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Review of the book "Nation Shapes: The Story Behind the World’s Borders"

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Nation Shapes: The Story Behind the World’s Borders.  

Dr. Shelley, professor of geography at the University of Oklahoma and a prolific author on geography-related subjects, has compiled an informative source of up to date information on the land boundaries of each of the nearly 200 countries of the world. He begins with a helpful introduction that establishes the context for the rest of the work, explaining the difference between nations and states, the development of the concept of state sovereignty, and how this relates to boundaries. “Sovereignty is associated with control of territory. In order to determine the geographic limits of sovereignty, boundaries have been established” (xi). He further defines the primary types of boundaries and their relationship to the development of the modern state system.

The main body of the book is divided into seven chapters: Europe, the Americas, Sub-Saharan Africa, Southwest Asia and North Africa, East and Central Asia, South and Southeast Asia, and Australia and Oceania. Following a two- to four-page overview of each broad region are entries for each country within it. The entries follow a standard format. First, an overview including land area, population, and a list of boundaries with adjoining countries or natural features, is provided. Next, the “Historical Context” section summarizes the development of the country and its borders up to the present. Finally, “Contemporary Issues” (not present in all entries) treats current tensions and conflicts within and between countries. For example, the discussion of China includes three internal groups: the Uighurs, the Tibetans, and the nationalist government on Taiwan. The China section also mentions a 2012 dispute between China and Japan over some islands in the South China Sea. “See also” references to related countries and a brief “further reading” list conclude each entry. Page length for the country “vignette” ranges from approximately two to six pages.

An outline-style map is included for each geographic entity discussed. They are black and white but utilize shading. Despite the limitations imposed by the volume’s 10” X 7” dimensions, they are quite useful in helping the reader to visualize the borders described in the text. Scales vary widely, which is to be expected considering the coverage ranges from Russia to Vatican City. The primary weakness is indistinct
borderlines in some cases, for example the United Kingdom (141) where it is hard to discern the boundary between England and Scotland.

Following the main section is a selective bibliography (one and one-half pages) and an index. The index is helpful in pinpointing references to people, events, geographic features such as mountains and rivers, and political subdivisions lacking their own entries.

The only directly comparable work this reviewer could locate is Gideon Biger’s *The Encyclopedia of International Boundaries* (Facts on File, 1995). It too offers comprehensive worldwide coverage including historical background and present situation, along with similar outline maps (and also photographs of border regions, border crossing stations, and the like), but is somewhat dated. There are many more reference works on boundaries, but most confine themselves to specific countries or regions. Diener and Hagen’s *Borders: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2012) may serve as a complement to the specific coverage of *Nation Shapes* by offering a concise overview of the interdisciplinary field of border studies and thereby providing context.

*Nation Shapes* largely achieves its stated purpose of addressing fundamental questions regarding how boundaries came to be, how they evolved over time, and current conflicts over territory. Because of its currency, authority, and thorough coverage, it is recommended for all libraries.—Michael L. Nelson, Collection Development Librarian, University of Wyoming Libraries, Laramie, Wyoming