L’étranger deux fois: John Rocque’s “Outsider” Maps of London and Dublin

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This paper explores the contingent nature of the visual language developed in the eighteenth century by “outsider” mapmaker John Rocque—a Huguenot working in London and Dublin—in his representations of cities and architecture, and how his compromised views are echoed by the representational limitations of the map image in general. Best known for his seminal 1746 map of London, its 24-sheet plan remains a somewhat suspect example of Rocque’s representational style, the control of which having been wrested from him before publication. His Dublin map, made a decade later, is his under-celebrated master work. Its depth and range of observed detail came about as an opportunistic rebuttal to competition from the resident city surveyor, but was also compromised by errors of recording and a brazen fudging of vital topographical information. Yet, there remains an anarchic authenticity to the Dublin map, missing in its more constrained and official London sibling, an objectivity founded on the distance of Rocque’s point of view. His position as outsider in each city profoundly affected the nature of his representation of them. Comparisons of both the London and the Dublin maps and Nolli’s contemporary map of Rome, show an ever versatile willingness by Rocque to adapt to the circumstances of entrepreneurial image making as a social outsider: a Frenchman in London; a Londoner in Dublin; a Huguenot in the realm of the dominant Church of England and Church of Ireland establishment; and as an engraver with no architectural training turned to making maps of capital cities and the grand urban domain. His practice as engraver, mapmaker, topographical and architectural image maker is typical of the contingent versatility of the refugee. Such considerations open the question of the limitations and the hidden surplus of map representation, explored briefly in the conclusion.

Keywords: Rocque; Nolli; Huguenot; maps; London; Dublin
In this paper I approach the theme of “distance” in two ways: by investigating the representational consequences of being a cultural “outsider,” and by looking at the nature of the distance between image and its subject, printed map and constructed city. For the first, I will look at John Rocque, one of the most prolific city mapmakers of the eighteenth century, a Huguenot craftsman of uncertain origins, whose family passed from France through Geneva to London. In the English capital from the 1730s to the early 1760s, Rocque also lived in Dublin from 1754 to 1760. Although best known for his great 24-sheet plan of London of 1747 (fig. 1), 1 Rocque produced a smaller, but more detailed, four-sheet map of Dublin in 1756 (fig. 2). 2 Both of these maps are seminal source documents for the urban matrix of their cities at crucial times in their development. They are the equivalent for the English and Irish cities of Giambattista Nolli’s 1748 map of Rome. 3 Despite Rocque’s association with them, the maps of London and Dublin are entirely different in their idiomatic expression (figs 3 & 4). That Rocque’s changing idiom and the variable quality of his city records were a function of his circumstances as outsider, is my first contention. Secondly, any graphical consequences of being decoupled from your cultural milieu are echoed by the distancing that takes place in mapmaking itself. The map figure is on the one hand a relatively impoverished mode of translating the three-dimensional architectural complexity of a city into a two-dimensional engraved cipher. Yet, it also hides within itself what Paul Ricoeur calls “a semantic surplus,” an additional untapped realm of meaning.

1 A Plan of the Cities of London and Westminster, and Borough of Southwark … From an Actual Survey, Taken by John Rocque, Land-Surveyor and Engraved by John Pine (London, 1747).

2 John Rocque, An Exact Survey of the City and Suburbs of Dublin in Which is Express’d the Ground Plot of all Publick Buildings Dwelling Houses Ware Houses Stables Courts Yards &c by John Rocque Chorographer to their Royal Highnesses the Late & Present Prince of Wales 1756 (Dublin, 1756).

3 Giovanni Battista Nolli, Nuova Pianta di Roma (Rome, 1748).

Figure 1. John Rocque, A Plan of the Cities of London and Westminster, and Borough of Southwark, 24 sheets, 1747. (Courtesy of the David Rumsey Map Collection.)
Rocque was an étranger, more than the “twice” (deux fois) implied by the title to this paper. He was a Frenchman in London; a Londoner in Dublin; a Huguenot in the realm of the Church of England establishment; a commoner making maps of royal estates without invitation; and an engraver with no architectural training turned to making maps of capital cities and the grand urban domain. His professional and cultural estrangement may be picked up in the nature of the map expression Rocque used in various projects.

Long associated with the 24-sheet London map, it is assumed that Rocque was a trained cartographer. In fact, the great French state-supported map-making endeavours of the early modern period had no equivalent in England, where he spent most of his professional life.⁴ There is no evidence that Rocque was trained in such scientific cartography, in either country.⁵ Neither should we compare him to Nolli, an architect and experienced

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cadastral surveyor. The architecture depicted in inset boxes that framed the earliest of Rocque's estate surveys suggests a stilted awkwardness that disappeared in later works where others were employed to create such illustrations. His record of some buildings in Dublin, as we shall see, demonstrate incontestably that he had no formal training in architectural drawing. Indeed, the accomplishment of his engraving technique, best seen in his own map cartouches, and in decorative designs he engraved for book illustrations, suggests that he was an engraver rather than a cartographer. He came to mapmaking through estate surveying, a much more primitive adjunct profession, the acquisition of the skills for which was easily picked up from widely available surveyors' manuals.

Nevertheless, without experience as a surveyor of cities, and suggesting a degree of rash naivety on the part of those who asked him, Rocque was invited in March 1738 to survey a new map of London. The map was completed nine years later in 1747. The project was supported by the London Corporation and the Royal Society, and errors in matching the city-wide trigonometrical survey to on-street measurements were captured early enough for the map to be reconfigured at least once. The save was made by Peter Davall, Secretary to the Royal Society, based on the methodology of French mapmaker Guillaume Delisle. While he may have been initially out of his depth, Rocque was a quick learner, and long before this London map was completed he had published his own triangulated city map of Bristol, and surveyed and published an entirely independent 16-sheet map of London and its Environs.

Despite Rocque's engraving credentials, and although he was likely to have made the fair copy upon which the published map was based, he was superseded as engraver of the 24-sheet London map by the more established local, John Pine. Nevertheless, Rocque would employ Pine to engrave Rocque's own map of Bristol. Yet the Bristol and London maps are entirely different in their appearance, despite Pine being the engraver for both. The Bristol map, as we will see, was a typical Rocque creation. The 24-sheet London map was not, even though this is the map for which he is best known. Somewhere towards the end of its preparation Rocque's standing in the project was reduced to surveyor only, and Pine and his fellow engraver John Tinney became the publishers.

Rocque's idiomatic style needs to be briefly considered to understand this better (fig. 5). Although he received his ad-hoc training in map surveying in England, his engraving style was deeply indebted to contemporary French cartographic


14 Peter Davall, "Some reflections on Mr. De Lisle's Comparison of the Magnitude of Paris with London and Several Other Cities, Printed in the Memoirs of the Royal Academy of Sciences at Paris for the year 1725, Communicated in a Letter to Dr. Rutty, Secretary to the Royal Society, by Peter Davall, of the Middle Temple, Esq.," Philosophical Transactions (1663-1775) 53 (1727-28): 432-36.


7 Compare the awkwardly depicted mansion houses in Rocque's estate map of Richmond (1734) to the sophisticated storied images in his Chiswick map (1736).
expression. Map historian Catherine Delano-Smith distinguishes between the use of macro- and micro-lines in maps, the former recording the outlines of a map’s main components, such as street and property divisions, while the latter, includes the symbols, text or linear shading which expand our understanding and the meaning of what’s recorded. Rocque’s particular brand of French map was planimetric, rejecting the bird’s-eye-view of maps such as Turgot’s Paris map. Building outlines are enlivened by a dense layer of meaningful micro-lines, that suggest the nature of the terrain, and are “carpeted” across the picture plane. Rocque’s version of this idiom is easily recognisable, particularly in his naturalistic symbols for landscape features and land use. In the Dublin map, Rocque used micro-lines to distinguish between building types, public, private or purely utilitarian outhouses, warehouses, workshops and manufactories (fig. 6). There is a profuseness here that charms us into the illusion of a lived authenticity, a “world of its own,” if not the real world. Rocque used workshop employees for some of the engraving, but always retained control of an in-house mode of expression.

We see this expressive control when we compare Rocque’s Bristol and Kilkenny maps, one engraved by John Pine (fig. 7), the other by the Irish engraver George Byrne (fig. 8).
Figure 6. Rocque, Dublin 1756, detail. (Courtesy of Trinity College Dublin Library. Reproduced by permission of the Board of Trinity College.)

Figure 7. Rocque, Bristol, 1743, detail. (Courtesy of The MacLean Collection, Chicago.)

Figure 8. Rocque, Kilkenny, 1758, detail. (Courtesy of Trinity College Dublin Library. Reproduced by permission of the Board of Trinity College.)
The appearance of those two maps is radically different to the London map (fig. 3), also engraved by Pine, as already noted. There, in the built-up areas, instead of the abundance of Rocquian detail, we get a rationalised city, whose teeming complexity is straightened under an artificial order. Having been pushed out of the final production of the London map, an implausible regularity replaced the usual Rocquian vitality.

For all Rocque’s subsequent fame, he hardly exists in what survives of the contemporary record. Pine, in contrast, was part of a clique associated with Slaughter’s Coffee-House in London, a group of sculptors, architects and artists, including Hogarth, who established the St Martin’s Lane Academy, a precursor to the Royal Academy. Patronised by Frederick Prince of Wales, and associated with opposition politics, their artistic bias was rococo rather than the establishment Palladianism of the Burlington set.20 Despite being in the advanced guard of those who imported rococo to England, and styling himself “Topographer” to the Prince of Wales, Rocque is not listed among surviving records of this group.21 Neither an architect, nor indeed a trained cartographer, Rocque’s status as craftsman may partly explain this exclusion, and why he was pushed out of the final authorship of the London plan. In this way, his being an outsider, profoundly affected the idiom of the London map.

The style, and sense of authenticity is distinctly different to anything else he ever made, despite his later fame in relation to this map in particular.

Seven years after the London maps were completed, after making a number of county surveys and other city maps in England, Rocque moved to Ireland.22 Here too, as a Londoner, and as a Huguenot in the Church of Ireland dominated Dublin, he was an outsider again. Rocque received no direct support from Dublin Corporation or from local bodies equivalent to the London Royal Society, until after he had completed his map.23 Instead he faced competition from the incumbent city Surveyor, Roger Kendrick, who countermanded in the local press all of Rocque’s announcements for a proposed new map of Dublin.24 This protectionist reprisal from a native holder of perceived prior rights was prolonged by a series of tit-for-tat claims by both rival mapmakers. When Kendrick was eventually embarrassed by the more experienced outsider into abandoning his wholly unrealistic project—expanded to eight sheets, covering a much larger area of the city than Rocque’s map, and using a local “Citizen” as an engraver25—Rocque’s proposal was also ramped-up in the level of its detail. He promised to include every single building, garden, outhouse and backyard.26 Such


22 For an almost complete list of Rocque’s maps, see Ashley Baynton-Williams, “John Rocque: Catalogue of his Engraved Works,” http://www.mapforum.com/05/rocqlist.htm and http://www.mapforum.com/05/rocqlis2.htm.

23 Dublin Corporation granted twenty guineas to Rocque in 1757, R.M. Gilbert (ed.) Calendar of the ancient records of Dublin, vol. 10 (Dublin: Joseph Dollard, Wellington Quay, 1891), 252, January 21, 1757. The Dublin Society, the equivalent of London’s Royal Society of Arts, merely purchased a copy of Rocque’s Dublin map, and had this coloured for a guinea by him afterwards, see Royal Dublin Society “Minute Book,” February 24, 1757.


a map represented a precipitous and foolhardy career-first for Rocque. The result, produced within two years, is the most detailed map in his oeuvre, and of any map of Dublin to that date.

One of the most convincing qualities of Rocque’s Dublin map, and one shared with Nolli’s Rome, is the character of his depiction of negative space. There is a sense in the Nolli map that it was the streetscape, the demotic open ground available to all, that was best accounted for (fig. 9). The shaded city blocks appear almost secondary, supporting the more shapely white void-figures. It is this spatial expression that excited Colin Rowe at Cornell in the 1970s and subsequent generations of
architects and urban designers.27 If anything, the quality of the representation of the public ground is even more accomplished in Rocque’s Dublin (fig. 10). This map is alive with spatial variety and incident, giving the impression of a convincing contemporaneous documentation of Dublin’s early-modern street-space. In Rocque’s London, in contrast, the representation of streetspace is wholly unconvincing (fig. 11). It is as if a web of vectors for the complex of the city’s streets was computed, and onto this some optimal rectilinear geometry was overlaid. Its regularised appearance is partly to do with Pine’s choice of repetitive graphic idiom—including its relentless unmodulated brick-pattern—but also the limitations of Rocque’s London survey, resulting from the expediencies of the professional freelance surveyor at work on such a vast city.

Rocque’s record of Dublin buildings—as opposed to its streetspaces—is another thing entirely (fig. 12). The results from archaeological digs in Dublin made with Rocque’s map in hand are usually fairly favourable. 28 Under the pressure of an impossible deadline, however, Rocque cheated the building count whenever he felt he could. 29 Moreover, his representations of key public buildings demonstrate a limited understanding of the principles of classical design. At the Parliament House on College Green, he miscounted the depth of its grand colonnaded breakfront, counting four columns where in reality there are only two (fig. 13). 30

His grasp of medieval architecture was worse. At Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin’s most important ecclesiastical building, Rocque, misconceiving the cruciform plan of all such buildings, staggered the transepts at intervals on either side of the nave.


30 See Colm Lennon and John Montague, John Rocque’s Dublin: A Guide to the Georgian City (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2010), 34–35.
(fig. 14). But, at St Patrick’s Cathedral, which incorporated a chapel for the local French community, Rocque’s record of the building is naïve but substantially accurate (fig. 15). Rocque’s record is modified as a function of his social position—botched as an outsider to the official church of the state, naïve but accurate where he felt welcomed in the city’s second cathedral.31 There is another case in the Dublin map that suggests a doubling of the outsider perspective, this time related to Rocque’s depiction of two local parish churches of St Mary’s, one Catholic and the other Protestant (Church of Ireland) (fig. 16). In mid-eighteenth-century Dublin, although the Penal Laws had been partially relaxed, Catholic and Dissenter churches were set-back from principal thoroughfares. In this instance, the Catholic parish church was buried inside a city block, in the back yards of buildings on the west side of Liffey Street. The church isn’t labelled, our only hint of its function being the inscribed black cross inside its hatched L-shaped footprint. The Protestant building, in contrast, extended to the full depth of its city block, and stands in open space. Rocque’s representation raises this to the status of a public building by his cross-hatched code, and by adding the label “St Marys Church.” Moreover, in a rare break from planimetric discipline, four bollards at the church entrance are represented axonometrically. In this example, both the Catholic parish church as “outsider” and Rocque’s outsider deference are notable. Rocque was neither a Catholic nor a member of the episcopal Church of Ireland, but his most likely patrons were of the latter, and so this miniature rupture of three-dimensionality in the representation of their church, among other signs, establishes its distinguished nature. In contrast, the enforced modesty of the architectural setting of

the Catholic building, is matched by the modesty of its depiction by the visiting mapmaker.  

Rocque was a freelance hand-to-mouth businessman, who remained outside political and professional hierarchies. In Dublin, with no official support, he was forced to peer over garden walls to complete his measured map. All of his changes in genre—rococo ornament, estate surveys, books of landscapes, grand city and county maps—and the changes in the nature of his idiomatic representation, appear as the agile expediencies of the entrepreneurial immigrant.  

However, the planimetric town map is itself a circumscribed manner of conjuring a likeness of the bustling, corporeal and substantive materiality of cities. It is a truism, that maps are as much about what they exclude, as what they include. A plan map is a desiccated linear slice through a city. No suggestion of the materiality of the built environment is given. Is a tiny rectangle enclosed by an engraved line a four-storey-over-basement building faced with red brick, a half-timber house with gable to the street, or an urban stone cottage with a thatched roof (fig. 17)? Without supplementary evidence, little in a map will tell us. Even Nolli’s seminal code of solid and void needs the support of other images. To understand the denuded Nolli, we depend on the lush motley of Piranesi.  

In architectural practice, the limitations of the plan are overcome by combining visual codes: the plan is supplemented by the elevation, section and perspective. Nevertheless, the paucity of expression in the city plan suggests its own reductionist polemic. The architectural commentator Jeremy Till compares a view by Piranesi to a drawing by the urbanist Edmund Bacon of the same junction in Rome. The Spartan reduction of information
in Bacon’s drawing serves the purpose of clarifying a particular point of view. But it is also consistent, Till argues, with the implied will-to-order of the whole modernist, and by extension backwards, enlightenment, project. 33

There are alternatives to this view of the map as denuded code. Svetlana Alpers’ insight that Dutch seventeenth-century artists were also mapping the landscape, 34 is easily reversed if we remind ourselves that map-makers are image makers too. Louis Marin’s *Utopics* also ponders the dual nature of the map as substitute for something that isn’t here, as well as being a figure or image in itself. 35 J.B. Harley noted that “[M]aps are value-laden images,” and that the mapping process involves artifice, elisions and hidden motivations, stemming from broader artistic and polemical traditions. 36 In a parallel case to the orthographic map, Panofsky has shown us that single-point perspective was not only one of a range of ways to “view the world,” but that it had its own discursive position, suggesting empirical objectivity, the appearance of truth, or even truth itself. 37 The philosopher Paul Ricoeur distinguishes between the image-as-representation and the image-as-sign, the former a “static … ‘portrait’,” the latter “dynamic … ‘expression’.” 38 Therefore, we might conclude that the mimetic substitutional qualities of the map’s image-as-representation retains, even within the mapping apparatus itself, potentially endless untapped residues of symbolic surplus.

To choose the sparest example, Nolli’s binary on-off, black-white code of pochéd built fabric is ying to the yang of his untempered white space: the first impenetrable, dense, private, the rest liberated to the public, spaces we’re invited to enter (fig. 9). This void-as-figure, became its own model for spatial planning, the city no longer a collection of buildings, but a solid mass from which space is carved out. In contrast to Nolli’s two-tone sound, Rocque sings in polyphony (fig. 10). Significance is suggested by layers of decorative landscape pictogram fuzz shimmering amongst the plane of macro-lines telling us where buildings begin and stop. Mixed in with this layer of symbolic pictorial wealth is Rocque’s expediency, his licence arising sometimes from his dubious skills sometimes his alien status. His images are nevertheless redolent with what late-night American talk-show host Stephen Colbert calls ‘truthiness’. Their accidental qualities are what convince us—perhaps fraudulently—of their authenticity, their facticity, their tumultuous life-likeness. The Dublin map with all its chaos appears more “true to life” than the more frigid sanitised image of London. The density of incident arises from the intensity of the Frenchman’s encounter with the smaller city, his freedom from officialdom, and any

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imposed putative scientific knowhow. Rocque artfully disguised the shortcomings of his survey and of his representational ability. He was no Nolli. His likenesses are more art than science; more artful—as in the Artful Dodger—that they are artistic.

The town plan is an abstracted code standing in for the abundant three-dimensional complexity of a city. Compared to a drawing, the city plan is an encrypted cypher of some unknown foreign text. For many of us, its Cartesian abstraction, its distance from the original, is its attraction, even if in theory, such abstraction may be associated with enlightenment control and exclusion. For Rocque the disguise was an opportunity. His visual grammar was contingent, that is to say responsive to the moment, and to the rich cultural topography he sought to represent. We may see the flaws in his idiomatic expression as Freudian slips exposing the weakness of his position. In this way, they offer a dropping of the mask, that help us cut through and better understand its social code.