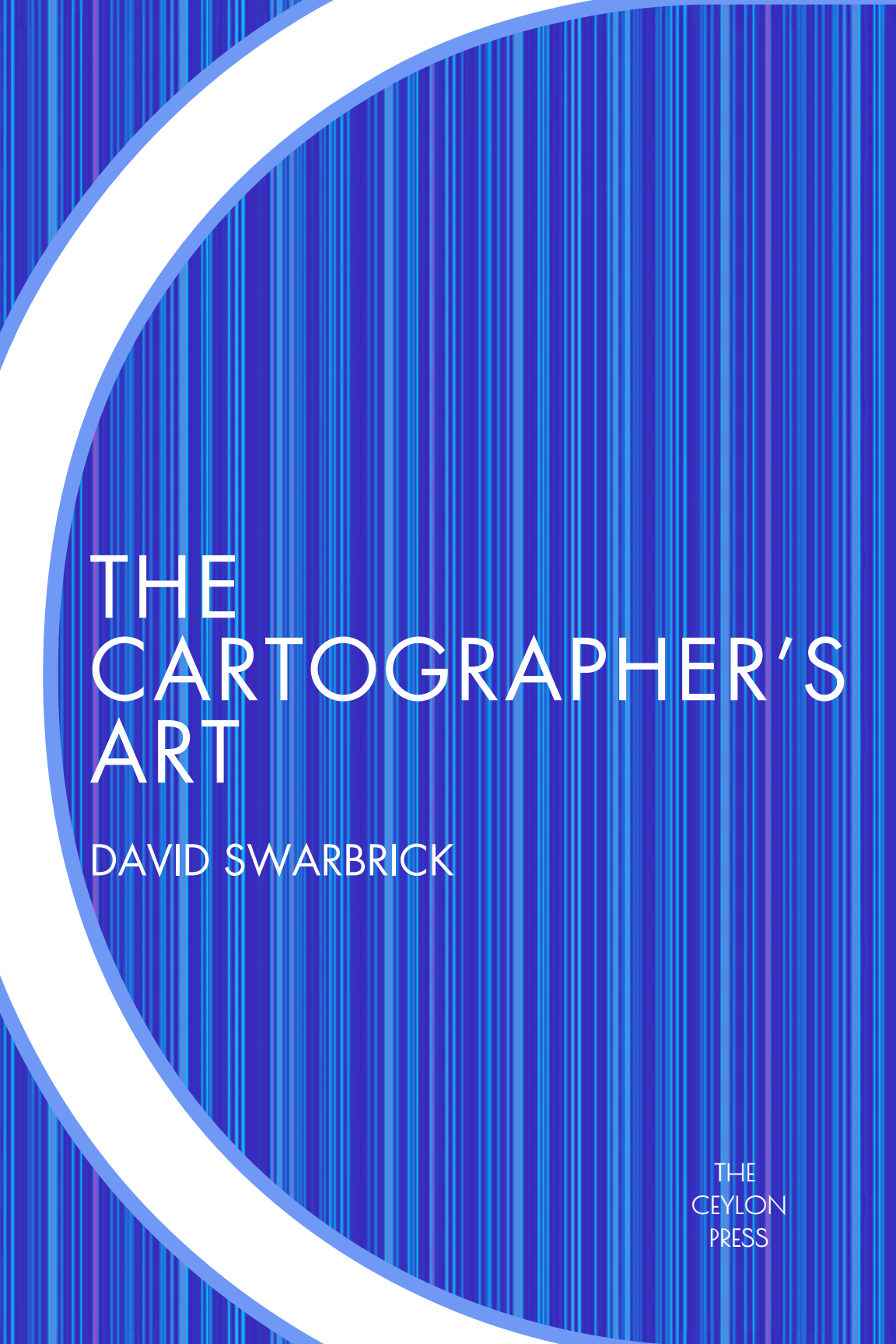




THE CARTOGRAPHER'S ART

DAVID SWARBRICK

THE
CEYLON
PRESS

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FOR MM

WRITTEN FROM 1988

LEY
LINES

What remains
are the maps,
laying,
 like ley lines,
 the journeys of men
 who have died,
 or simply disappeared;

the journals
others have remembered,
building the picture
from a few surviving fragments
quoted in the books
of those who followed.

Charts swallow charts,
 pass on the same fantastic contours -
 corkscrewing coastlines,
 pulling out modest deltas
into uncharted seas,

 and, faithfully,
 taking each
 a little further
 as if a returning sailor
 whispered on the home dock
 that the journey was further
than the old maps had implied.

Sometimes,
a new hand intervenes,
adding an island,
peppering, with cities,
the board alluvial plains

of a dreaming land;
gouging out a fierce, flamboyant river;

but even the navigators
do not know
which of the strange sea beasts
preying on the edges of each terrain
are the ones to fear;

or which rivers will take us inland,
before vanishing
like streams on chalk
beneath the walls of the city,

the one that is mentioned
in the first accounts.

CITY WITHOUT SEASONS

Because the city has no seasons;
because the house beneath the downs was sold
it is that summer that holds,
 its days turning at the end of unfamiliar roads,
 dry and culpable:
 forever out of reach.

 remember the order of things -
 sloes, leading a rush of starry blossoms:
 apple, pear, cherry, plum;
 fountains of white hawthorn flowing before the chestnut;
the chestnut opening before the beech;

I knew what would flower when,
 hawkweed along hedges;
 poppies banking on high verges;
 rowans reddening overhead:

just now;

and now,
the years
have rolled to this point,

to this impounded summer
rooted in another landscape,

ghosted by the co-ordinates
of an older map:

the hill is swept by trees;
 the gate is closed.
 someone else is in the yellow house.

Wherever you lie,
come out;

the city walls are not so wide:

you walk my streets,
shop in my shops

wherever you are,
come out.

Daylight shrinks;

leaves gather;

along the old drive
crocuses bloom
with tiny purple wings
like birds escaping south.

The city calls
down long dark evenings,
faces flash-frozen
in the street.

Wherever you are,
come out

It is time,

It is time.

FORGOTTEN BOUNTY

It stays -
that memory of flying once –

vassal states break free,
daring all.

The new frontiers
are all the News reports.

Journalists speak of cities
lost decades ago;

forgotten routes reopen,
fresh boundaries frame
the unsurveyed new nations
rising from the blank expanse
of disregarded maps.

Although the same autumn bonfire
smoulders at the edge of the Hyde Park
it is all changed:

the unending summer
has taken us from early lighted rooms
drawn us out
into a world we thought we knew,
and have to learn again.

I saw you
because it was too early to go home
because the party before was dull
because I chose that place, randomly,

and it is always the ease I remember;

the ease
and your voice moving us on.

All around the city dims,

shrinking space before us
to a single route,

remembering the older roads
that lie beneath the asphalt.

ALL NIGHT

Now all night long
beside you burn
and fold the frozen stars away;

the silver night,
secured and safe,
floods out across my dreams;

within my arms
again you turn -

the sweet grass
and the silent sky -

and all forgotten bounty breaks
within the space we lie.

NOW IT IS
COLD

Why go,
now it is cold?

Already
the street lights burn
and the park gates are fastened;

stay.

The air is still;
the distant traffic rounds invisibly
in cold blue lanes below;

here,
our fingers move
from arm to face,
from lip to ear,

reading like blind men,
reading.

Behind these blinds
the distant world
is flat
and closed;

stay.

LEARNING
BY LETTER

Learning by letter

I link the points of your life,

the picture growing weekly,
cards, tapes, scraps of paper
dispatched,

received weekly,
postmarking the route we take,

laying down a sense
that we had met
before we learnt
the adult arts of camouflage.

I lean against you
caught by the rebounding
differences of image,

a long lost freedom

returning
on forgotten tides

flooding
the recent land,

reassigning old boundaries,

throwing out links like landing ropes
until the dreaming jetties fill.

THE RIVER

Alone in the house
I see the river
as a late traveller might,

a winding path cutting through low hills.

Colours change with an unreal haste;

you do not see them move
but where before it was blue,
now it is crimson;
where it was white
now it is gold.

Shadows surface from shapes,
trees fall out of focus.

It is colder.

Night binds the leafy lawns;
birds seek out a place
on bare boughs.

Behind the sirens of occasional barges
it is quiet;

smoke rises in thin blue columns.

The sun has sunk behind the hills
leaving a smudge of pink
silhouetting the old forest
where kings have hunted,
waged wars,
built places,
gone,

leaving this a place apart,

Down the spiky avenue of trees

the river burns

to a last few flecks of gold

the waters sliced by boats,

gliding to the city

on southern currents.

FREER THAN
MAGPIES

Freer than magpies,
whatever we could,
whatever we will,

we have.

Like Raleigh's city,
the goal waits
glitters above valleys
drawing from a roof of leaves
the secret light.

By what amounts of time they link,
the days incite
each sequestered wish
loading them like bullets.

The jungle sighs
trees trespass
the casual paths.

The way forward
is the way back,
across what has already been walked.

Only the birds have eyes,
flying free,
singing strange songs
out of sight
where the branches scratch the sky.

All is green;

a river drags into broad loops

a snake slides across moss.

This is the way
the old explorers said they would come
following the river after the ships grounded.

This is the way others have come,
knowing that somewhere
in the sudden mountains
the city would lie
with labyrinthine streets,
that known,
lead on like a map, memorized,
each landmark bringing us closer
to the walls of the palace,

to the point where all time turns as one.

DAY

After the storm,

the calm,

after the noise,

an immutable song

silent for so long.

When the sleepless night falls

only the hardest things are sure

roaming like tigers

till the darkness thins

and the city gates open.

Sleeping, you wake me;

your face moves,

releases

an unbound tenancy;

between the trees

the valley spreads:

I can see where the path began,

the farms, the structured fields

but here in the forest

the track divides

and divides again;

and is lost

under the leaves

where we lie.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Swarbrick is a publisher, planter, hermit, hotelier, and writer.

He was born in Colombo and raised, with few concessions to modernity, in India, Singapore, Dubai, and the Middle East. Cornish, he gained his degrees on the Celtic fringe, with a joint honours at the University of Wales; and an M. Phil at the University of Stirling, prolonging an introduction to regular working hours for as long as was decently possible.

Having worked at News Corp's HarperCollins UK as board director for sales, marketing and various other otherwise homeless departments, and HarperCollins India, he ran Hachette's consumer learning division. Prior to this, he launched Oxford University Press's first commercial online business, Oxford Reference Online.

When the doubtful charms of boardroom bawls, bottom lines, and divas diminished, he returned to Sri Lanka, the land of his birth hundreds of years earlier, to rescue a spice plantation and set of art deco buildings that had gone feral in the jungle.

Today, as the Flame Tree Estate & Hotel, it has become one of the country's top ten boutique hotels, run by the kindest and most professional of hospitality teams; and overseen by several small schnauzers.

DISCOVER MORE



A small island surrounded by large oceans,
Sri Lanka is a mystery to many: remote, hard
to place; a well-kept secret.

The Ceylon Press seeks to make its
complicated story more accessible.