Book review

How the States got their Shapes
by Mark Stein
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The author is neither lawyer, legislator, surveyor, cartographer, nor historian. He is a professional playwright who has taken time out to indulge his interest in the underlying reasons for the ‘shapes’ of the territorial limitations of the fifty US states and the District of Columbia (the seat of the US Federal government).

An understanding of the causes of the location, position, and shapes of the various state borders provides insight and understanding of the history behind the establishment and development of the current regional US political entities. In regard to his research, as the author acknowledges, it helps for any young person embarking upon a research career to seek out for a spouse an employee of the Library of Congress.

As an illustration – the northern part of Wisconsin is actually part of Michigan although not physically attached to that state; similarly for the eastern peninsula forming the Chesapeake Bay – why should it be within Virginia territory when logic seems to demand it be part of Maryland? In most cases, the answers provide an historical understanding behind the initial creation and development of the states. However, the author has falsely promised that “[t]his book will provide those answers” to all the questions raised in the book. His book fails to answer the question despite having asked it twice: Why is there a West Virginia but not an East Virginia?

Also disappointing is the failure to address the issue of the dogleg along the eastern border of New Mexico. The New Mexico-Oklahoma border runs due south along the 103rd meridian of (west) longitude from the 37th parallel of latitude to the line representing 36° 30’ north from the equator. From there, the border between New Mexico and Texas does not proceed south as a continuation along the 103rd meridian. Instead, the Texas-New Mexico border continues due west along the 36° 30’ N
parallel (a continuation of the Texas-Oklahoma border) for some 3 km (as best my Times Atlas 1:2,500,000 scale map shows) before turning due south along a meridian some short distance west of the 103rd meridian of longitude. Why this wedge of land approximately 500 km long and of width ranging from 3 km to 8 km should belong to Texas and not New Mexico is not explained in the text. It is not a case that the explanation offered is unsatisfactory, there is no explanation at all offered. This is despite the assertion that under the Compromise of 1820, Texas sold to the US all of its land west of 103°. The author’s failure to explain this anomaly is astonishing.

The format of the book is to devote a brief chapter (~ 5 or 6 pages) to each of the 50 states and the Federal District of Columbia with a necessary introductory chapter Don’t Skip This (you’ll just have to come back later) describing the historical acquisition of territory from the French (by conquest in the mid-eighteenth century), the acquisition of the remaining French territory by treaty (the 1802 Louisiana purchase), the negotiated border between British North America (Canada) and the US pursuant to the 1818 Convention fixing the location of the international border at 49° North, the Adams-Onis Treaty (between Spain and the US, 1819). Even the 1790 Nootka Convention between England and Spain was to affect the borders of the US states even though the US was not a party to that treaty.

Even within the US, the Missouri Compromise (1820) imposed artificial borders upon incoming states seeking to join the US. Only those applicant states wholly situate below the 36° 30’ N parallel could join and retain their status permitting slavery. Thus, the independent Republic of Texas, wishing to join the US in 1846, could only retain its status as a slave state by relinquishing its territory north of 36° 30’. Had Texas wished to retain its territorial domain (stretching up into present day Wyoming or 42° N), it would necessarily have had to surrender its slave state status.

A very interesting book, in some ways comparable to the Australian professional cartographer and surveyor David Taylor’s The States of a Nation: the Politics and Surveys of the Australian State Borders, published by the NSW Department of Lands in 2006. However, it must be emphasised that Taylor’s is a more learned work. While the current author concedes that his book does not provide all the information
necessary to fully comprehend the history of the states making up the American federal compact, it directs the reader to where this history may be uncovered. The bibliography includes web page addresses allowing readers without access to the American texts to follow through. The author’s writing style is pleasantly engaging with the result that the learning of history in this instance is no chore and this book makes for an entertaining and valuable introduction. The maps (of approximate half-page size and totalling more than 200 in number) accompanying the text well illustrate the old saw of a picture being worth a thousand words.

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