

THE MAPS OF THE SOCIETY FOR THE DIFFUSION OF USEFUL INFORMATION

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The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge—I've always thought this a charming and anachronistic name! In the rare map world, in libraries and in auction sales catalogues, the maps of the Society (SDUK) are still commonly found and valued. Obviously this group was once very prolific in the production of small, clear and concise maps of countries and cities throughout the world. This article looks at the story behind this organization, with their earnest name and their vast map publishing program.

The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge was formed in 1826 and was very much a product of its time. The egalitarian ideals of the French Revolution had swept through Europe, leaving in their wake an awareness of the plight of the working classes and an increased sensitivity to democratic principles. The First Industrial Revolution was underway in Britain, relocating many people from agricultural areas into cities, factories, and lives of poverty in poor living and working conditions. The influence of economists and social thinkers, such as Adam Smith (*The Wealth of Nations*) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (*The Social Contract*), was gradually permeating both government and society with consciousness of the inequities between masters and workers, and the economic, social and political implications of such injustices. Trade unions had been banned since the middle of the 14th century but nevertheless were starting to re-emerge in response to the industrial revolution and perilous working conditions. Workers themselves, and also prominent benefactors, began to form cooperatives and various forms of "friendly societies" in an attempt to better the conditions of the working poor.

At the beginning of the 1800s, it is estimated that fewer than three-quarters of the adult population of England were able to read and fewer than one-half could write¹. This literacy was credited in large part to Sunday schools in childhood, but few working class adults had the opportunity to practice or expand their skills. The industrial revolution and urbanization offered greater employment opportunities for men who could read and write. But books were still very expensive. A Bible might be the only reading material in the home for many families. Working men initiated "reading clubs" as a way of pooling resources to purchase books and magazines that could be shared, read aloud in coffee shops and circulated. Middle class activists and democratic advocates began to encourage the government to take action towards education and literacy for the working classes, as a benefit both to individuals who wished to better themselves and to society as a whole.

One of the founding fathers of the SDUK was Henry Brougham². Brougham is credited with a lifelong advocacy for adult education and the benefits of education to society. As a young lawyer he participated in the founding of the *Edinburgh Review*, one of the most influential British magazines of its time, and wrote many articles on science, philosophy and history. As a Member of Parliament he opposed the slave trade and advocated for free trade and educational reforms. Eventually he went on to found University College London and to become the Lord Chancellor of Great Britain, but his greatest achievements are considered to be in the fields of political and educational change.

¹R.S. Schofield, "Dimensions of Illiteracy, 1750-1850", *Explorations in Economic History* 10 #4, Summer 1973; quoted in Gray (2006), p.96.

²Henry Peter Brougham, Baron Brougham and Vaux (1778-1868) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Brougham,_1st_Baron_Brougham_and_Vaux.

In January of 1825, Brougham published a pamphlet entitled *Practical Observations upon the Education of the People addressed to the Working Classes and their Employers* which was, and is still, considered a landmark in educational history³. This essay re-enforced his reputation as a powerful advocate for adult education, and in the same year he reiterated his ideals when being installed as Rector of Glasgow University: "Real knowledge never promoted turbulence or unbelief; but its progress is the forerunner of liberality and enlightened tolerance."⁴

The idealist Brougham gathered a group of prominent English gentlemen and proposed the formation of an organization based on the principles of his pamphlet. The Objectives of the Society reveal both the lofty aspirations and the paternalistic tone of the venture:

The Object of the Society is strictly limited to what its title imports, namely, the imparting useful information to all classes of the community, particularly to such as are unable to avail themselves of experienced teachers, or may prefer learning by themselves.

The plan proposed for the attainment of this object, is the periodical publication of Treatises, under the direction and with the sanction of a superintending Committee.⁵

So in essence, the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge was established to remedy the problem of scarce and expensive reading materials and to assist adult learners in their self-improvement by means of the production of an affordable series of publications on selected and approved topics. The "superintending Committee" was definitely not broadly representative, but rather was a reflection of the energizing influence of Brougham himself and the philanthropic sentiments of the intellectual

gentry of the time:

The original committee consisted of 47 members of whom 23 were MPs, 15 were Fellows of the Royal Society, 12 were members of the original committee of London University and 22 have entries in the *Dictionary of National Biography*.⁶

The SDUK published its first treatise in March of 1827—a work by Brougham entitled *A Discourse of the Objects, Advantages and Pleasures of Science*—in a series called the Library of Useful Knowledge which continued publication until 1846. This was followed by the Library of Entertaining Knowledge (1827-1839), the *Quarterly Journal of Education* (1831-1835), the *Penny Magazine* (1832-1845) and the *Penny Cyclopaedia* (1833-1846). Many of these series are well known and often described as forerunners in their fields of publishing, but I will pass over them quickly in order to get to the maps.

Almost immediately, the Society recognized the same need for maps as they had for reading materials. Maps were even more expensive to publish than books because of the engraving processes required; map purchase was strictly limited to the affluent and map study to the elite. The educational advocates in SDUK proposed a series of maps as an accompaniment to the Library of Useful Knowledge, so that readers could supplement their studies on history, geography and politics. The maps again would be approved, high quality and affordable.

Typical of SDUK governance, a Map Committee was struck in November 1828 to oversee the production of the new series. Again, the success of the venture was almost completely attributable to the individual whose leadership and passion drove the initiative.

³Brougham, Henry. *Practical Observations upon the Education of the People: Addressed to the Working Classes and their Employers*. London: Printed by Richard Taylor and sold by Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green for the benefit of the London Mechanics Institution, 1825. Digitized version available from The Victorian Collection, Brigham Young University at <http://www.archive.org/details/practicalobserva103brou>.

⁴Smith (1972), p.2

⁵Objectives of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (1827), from Smith (1972), Appendix C, pp.56-57.

⁶Smith (1972), p.5

In this case, the map series was undertaken by Francis Beaufort⁷. Beaufort is most famous today as the inventor of the Beaufort scale used for measurement of wind and as the namesake of the Beaufort Sea in the Canadian Arctic. He was a Captain in the British Navy, an acclaimed surveyor and cartographer of nautical charts, and eventually the Chief Hydrographer for the British Admiralty. His commitment to detailed and accurate mapping arose from an incident in his very early days as a sailor, when he was shipwrecked as a result of a defective chart. He was himself a self-educated man, who left school at age 14 and worked his way up through the ranks to Captain and acceptance as a Fellow in the Royal Society, and so he readily identified with the SDUK ideals for adult self-improvement. Beaufort agreed to take on the direction of the map series one year before he was appointed as Chief Hydrographer of the Admiralty and continued to personally edit and annotate every map for 15 years. His biography gives some insight into his passion for the project, describing how, even on the busiest and most politically charged days in the Admiralty's service, Beaufort never failed to reserve an hour or two before work every morning for the SDUK maps. Examples survive which show as many as 200 corrections and instructions in red ink to the draughtsman on a single map draft⁸. Beaufort's fine cartography and passion for exactness resulted in the high quality of the maps which were produced under SDUK's imprint and their successors.

...It has been determined to publish a Series of Modern and Ancient Maps, on similar scales, moderate in size, yet capable of distinctly showing every place of interest; of unexampled cheapness, yet finished in the best manner; and the accuracy of which may safely be relied upon, from the arrangements made for their composition and execution. They will be engraved on Steel; the size will be 11 inches by 14; and Two of them will be

delivered in a Wrapper for One Shilling, or with the Outlines coloured for One Shilling and Sixpence.

The Series will consist of at least Fifty Plates; and a Number will appear at intervals of Two Months, or more frequently, if they can be more speedily completed⁹.

The first two maps in the series were produced in September 1829: *Ancient Greece, Southern Part* (Figure 1) and *Modern Greece, Southern Part*. They, like all the series to follow, were sold in pairs, lightly sewn into a paper wrapper which was numbered sequentially. The Prospectus promised subscribers at least 50 plates (25 Numbers), which would theoretically have taken just over four years to complete at the proposed bimonthly rate. Ultimately, more than 200 maps were completed—over the next fourteen and a half years.

Because the commitment of the Society was to produce affordable publications, the pricing of the maps was of critical importance. Cain (1994) describes the lengthy debate between the Society and its potential publishers, with advice from many of the most prominent cartographers of the time (Walker, Cary and Arrowsmith), about the best price point to minimize production costs, reach a wide market, produce a high quality product and still allow some small profit to the publishing firm. The potential number of sales was a great unknown. Ultimately, a price of one shilling was dictated by the Map Committee (or one shilling sixpence with coloured outlines) and the publishing firm of Baldwin and Craddock agreed to produce the SDUK maps for this price. In modern values¹⁰, this is approximately equivalent to \$5.60 and \$8.35 Canadian, so the maps were indeed remarkably cheap.

⁷Sir Francis Beaufort (1774-1857) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis_Beaufort

⁸Friendly (1977), p.241

⁹The advertisement for the new map series was included in many other SDUK publications. This version was transcribed from *Animal Physiology* (London: Baldwin and Craddock, Library of Useful Knowledge, 1829, title page verso), <http://books.google.ca>.

¹⁰Estimated using MeasuringWorth.com, "retail price index" value, <http://www.measuringworth.com/ukcompare/>.

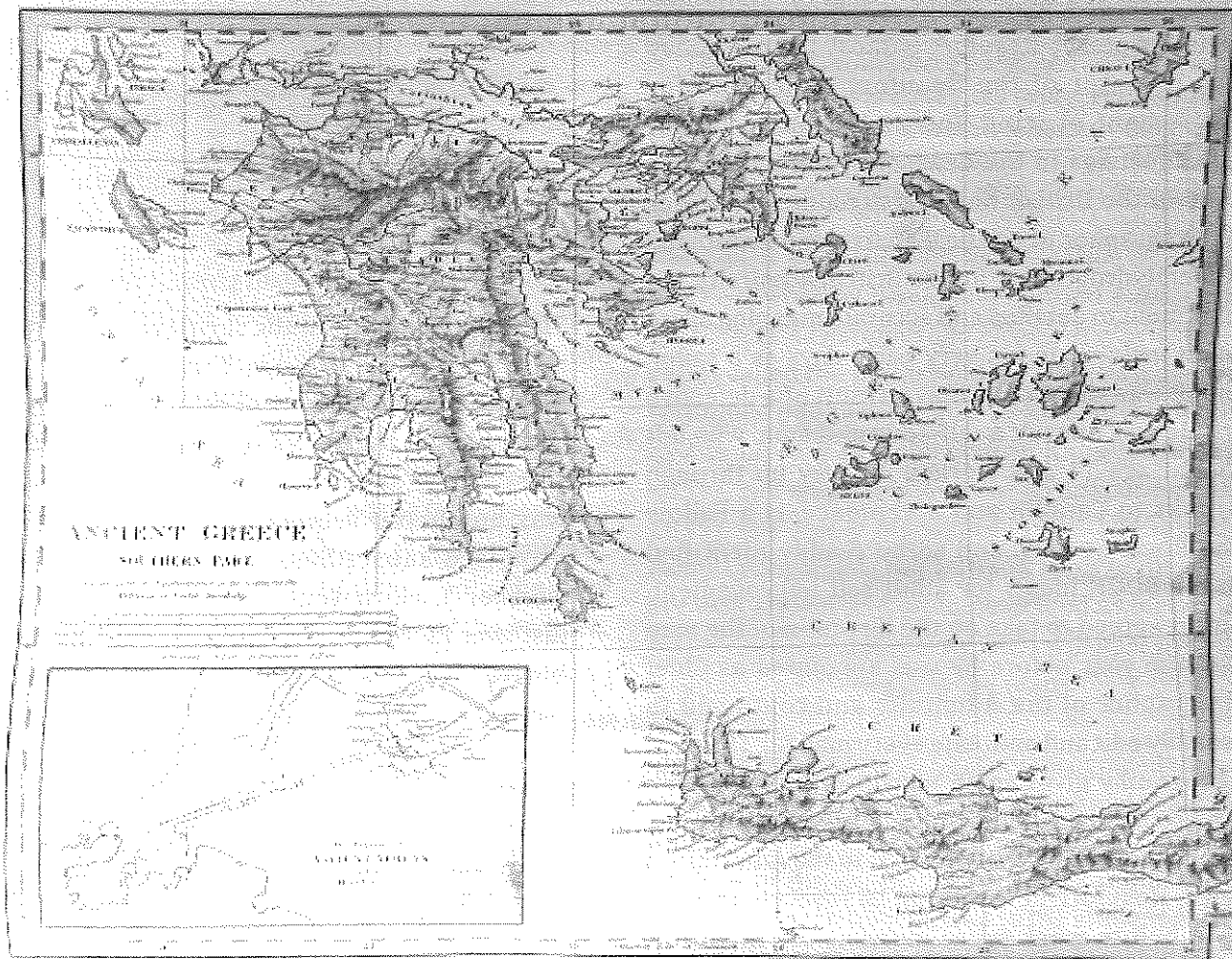


Figure 1. *Ancient Greece, Southern Part* was one of a pair of maps published September 1829 as No. 1 in the SDUK map series. This copy was bound into the final compilation *Maps of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge*, after the series was completed in 1844. (McMaster University Library, Research Collections, G1019 .S645 V.1)

Cain (1994) presents some excellent graphs about the production history of the SDUK maps between 1829 and 1844; in summary 3,080,000 maps were printed in total during this time period. The lowest annual production was 38,000 in the first year 1829 and the highest production year was 1833 with 379,000 maps. Over all the years of map series production, the average annual print output was about 193,000 maps. This might give some indication of the potentially large number of SDUK maps surviving today in the antique map market.

The longevity of the engraved printing plates also suggests something about the potential number of

SDUK maps which may survive. Table 1 attempts to follow the ownership of the engraved printing plates. Figure 2 shows an atlas plate published after the demise of the SDUK but derived from the original plates by their new owner. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to see the actual maps in all of the potentially related atlases to confirm their direct or indirect reuse of the original plates, as there are so few surviving examples of these atlases in North American libraries (according to WorldCat) or online. But the imprints for all of those listed indicate ancestry through the Society, so it is likely that the maps will exhibit at least some direct influence.

Table 1. History of the Map Printing Plates Engraved for SDUK and Derivatives

During the time period...	The map printing plates were held by...	Who produced the following publications...*
Sept 1829-1837	Baldwin and Cradock (terminated due to bankruptcy)	• Map Series Numbers 1 to 70
Sept 1837-early 1842	Baldwin's bankruptcy trustees (SDUK paid £1,750 to regain the plates)	• Reprints of maps from the first 70 Numbers
1838-1842	SDUK	• Map Series Numbers 71 to 93
Early 1842-April 1844	Chapman and Hall (terminated due to quality of printing)	• Map Series Numbers 94 to 106 ¹¹ • <i>Maps for the Society of the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge</i> 1844
May 1844-early 1844	Charles Knight	• <i>Maps for the Society of the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge</i> 1844-1845
After the dissolution of SDUK		
Jan 1846-1852	Charles Knight (purchased for £4,500)	• <i>Maps for the Society of the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge</i>
1852-1856	George Cox	• <i>General Atlas</i> 1854
1856-1875	Edward Stanford	• <i>Family Atlas</i> 1857, 1863, 1865 • <i>Harrow School Atlas</i> (multiple editions, Modern and Classical) • <i>Cyclopaedian</i> 1857, 1860, 1862, 1870, 1875 • <i>Complete Atlas</i> 1857, 1870 • <i>Atlas of Modern Geography</i> 1870
1873-1885	Thomas Letts	• <i>Family Atlas</i> 1873, 1876 • Letts's New Counting House Atlas 1879 • Letts's Popular Atlas 1887
1885-	Mason and Payne	• Letts's Intermediate Popular Atlas 1887, 1889
* An italicized atlas title indicates use of the original plates in this atlas has been indicated by bibliographical records; atlas title without italics indicates use of derivative plates is possible but unconfirmed.		

Overall, the number of SDUK single maps and related maps plated from atlases which could be found existent in libraries and the antique map resale market is potentially quite large. But because of their small size they are often overlooked or undervalued. The most highly valued of the SDUK maps today are actually the city views. Many libraries may have a fine compilation of these, in Melville Branch's *Atlas of Rare City Maps: Comparative Urban Design 1830-1842* (Princeton Architectural Press, 1997). SDUK produced 51 city views as part of the map series, and many were also reproduced in the atlases that followed (Figure 3). Interestingly enough, these were criticized at the time by subscribers who found them less relevant and feared that they were delaying the delivery of the series.

¹¹Map publishing sequence from Cain (1994). Numbers published by Chapman and Hall are inferred at the demise of SDUK.

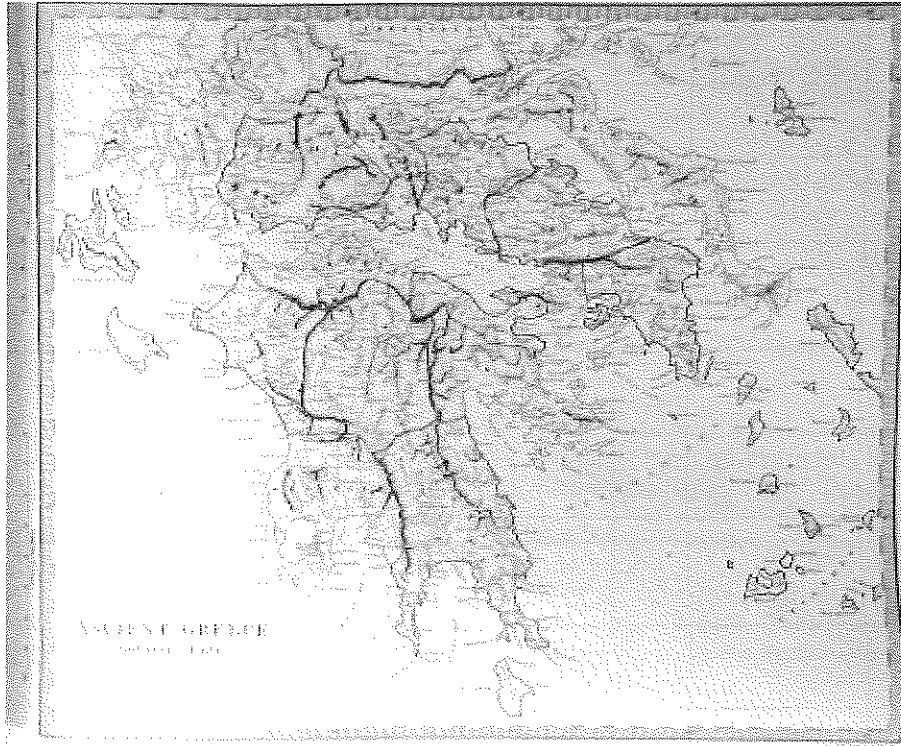


Figure 2. This version of *Ancient Greece, Southern Part* was derived from the original engraved plates by their new owner, George Cox, and published in *General Atlas Published under the Superintendence of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge 1854*. (McMaster University Library, Research Collections, G1019 .S64 V.I/II)



Figure 3. Example of a city plan: *Moscow*, published by Baldwin & Cradock for SDUK in June 1836. This copy was bound into the final compilation *Maps of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge*, after the series was completed in 1844. (McMaster University Library, Research Collections, G1019 .S645 V.II)

In order to make some generalizations about the number and value of SDUK maps in today's antique map market, the sales catalogues of two prominent online vendors were searched and the maps offered for sale on a typical day were recorded with their asking prices. The vendors sampled were Abe Books (<http://www.abebooks.com>) and eBay (<http://www.ebay.com/>), and the "typical day" was 30 March 2012. Only the maps on the US eBay site were recorded; some maps were also offered on eBay UK. In total, 137 maps were offered for sale by Abe Books on this day and 137 were offered on eBay. This seems to be coincidental, as there was no obvious duplication in titles or prices.

Based on this sample date, Abe Books offered SDUK maps for sale from a low of \$8.22 US (as part of a 17 map lot) to a high of \$2,054.37, for an average price of \$196.36. eBay offered SDUK maps from \$3 to \$325, for an average price of \$58.76. Obviously, a bargain hunter (or a perennially underfunded map collection) would be wise to shop around, as the prices for very similar maps varied greatly, depending on the aspirations of the vendors.

Interestingly, plates removed from atlases (distinguishable by publication dates of 1844 or 1857) were often more expensive than the same maps with original imprint dates. Some of the first issue sheet maps with original imprint dates from 1829 to 1843 appeared to be very good value for collectors, depending of course on condition. An intact copy of the complete bound series (*Maps of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge* 1844, by Charles Knight or sometimes credited to the publisher Chapman and Hall who printed the title page and table of contents) may sell for approximately \$5,500 to \$7,000. The average value of a coloured city view ranged from \$240 to \$2,054 US, depending on the vendor and the popularity of the city. It is important to note that these are 'asking prices' and the maps may not actually sell for these amounts. The three most costly maps identified in this sample were coloured plans of the City of London, offered for sale through Abe Books by Peter Harrington, a high-end antiquarian bookseller in the same city¹².

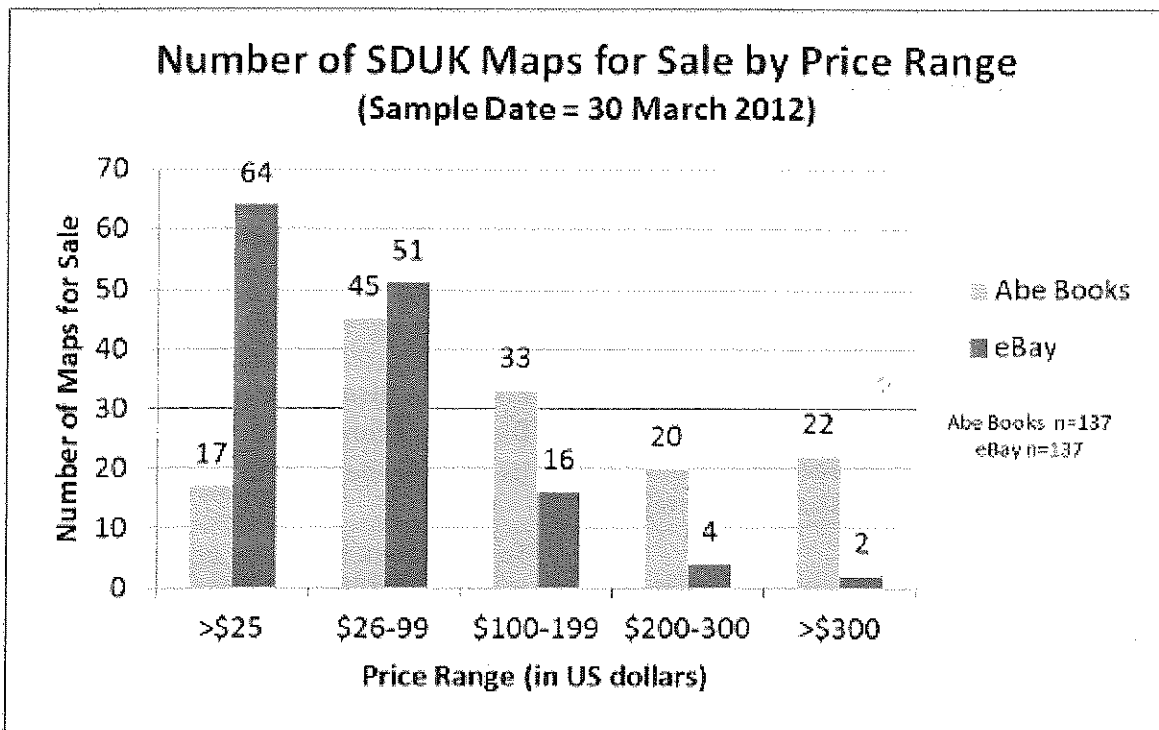


Figure 4. SDUK maps for sale through two prominent online vendors on a sample day, with price ranges

¹²London 1836 - \$2,054.37; London 1842 - \$1,314.80; London 1843 - \$1,232.62

It is possible that these very high prices reflect a local market bidding war, suggesting that a canny buyer should look for maps of a desirable city or country in sales locations that may be more disinterested.

The customers of the map series became increasingly unhappy about the slowness of production. As has been indicated, the complete series was originally promised within just over four years. But delivery of the maps became slower and slower, as SDUK struggled with publisher bankruptcies (Baldwin and Cradock), quality issues (Chapman and Hall) and also with inefficient administration by committee and much more serious discontent with the text publication series. In an interesting twist of fate, one of the greatest factors hindering the production of the maps was the extreme care and deliberation allotted to each one by their greatest advocate, Francis Beaufort. Because the maps in the Numbers were released as they were finished, the production order did not follow a pattern, and subscribers were not able to bind their copies into any logical order because the table of contents for the series was scheduled to be the very last Number released. A letter to the Society from a Mr. Molineux in October 1841 captures the irritation of the beleaguered subscribers:

Sir

As I have been taught that nothing sublunary is eternal, I presume that even the Series of Maps published by your Society will one day have an end; but as present appearances induce one to think that such an event must be witnessed by one of my remote posterity, I take the liberty of asking whether you will at least be pleased to grant us a title page in order that I may have the numbers already received, bound, as hitherto they have been as useful as so much waste paper...¹³

The tumult faced by the Society's text publications was vastly greater and more complex than the merely irksome delivery delays of the map series.

From the beginning, the paternalistic goals of the Society were mocked and a caricature of Brougham was circulated, showing him grinding a publication mill that produced 'twaddle' which a well-dressed colleague stuffed down the throat of a working man in rags. The treatises in the *Library of Useful Knowledge* were deemed too scientific and too difficult for the average working man and the works in the *Library of Entertaining Knowledge* were also pretty heavy reading. The Society steadfastly refused to include works on politics and maintained a laissez faire stance on economics, both of which were of critical popular interest in an era of major working class unrest. Smith (1972) summarizes the Society's ultimate failure:

It was a period of intense, almost frenzied, political activity, but none of this was reflected in the publications of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge... Faced with social upheaval the Society published irrelevant treatises, propounded ineffective palliatives and misleading and confusing solutions such as those contained in Short address to Workmen on Combinations to Raise Wages (1831) where, drawing on the doctrines of political economy, it endeavoured to stifle the demands of the workers. It could not, nor did it wish to, bridge the social chasm...

There was no community of interest between a prosperous middle class believing in salvation through education, science, individual self-help and the status quo and a radical, politically awakening but unenfranchised working class, underfed and badly housed, believing, often out of sheer desperation, in collective self-help and struggling for a fully democratic society.¹⁴

Finally, a disastrous venture on a Biographical Dictionary forced the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge into bankruptcy in 1846.

Today, most scholars agree that the Society's idealistic efforts were not the desired panacea of self-improvement for working men at that time, but in the longer run they contributed to the overall awareness and progress of adult education.

¹³From papers of SDUK; quoted in Cain (1994), p.155.

¹⁴Smith (1972), pp. 39 and 41.

The Society had a very significant historical role in what came to be called the 'cheap literature movement', as pioneers of the ideal of affordable but high-quality publications easily accessible to all. Their efforts sparked a growing reading public, not limited only to the affluent classes, which was increasingly willing to buy or subscribe to mass market publications. Even the disastrous Biographical Dictionary project idea led to the creation of the monumental *Dictionary of National Biography* half a century later. One of the most significant societal improvements which followed directly from the era of the SDUK was the establishment of government responsibility for public libraries¹⁵. The role of the public library we know today, as the provider of free and equitable access to quality literature and opportunities for self-improvement, owes something of its legacy to the earnest efforts of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge.

The maps of the Society were probably their most successful publication series—untainted by politics and paternalism, universally acknowledged for their quality and clarity, many still as attractive and useful now as when first printed. Should you encounter one of the little SDUK maps today, in a library collection or in a sales catalogue, I hope you will give a respectful thought to its remarkable ancestry.

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¹⁵Through the establishment of The Public Libraries Act of 1850, Kelly (1973).