

# Book Review

*The Map Thief*. Michael Blanding, New York, Gotham Books, 2014. 299 pp. color plates, drawings, photos, index, bibliography, appendices. ISBN: 978-1-592-40940-2 \$17.00.

*Reviewed by Dawn M. Drake, Department of History and Geography, Missouri Western State University, St. Joseph, Missouri.*

*The Map Thief* is an interesting read in that it combines a true crime tale with a cartographic history lesson to weave a narrative that is both informative and entertaining. Author Michael Blanding set out to write a short piece for a magazine, but saw a much larger story of a complicated man. Unfortunately he cannot get the subject of the story to help the author understand his motivations. In the end, Blanding gets around these difficulties in a way that makes the tale much more rich and intriguing. *The Map Thief* is a great read whether the readers yearns to be more of an academic geographer or just the garden armchair variety. In either case, everyone will find something to love and with which to identify.

In the Introduction, Blanding introduces the “map thief” – E. Forbes Smiley III. It has been ten years since Smiley was convicted of stealing rare maps from libraries in the US and Britain. Up to this point, Smiley had resisted all attempts to tell his story. What Blanding finds when he begins to interview Smiley is a story and a man that is too complex and multi-layered for a single magazine article. He initially is able to get Smiley to consent to a book, but later Smiley withdraws from the project, citing fears that the book will hurt his family, friends, clients, and colleagues. What follows that introduction is a narrative that the author constructs through numerous interviews with other relevant parties and without Smiley’s consent. Blanding ultimately only has the information from two interviews to put Smiley’s real voice into the book. And that might just be the thing that makes the book such as delightful read.

The preceding chapters of *The Map Thief* weave a rich narrative that traces Smiley’s life



from his earliest days as a map dealer, even looking back further to his childhood, all the way to his trial and incarceration. Intermixed with the story of Smiley in many chapters are the stories of maps and mapmakers, many maps of which were targets of Smiley's thefts. In Chapter 1, for instance, we learn about the John Smith map, the map that ultimately got Smiley caught. In Chapter 3, we are reminded of the Waldseemueller map – the first known map to use the word “America.” In other chapters we meet colorful characters – Smiley's friends, clients, and colleagues. Blanding pursued interviews with as many relevant people to the story as possible in an effort to fill in gaps and resolve the lack of cooperation he received from Smiley himself. Those interviews take the reader inside the New York Public Library and the world of map trade shows and map collecting. They create a much fuller and rich narrative than if the book had only been about Smiley himself.

Throughout the book Blanding not only provides good coverage of Smiley's life leading up to his arrest, but also of the history of cartography and map collecting. He dispels myths that people believed the world was flat prior to Columbus' voyage and takes the reader from the Greeks to European colonial mapmakers in relatable language and interesting prose. Blanding artfully mixes the bright moments in cartography with the dark sides of some map collectors and dealers, showing that Smiley was not the only person in this world tempted into theft or forgery. In fact, the map library world was already put on notice by several other notorious cases of theft many years before Smiley began his spree. It would take Smiley's deceit though to finally encourage change in the way maps are cataloged and viewed in some of the most famous map libraries and rare book collections in the world.

What evolves from all of Blanding's research and narrative is a more complete view of the world of cartography and map collecting than might have existed if Smiley had been compliant in Blanding's requests

for more interviews. What probably seemed a disaster to Blanding actually was a blessing in disguise. Even though the author never was really able to get inside Smiley's particular motivations, the interviews he conducted with Smiley's friends, former clients, and colleagues develop a depth of character and story that makes *The Map Thief* both interesting and intriguing. Without their words, Blanding's book would have lacked a certain human element and the rich characterization that makes it engrossing.

Because of the nature of this tale, as a crime spree, there are a lot of individuals and maps involved. Blanding helps readers to keep track of all of this through a list of characters organized by their roles and locations, a list of mapmakers, organized by their nationality and active periods, and a list of maps that Smiley admits to stealing and their status (recovered or unrecovered) as well as a list of additional maps that libraries reported missing as a result of Smiley's crime spree. The latter list also includes their status (missing/recovered/found). All of these added features make the book more user-friendly and help the reader to remain a part of the complex tale.

Perhaps one of the most impressive features of this book is that it reads like a true-crime novel, yet provides the factual detail of an academic text. Blanding does not simply telling the reader that Smiley got caught, but delves into the forensics of wormholes and matching paper margins to show the reader how. This is also the one short-coming of the book, however minor. In some places, Blanding's own voice and research feels like an awkward and confusing disruption to the dialogue and flow of the story. This happens in few places though, and does not detract much from the success of the book as a whole.

Blanding concludes *The Map Thief* by examining how the world of map collecting and dealing has changed since Smiley's arrest. He looks at procedures that have changed at libraries and the success or failure of recovery of the maps Smiley pilfered. There have been

map thefts since Smiley, although mostly in Europe. Smiley continues to pay restitution to his victims. Blanding finishes by bringing readers to the present in the lives of many of the key characters in Smiley's tale. What started out reading like a novel or a made for TV movie script finishes in that fashion as well. In some books that is a bad thing, but for Blanding it is a satisfying end to tale that has no satisfying conclusion. One must wonder if Smiley had been more cooperative, would the story come to a more definitive end? Or would it have been even more disappointing and lacking in closure?

On the whole, despite the lack of cooperation of the primary character, Blanding's *The Map Thief* is an interesting read that balances novel with rich academic detail in a perfect balance. The reader can remain engaged whether they are interested in the human story of Smiley or the cartographic history that gave rise to Smiley's trade. Whether looking for a relaxing read for a weekend trip or a more academic tale, this book delivers in both realms with few flaws of which to speak.





