‘The map that would save Europe’: Clive Morrison-Bell, the Tariff Walls Map, and the politics of cartographic display

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**ABSTRACT**

This essay uses the personal archives of Clive Morrison-Bell (1871–1956), a campaigning Conservative politician who made extensive use of maps and cartographic models, to consider the entangled histories of cartography, economics and geopolitics in early twentieth-century Britain. Particular attention is paid to Morrison-Bell’s Tariff Walls Map (TWM), a large three-dimensional model of Europe on which international borders were represented by actual physical walls, the varying heights of which indicated average tariff restrictions imposed on traded goods by each European country. The TWM was one of the most widely debated maps of the 1920s and 1930s. Versions were exhibited in national parliaments, government ministries, chambers of commerce, and at international conferences across Europe and the United States, part of an ultimately unsuccessful campaign against economic protectionism. By depicting nation-states as volumetric spaces separated by physical barriers, the TWM contributed significantly to the idea of the ‘wall’ as an economic and geopolitical division.

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the ‘beggar-thy-neighbour’ protectionism embraced by many countries after World War One.

As an experimental form of interwar geopolitical cartography, conceived and promoted by a British parliamentarian, the TWM stands apart from the more extensively researched geopolitical maps and cartographic propaganda produced in this period in fascist Italy, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Morrison-Bell’s free-trade critique of Europe’s economic and political malaise after World War One reflected his fundamentally liberal world-view. His maps and cartographic models were therefore examples of a previously overlooked liberal geopolitical imagination between the wars.

Morrison-Bell’s campaigns have surprising relevance today. The TWM, in particular, highlighted questions of free trade, protectionism, European unity and Britain’s relationship with Europe and the wider world that are as important now as they were in the 1920s, especially since the UK’s recent decision to withdraw from the EU, as the story of Morrison-Bell’s TWM provides a salutary historical lesson about the potency of walls in the geopolitical imagination.

Campaigning cartography

Clive Morrison-Bell was born in 1871 into what he called, rather tauntologically, a ‘conventional ordinary early-Victorian family’. His father, a distinguished soldier of traditional Tory views, owned a small estate in Sussex where he raised his four sons and two daughters to ride, shoot and ‘hate Mr. Gladstone’. From Eton, Morrison-Bell progressed to Sandhurst, the Scots Guards and the first South African War, after which he spent four years in Canada as aide-de-camp to Lord Minto, the governor-general. When Minto became viceroy of India in 1905, Morrison-Bell returned to London as ‘organizing secretary’ of the Society of Miniature Rifle Clubs (SMRC), an organisation established four years earlier by Lord Roberts, commander-in-chief of Britain’s armed forces, to counter the appeal of pacifism and socialism among working men. Here Morrison-Bell began to experiment with maps as organisational and campaigning devices, using a large map of Britain to plot the distribution of rifle clubs and to target resources at regions where SMRC recruitment was weak.

Encouraged by Roberts, Morrison-Bell began to involve himself in Conservative politics, just as Tory fortunes slumped as a consequence of the acrimonious split between the advocates of free trade, previously the dominant force in Conservative ranks, and the supporters of Joseph Chamberlain’s Tariff Reform League, a grassroots Tory movement that had campaigned since 1903 for a more protectionist policy of imperial preference. While free traders insisted that Britain’s prosperity could only be secured by the traditional policy of minimising the tariffs imposed on imported goods, tariff reformers argued that Britain was falling behind more protectionist states, especially Germany and the United States, and had no alternative but to impose higher duties, specifically upon goods from outside the limitations of economic expertise, modelling and forecasting, and the role of the media in political campaigns. And as we shall see, the story of the TWM reveals the protean character of visual messages in political debate and the propensity of images to escape the intentions of their creators.

Depicting Europe’s economic geography as a three-dimensional terrain model, the TWM was an early attempt to visualise the continent vertically as well as horizontally, and by reference to enclosed, walled spaces — a powerful metaphor in the 1920s and 1930s, and a brutal geopolitical reality after 1945. As we confront the prospect of real and rhetorical walls reappearing in various parts of the world, the story of Morrison-Bell’s TWM provides a salutary historical lesson about the potency of walls in the geopolitical imagination.

Footnotes:


6 From Eton, Morrison-Bell was known by his middle name (“Cloche”) although his first name was Arthur and he often used the initials A.C. Morrison-Bell in 1927, aged 56. © National Portrait Gallery, London.

8 PA/MOR2/VI/10.
9 PA/MOR2/VI/12-3.
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