansive? The unwieldiness of the project can be attributed in large part to Captain Francis Beaufort, the project's uncompromising and passionate editor and mastermind. Beaufort went beyond the role of editor, authoring most of the maps himself. At the same time he was heading up the Map Series, he was also Hydrographer to the Admiralty, which gave him access to the latest geographical information as well as the ability to commission his own surveys. He was a stickler for accuracy who largely preferred original maps drawn from unpublished sources to updated versions of preexisting maps. His dedication resulted in some of the most precise and well-engraved maps of their era. But perfection came at a cost: maps were often delayed for absurd stretches of time. The SDUK's two-part map of Ireland (Beaufort's

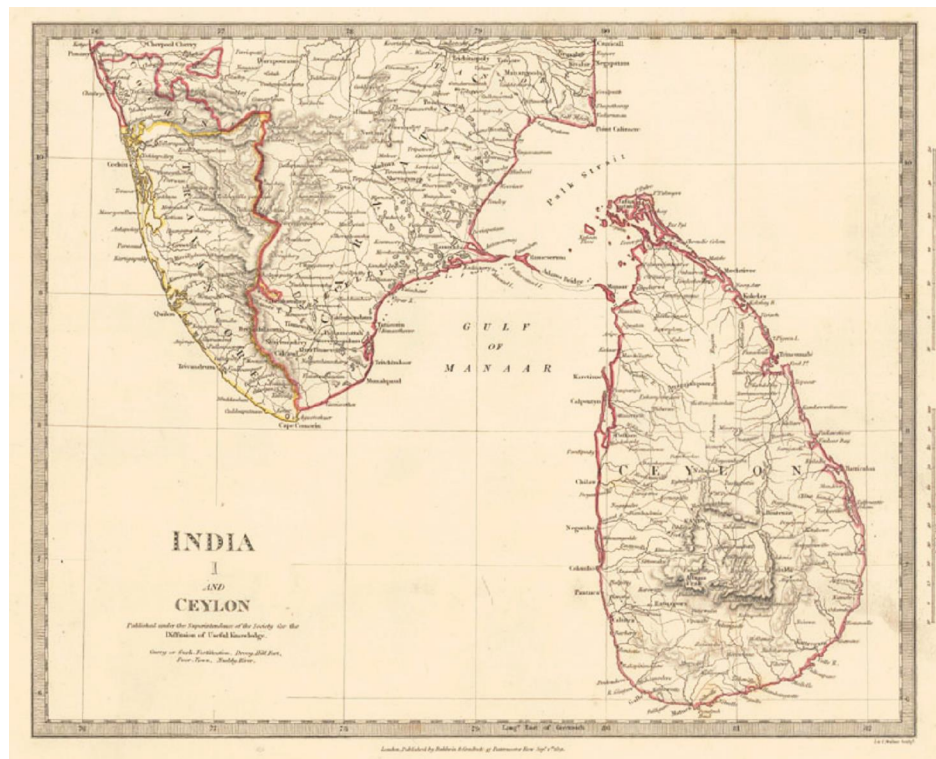
homeland) took more than six years to complete. Perhaps because his father had completed a well-renowned map of the island in 1792, Beaufort felt pressure to get his Ireland map just right. As he was compiling the map, the Ordnance Survey and the coastal surveys he had himself begun were in progress, which made the spotty and outdated geographic information he had at hand seem especially inadequate -- so he held off until he was satisfied. His fastidiousness extended to the very end of the process: found in the Beaufort Collection at the Henry Huntington Library, the corrected proof for the plate of Northern Ireland is cluttered with more than one hundred tiny, exacting corrections in Beaufort's hand.



This plan of Munich was published in 1832 by Baldwin & Craddock.

Beaufort's obsessiveness irritated the SDUK's General Committee and the publishers, mostly because his delays irritated the customer base. The piecemeal nature of the Map Series was already frustrating subscribers; they would receive two often unrelated maps at a time, out of order and in uneven intervals (sometimes as many as 26 maps in a year, sometimes just 12), with the index map of each region coming towards the end of the series, leaving the maps they did have without any useful context. Instead of their atlases taking shape over the years, subscribers found themselves with a diffuse hodgepodge of maps, with no clear end in sight. It took 5 ½ years for a complete South America set to come together, 6 ½ years for Russia. When the SDUK began issuing city maps starting with Number 9, customers were irate. Despite the elegance of these city plans (most of which were the work of the architect W.B. Clarke), which are now among the most valuable items in the Map Series, they were seen at the time as a distraction from the general country maps. Customer complaint letters of surprising vitriol and outright despair flooded in. Here is but one excerpt, from a

SDUK. Their mission to bring education to the masses and enable their political and social influence to grow may seem admirable to our modern democratic sensibilities, but it was quite controversial at the time. Brougham, as the figurehead for the reforms "sweeping" the nation (his name is pronounced like "broom," a pun that figures heavily in attacks against him), was ruthlessly caricatured and satirized. Although they vowed to avoid overt party politics and religion, the SDUK received flak from anti-reform elements in society who thought the "March of Intellect" threatened to destabilize the English social order and that the Society was out to spread religious skepticism. Rebukes came from the Radicals too, who thought that the SDUK patronized the poor by avoiding politics. The Society's internal operations were also plagued by their internal operations. Their lack of consistency in choice of material, editorial policy, and publication times led to a drop-off in subscribers after a peak in the early 1830s. Outsized ambitions proved to be trouble as well. The Map Series wasn't the only SDUK project to balloon out of control. The SDUK continued to introduce new publications even as finances dwindled, including a universal biographical dictionary of preposterous scope. Just seven half-volumes of this *Biographical Dictionary* were published in between 1842 and 1844 -- and those only consisted of the letter A!



The first sheet of a 12-sheet set of maps of India was published in 1831, with the final sheet appearing in 1835.

Still the SDUK accomplished much in its twenty-year run; many of their goals for English society were met by and large. Their treatises, magazines, maps, and

other publications found an audience amongst the lower classes, and their work inspired a slew of imitators hoping to reach the same market. By 1844, the SDUK had produced and sold more than three million maps (or about 15,000 complete atlases). The Map Series may have exasperated many subscribers, but the maps continued to endure long after the Society closed up shop. Knight bought the SDUK plates and kept publishing maps and atlases until 1852. After that, the plates were passed down through a string of publishers: George Cox (1852), Edward Stanford (1856), Thomas Letts (1877), and Mason and Payne (1885). Collectors today still seek out SDUK maps for their stripped-down stylishness, stunning accuracy, and relative affordability. As demographer and researcher of cartographic history Mead T. Cain argues, the SDUK were instrumental in "the establishment of an enduring standard of excellence for commercial map production and the demonstration that handsome profits could be reaped by serving a mass market with cheap yet high quality maps." For a low, low price, the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge gave the working classes the world, two maps at a time.

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