Spies and pies

How a shady character invented data visualization

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Bruce Berkowitz
PLAYFAIR
The true story of the British secret agent who changed how we see the world
477pp. George Mason University Press. $34.95. 978 1 942695 04 2

lasted, to literally print his own money.
Much of the light Berkowitz shines into these corners of Playfair’s career comes from his discovery that, between 1793 and 1795, Playfair initiated and coordinated a government-approved plan to flood the French economy with counterfeit currency. In Berkowitz’s opinion, the compromises necessitated by this “Great Op” exculpate Playfair from many of his failings. Even when Playfair is blackmailing old acquaintances, Berkowitz thinks we should be slow to judge.

Playfair’s operations are at times more complex than Berkowitz’s colloquial prose can convey. Slanginess will amount to obscurity for non-American readers, as when Joel Barlow is said to have “lollygagged through the American Revolution”, or when Jean-Jacques Duval d’Epresnusl is said to have been “cold-cocked” by a member of the mob from which Playfair would later escape. Berkowitz’s recourse to stock phrases eventually rises to the level of a continuity gag, but for the most part seems clumsy. His one-sentence paragraphs, enquiring after the identity of some just-mentioned person, are an extreme example: “So who was Thomas Byerley?” (p94); “So who was Samuel Blackden?” (p119) (and so on, in the same form, on pages 183, 193, 206, 209, 272, 273, 296, 310 and 323). An editor ought to have stopped this, and ought also to have removed the author’s references to a London thoroughfare named “Piccadilly Street”, to a “Theatre Royale” on Drury Lane, and to St Peter’s conversion on the road to Damascus.

Such gaffes sometimes intrude on the substance of Berkowitz’s analysis: two men whose children have married are not therefore brothers-in-law; an eighteenth-century ream of paper did not contain 500 sheets; and Playfair himself is quoted as saying that his eldest daughter was blind, five pages before the author reports it to have been his youngest. The intrigue and pathos of Playfair’s life survive these infelicities in its telling, however, as do his intellectual achievements. Berkowitz argues plausibly that Playfair anticipated ideas about credit that are usually attributed to Jeremy Bentham, and ideas about comparative advantage that are usually attributed to David Ricardo. (He is somewhat less plausible when claiming that Playfair anticipated twentieth-century thinking about behavioural economics.) He also gives us a clear view of Playfair’s attempts, both in covert operations and in public propaganda, to mobilize the powers that his analyses of data promised to make available. Since the extent of such powers is often reckoned to be dauntingly vast, the long perspective that is made available by Playfair’s biography is an especially valuable one to have.