Renoir’s Landscapes

We do not usually think of Renoir as a landscape painter: that is a position reserved for Monet. At the National Gallery, though, we saw Renoir confronting landscape as something made, inhabited and articulated by human action; even when his paintings are ostensibly empty of people, they are represented by the paths they have worn, the houses they have built and the crops they have planted.

The earliest works of the 1860s record Renoir’s association with the Fontainebleau area, the Barbizon school and the example of Corot: the common currency of much pre-Impressionist painting. The exhibition ends in 1883 shortly before Renoir’s famous expostulation: ‘But I am a figure painter’ and not long after the critic Théodore Duret had written: ‘I take M. Claude Monet as the quintessential landscapist, and M. Renoir as the quintessential figure painter’.

During his landscape years, though, Renoir took the opportunity to play, to experiment, to respond to landscape’s infinite variety with the full range of the virtuosity of his painting.

As John House remarks: ‘He seems to have viewed landscape as the theme that allowed him the freest scope for technical experimentation’.

So what kind of landscapes did Renoir favour? He often worked with Monet: painting together in 1869 at La Grenouillère, the popular ‘bathing and boating establishment’ on the Seine, crowded with dogs and holiday crowds, Monet recorded a slightly sombre scene of water, boats and a jetty that supports indications of figures whereas Renoir presented a
delicious froth of frocks, flirtation and gaiety. Astonishingly, both artists considered these paintings to be no more than sketches. Exploiting a local resource, Renoir often painted the Seine as a place of summer leisure activity where the status of the river ranges from a mere prop, glimpsed through the trellis that shelters a restaurant to full-on star quality. At this time it was people who directed the artist’s sense of place, if not always predictably: *Rivers at Argenteuil* is less about exercising than the back view of a girl in a blue striped dress who sits gazing at them, embedded in a grassy bank (the painted marks of frock and grass dissolve into one another) which would not exist in its visible form without her presence.

Renoir did not, it seems, share Monet’s predilection for snow landscapes. ‘Renoir Landscapes 1865-1883’ (National Gallery, London 21 Feb-20 May; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 8 June-9 September; Philadelphia Museum of Art, 4 October-6 January 2008) [Acknowledgements to both galleries]


SOLITUDE:

**[A childhood landscape]**

At Morston, Blakeney, Wiveton and Cley,
Between the Norfolk farmlands and the sea,
The unfrequented coastal marshes lie,
And there a little boy of barely three,
Stunned by the sight of so much loneliness,
Fixed in his mind a picture of the place
Saving the image in his consciousness,
A horizontal sheet of empty space.
That childhood vision from the marsh’s edge,
That first encounter with infinity,
That tapestry of water, sand and sedge
In eighty years has not deserted me.

Margaret Garlake


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**The Suffolk Landscape**

‘But the position of the church, in its sanctified yard, has very rarely changed. How long they stood there before 1066 is a more difficult question…. In terms of the basic pattern of settlements in Suffolk, those 417 churches provide the pegs from which most of the rest must hang. The rest, as we now see, is an infinitely varied composition, of farms and villages and market towns. But however urban the community, in Suffolk the fields are not ever far off, indeed they are rarely out of view. However increasingly town-moulded all the upbringing of Suffolk people may be, the fields spread round us throughout our lives. We cannot ride through them without being conscious, if only out of the corners of our eyes, of their daily response to the seasons, their extraordinary fertility, and their endless diversity of shape and pattern, particularly where they retain their old ‘natural’ enclosures, their framework of ditches, banks and well-spread hedgerows. As we drive along the lanes, these tree-frames seem to revolve slowly, on either side of us, the elms in the foreground hedges moving at different speeds from those on the far sides of the fields, considered these as our left, anti-clockwise on our right, like slow roundabouts at an old fair or like some long-remembered ritual courtship dance’.

From chapter 1 of *The Suffolk Landscape* by Margaret Garlake.
Immediately outside the gate of Fawsley Park (Warwickshire/Northamptonshire) there is the parish of Great Everdon, some 1900 acres. Great Everdon is an attractively set village, and little Everdon is a small hamlet near the Hall; the other part of the parish is empty. A lonely, unfenced and gated track leaves the Everdon-Farthamstone road near the hall and follows the south bank of the stream a valley which steadily becomes more desolate. The map shows this road continuing for half a mile beyond Snowsmoor Farm before dwindling into a footpath to Preston Capes, but in fact it ceases to be negotiable at the farmyard. Why should there be the three contiguous miles of low quality road? Why should a valley look so desolate, although only a mile or so from sunny intensively settled country? An examination of the fields behind Snowsmoor Farm supplies the answer ……There is a great field of poor quality pasture pitted with hollows and laced with the banks of ditches: this is the site of the small village for whose depopulation Sir Richard Knightly of Fawsley was summoned to answer in the Court of Exchequer in 1520.

From “History on the Ground” page 114 Chapter 4: A journey among deserted villages by Maurice Beresford, 1947 Luthe nourth Press, London. This book was republished in 1971 by Methuen and Co Ltd, London. Professor Beresford attended the same school as your editor some ten years earlier and refers to cross country walking in the northern hunting wildlife. Sutton Park (Sutton Coldfield, West Midlands.). Tributes to his life and work are published in Landscapes Vol 72 (see learned paper section).
pretty much indistinguishable to me at first. Now, because I better understand their associated reputations, school catchments and other esteem factors, they actually look a lot more attractive to me. Now, because I better understand their associated reputations, school catchments and other esteem factors, they actually look a lot more attractive to me.

In Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste, Bourdieu offers an explication of “taste” as it relates to art, dress, furniture and food, amongst other things. What we deem aesthetically is argued as we acquire through a process of “acculturation”. Others have looked through similar lenses. Carlson (Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 1985), for example, explores how Carolina agricultural landscapes are new viewed very appreciatively, in contrast with William James’ 19th century reaction to them as ‘hideous, a sort of ulcer, without a single element of artificial grace to make up for the loss of Nature’s beauty’. Kuipers (Beauty: a road to the truth, in Synthese, 2004) argued ‘that we grow to find something beautiful after acceptance of it...’, and marshalled evidence to support the ways in which perceived underlying values can make something acquire an aura of beauty.

A challenge facing landscape in the years ahead is how we can discover beauty in scenes that currently evoke protest. The list is considerable: windfarms, rewilding of rural land and its associated bastiety, major new wetlands with elevated water tables and breached flood defences, sustainable drainage systems with some distinctly un-pretty and purely water margins, for example. Even organic farming may not always produce win-win situations in relation to conservative landscape tastes - some research suggests that people can find it untidy, woody and disorderly relative to conventional farming. In certain cases, of course, opposition to new landscapes, even allegedly sustainable ones, may be perfectly justified; but there are likely to be many instances where uncomfortable change must be embraced and our acculturation fast-tracked.

A key principle in understanding preference for certain landscapes is to explore what they ‘signify’ to viewers. Some landscape preferences may be relatively universal, and there may be cross-cultural similarities in enjoyment of ‘sublime’, physically dramatic landscapes, as well as more subtle cultural landscapes which display balance in terms of land cover and human scale. However, many landscapes are valued because of what people remember about them and read into them – this applies in distinctive ways to ‘ordinary’ places where people with insider status have positive or negative feelings based on memories and local wisdom. As an aside, this creates particular difficulties for landscape planners in defending and investing in locally valued landscapes when they are under threat from regional and national interests, yet this concern for ‘everyday’ spaces is profoundly recognised by the European Landscape Convention.

Signification in landscapes implies that they have a story to tell and that we are able to read it. This is the essential starting point for understanding how we might more readily accept change, and how to gauge whether that change is intrinsically desirable even where it might even evoke short-term protest. After our 1990s post-modern ‘wobble’ of characteristic fin-de-siècle loss of confidence, society now seems to have recovered its ‘voice’ through the new urgency attached to sustainable development. This is well reflected in housing, where some of the most innovative developments in recent years show how we can learn to love them. The landscape may become an important medium for social learning, where particular communities-of-interest and people of all ages can comprehend the causes and consequences of alternative human actions.

I find this an exciting prospect, even though I know it will create real dilemmas where issues of familiarity, heritage and risk are concerned. One of the most acute challenges will be understanding what to make of the emerging landscape planning ‘toolkit’, notably Landscape Character Assessment. This seems, at least in the minds of many practitioners, to advocate approaches based on reinforcement or retrieval of existing landscape character, even where it has become very residual. The subtext underlying the ‘ Countryside Quality Counts’ programme, for example, appears to favour those landscape changes that are ‘consistent with existing character area descriptions’: the Delta commentary on ‘CQC’ states the underlying proposition was that change should take place in ways that strengthen character and value’. This assumption, however, was not necessarily the intention of those who championed the toolkit in the first case. Indeed, one could be provocative and argue that, whilst acknowledging the continuing importance of some cultural landscapes and the value of familiar scenery in people’s lives, we should often be advocating changes which run counter to ‘existing character’ and allowing many residual features to meld into the landscape palimpsest.

If we are to believe the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, humanity is approaching crisis. Our new landscape will tell the story of how we are responding to this crisis. Perhaps we need to learn to love this new landscape more quickly than our gradual processes of acculturation normally permit?

Professor Paul Selman
University of Sheffield

Gregory Brown & Christopher Raymond The relationship between place attachment and landscape values: towards mapping place attachment Applied Geography 27/2 2007 pp 89-111.

John McKenna & Andrew Cooper Sacred cows in coastal management: the need for a ‘cheap and transitory’ model Area 38/4 2006 pp 421-431.


William Jessop and the River Trent: mobility, engineering and the landscape of 18th century improvement Trans. Inst British Geographers New series 32/2 2007 pp 201-2

‘LANDSCAPES’ contains the following papers:
Vol 7 No 2


Wombwell: The landscape history of a south Yorkshire coalfield township David Hey and John Rodwell combine ecology, field archaeology and history to reconstruct a post-medieval farming landscape later transformed by coal mining.

Maurice Beresford an appreciation Mick Aston, James Bond, John Chartres, Christopher Dyer, Brian Roberts, Terry Slater, Paul Stamper, Christofer Taylors and David Austin assess the achievements of the man who, with John Hurst at Wharram Percy, founded medieval settlement studies.

What landscape mean to me? Richard Purslow reflects on where history and nature meet, and argues for an environmental ethic in landscape studies.
As a PhD candidate my paper on Creative Passion, in this case the creation and passion for landscape was accepted for presentation at the Association of American Geographers 2007 Meeting in San Francisco. As a self-funding student I am extremely grateful to the Landscape Research Group for the financial help which paid for my week’s accommodation.

I have reported to the Group on my official recollections of the AAG 2007, but as a latter day ‘Supertramp’, my experience of American landscapes was not limited to the San Francisco Hilton. In fact had I stayed at that hotel I need not have ventured anywhere else. The hotel was a landscape in its own right, with large airy halls, shops, cafes, bedrooms, and security staff. Visually identifiable as an ‘aging hippy’ I felt entry would have been barred without an AAG badge hung round my neck. I thought of Relph’s ‘place’ and ‘placelessness’ each time I stepped outside. San Francisco was by no means an unfriendly city but I was surprised by the number of homeless beggars and the way most San Franciscans walked around the sidewalk-sleepers as if they were not there.

I have two abiding memories of the geography of the streets of San Francisco. A group of sidewalk-sleepers huddled like puppies in a basket, one woman with long red hair flowing in rivulets of colour across the concrete. Pity it was such a sad scene. The second was the smell on vacant building plots. As a Mediterranean immigrant its fragrance appears to take the place of nettles in the wastelands of San Francisco.

At the end of the conference I began my journey home. Crossing the Bay bridge by bus I took the train from Emeryville northwards through the night to Klamath Falls, Oregon. Listening to the elderly man playing blues harmonica was as memorable as the unfolding volcanic landscape and off-grid homesteads around Mount Shasta. Taking the bus from Klamath Falls to Pasco, Oregon as one of only three passengers, I took in the semi-desert lands I hadn’t expected to see. All day bus travel led to the next night train through the Rockies and onto the prairies first thing in the morning. I have seen plenty of mountain landscapes but never the expanses of the American Prairies. From the train I really did see the deer and the antelope play and even a few Bison on a farm. The landscape reminded me of the gently undulating Salisbury Plain but stretching for ever. One small boy told me it reminded him of ‘The Simpson’s’

cartoon show. I asked why and he pointed to the clouds in the blue prairie sky. Those of you who switch on Channel 4 at 6:00pm will know what I mean.

Chatting with passengers I met an elderly share cropper travelling from Seattle to Kentucky on his annual pilgrimage to plant his two acre tobacco plot, complaining about anti-smoking regulations in the US; following logically, the smell of skunk on the train, by which I mean the animal though I thought otherwise initially. The ex-graffiti artist complaining about the poor standard of artwork on passing rail wagons and the singing Amtrak staff all made it a memorable ride.

I was surprised to see nodding donkeys marking small, almost back yard oil wells. Perhaps it was a long way to the gas station? Strange large rusty metal Tips appeared from time to time and I was informed these were pigwam burners for disposal of local garbage.

Approaching Minnesota, the landscape looked more glacial with obvious moraine landscapes and tracts of hardwood forest, marshes and lakes. The engineer certainly made the lonesome whistle wail as we picked up Amish families before leaving the prairies to head into Minneapolis and the more built up Mississippi Valley. I still find it hard to comprehend such a wide river that far inland. As the song goes it certainly was wider than a mile between the Mississippi bluffs with Bald Eagles flying across the waters. Crossing Wisconsin, true to Aldo Leopold’s Sand County, Almanac, cranes waded though great marshes as the train approached Milwaukee and Chicago.

No time to take in Chicago as I had to get straight to the airport and fly away to Exeter and finishing my PhD write up. Thanks to Landscape Research Group for helping to make the memorable trip happen.

FIELD LANDSCAPES AND SHELTER

Bud Young

There is a persistent wind blowing and the clouds are positively threatening. It is hard, riding into the wind, and the childhood idea comes to me of finding the lee of a hedge that will stop the cold wind — even better to cross to a clump of holly trees. As this is not my land I feel the need to conceal myself. All the fields are pasture and are all empty — bar those with beef cattle which graze different fields in succession. At this point it occurs to me that some fields remain unvisited except for those twenty times a year by the farmer caring for or counting his animals. And of course for three days a year for topping, rolling or spreading manure. If I find the right place I may go unnoticed.

I am in the ancient stone banked field landscape of East Dartmoor. Each field has character: some are steep, some fall from a wooded edge, or go down to a stream. Some offer extraordinarily good views. Many of these fields have intriguing interior landscapes, remains of old barn footings, a clump of unmoveable rock, an intriguing bank, an ash house a zone of sorrows with roughs. There is one pasture that contains the whole of a first order stream network, a chaotic yet strictly ordered set of opposed slopes.

And this makes me think how we evaluate landscape officially, that is how we view it only from publicly available viewpoints and the lines of roads. How the five hundred fields of Moretonhampstead parish offer a thousand different rarely seen out-views and as many enclosing interiors. I think of resource richness and I think of scale and of extrinsic and intrinsic qualities. It makes me think of the sweeping immensity of Dartmoor itself, where no place is inaccessible. This leads my thinking to how we so often value open access land, ranking it higher than we ought and how we admire its vastness which does something special for us. How different it is from comforting enclosure, which does something else.

To act as a child and crouch on a waterproof in the lee of a hedge, even better to have a small campfire and make one small place home, to make a shelter of branches and spend one night and a day in a field, is to invest the unnoticed place with thin wisps of human response like sheep wool on the hedge. By inhabiting one point in the landscape we create a place and drink deep draughts of satisfaction. To carve a personal mark on a holly stem which says ‘in 1949 I was here’. Cattle ‘know’ fields but have no sense of understanding, die mostly before they get to three, appreciate shelter but perhaps do not why, know nothing of landscape. How strange!

CALIFORNIA DREAMING:
Paul Sharman tramps his way from San Francisco to Chicago after a landscape conference

In August 1968 Volume 1/1 of Landscape Research News appeared as a four page A4 document and contains the Group’s intentions with the coming events and news, which are continued in the LRE that you see today. The Editor at that time was A.C. Murray. LRG Chairman was Leighton L. Irwin, Hon. Sec. was Alan Murray and Hon.Treasurer was Derek Poole. The Committee consisted of Monica Bingley, Keith Atkinson, Derek Rhygi Childs, T.C. Coote, Alex Hardy and Lionel Smith.

Who were these founders? Career details or personal memories? Please send any notes or thoughts to brian.goodey@btopenworld.com with a view to putting together an account.

ART

IN THE SPIRIT OF RAVILIOUS & BAWDEN

Brian Goodey

Exhibition to July 1 at Fry Art Gallery, Castle Street, Saffron Walden, Essex. Phone 01799 513779: www.fryartgallery.org

Open Tues., Fri., Sat & Sun. afternoons 2-5 pm

This note, I regret, comes to you a little too late for action Editor

The Fry Gallery is a haven for lovers of Essex art, especially that associated with the Bardfield group, most notably the prolific and accessible Edward Bawden. This cramped but joyous exhibition is devoted to fourteen living artists who have acknowledged their creative debt to Bawden, and Ravilious whose watercolours and designs continue to amaze, though like Rex Whistler, he died in WW II. Well-known names include David Gentleman, Mark Hearld and Ronald Maddox but there are prints and landscape elements from the majority on show. The titular ‘Spirit’, strongly rooted in English popular art and its immediate post-war revival, is very much alive.

Drive through north Essex — Finchingfield and Thaxted — before you visit, or by train to Audley End, then walk into Saffron Walden and let Essex seep in.
Last December, I attended a seminar arranged by EUROPARC at Losehill Hall, Derbyshire to learn about the implications of the European Landscape Convention for protected areas (and landscapes more widely) and to consider how best to ensure its implementation. 70 delegates from protected areas in the UK, government departments and agencies, the voluntary sector and the landscape professions heard presentations on the origins of the Convention and the challenges for protected areas and discussed three themes: engaging people, linking landscape to policy and putting policy into action.

It was a timely event, in that only a few days earlier, Barry Gardiner, Minister for Biodiversity, Landscape and Rural Affairs, announced that the UK had ratified the Council of Europe’s European Landscape Convention.

Adrian Phillips, former Director General of the Countryside Commission, opened the morning session by reminding us that democratic principles underpin the Convention, that ‘good landscape’ is everybody’s right and that everyone was encouraged to become involved in landscape issues! The Convention is inclusive and recognises the importance of all landscapes (not just protected ones), acknowledges that landscapes change and that all have the scope to be better planned and managed.

Although the UK has been slower than many European countries in signing and ratifying the Convention, David Coleman from Defra pointed out that the UK had, along with its sponsored agencies and associated NGOs, already declared a keen interest in fully implementing the provisions, namely to:

* To recognise landscapes in law;
* To establish and implement policies for landscape protection, management and planning;
* To establish procedures for public participation in defining and implementing landscape policies; and
* To integrate landscape into planning and other policies that impact on the landscape.

The task of delivering these provisions is less daunting than it might at first seem. Firstly, unlike with EU Directives, there are no financial penalties for non-compliance, and secondly, many claim that the UK is already delivering much of this agenda anyway. Landscape assessment, setting landscape aims (such as the ‘Landscape quality counts’ initiative), involving the public in the planning and land management have been characteristic features of our approach to landscape in the UK for many years. The new and greater challenge is the ELC poses for us, and other like minded countries in Europe, is to share and learn from each others experiences and collectively ‘raise our game’ in delivering the Convention’s Articles to the full.

Michael Dower traced the history of the gestation of the Convention, and in doing so, made reference to LRG’s role in organising the Bliss Conference in 1992 where ideas about committing to planning, managing and protecting the diversity of European landscapes as a means unifying the nation states, were first mooted.

Other speakers in the morning session, focussed on key aspects of the Conventions requirements. Alister Scott (Abderdeen University) examined issues around capturing public preferences for landscape and the implications for policy. Carys Swainick (Sheffield University) looked at the link between landscape and policy and making judgments about development that has implications for the character, condition, value and sensitivity of landscapes.

In the afternoon, several short presentations were made on the practical implementation of the Convention including examples drawn from our experiences in Great Britain of the planning of new, management of existing and protection of historic/ cultural landscapes by Simon Evans (National Forest) and Oliver Lucas (Forestry Commission) and metalliferous mining in Cornwall.

Having been adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe in July 2000 and opened for signature in Florence, October 2000, the European Landscape Convention entered into force in March 2004 after ten member states had ratified it. By June 2007 the Convention had been ratified by 26 member states and signed by a further 8 — nearly three quarters of the Council of Europe’s members in total.

Questions now being asked are what difference has it made? How consistently are the provisions being implemented? and perhaps most pointedly, why are some states yet to commit?

These and other related questions will be debated at an ‘expert seminar’ being convened by LRG at Sheffield University this November. For further information about the seminar email me — or Professor Paul Selman at pselman@sheffield.ac.uk. For further information about the European Landscape Convention go to the website of the Council of Europe http://www.coe.int/.

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