Approaches to Landscape

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Richard Muir

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Introduction

Interest in landscape has grown enormously in recent years. The pattern of this growth has not been of an amalgamating nature, as in a river system, but of a branching character, as in a tree. As different approaches to the understanding of landscape have been developed and refined the divisions between these different branches have widened, so that today there will be few landscape historians indeed who are conversant with the prevailing concepts of landscape iconography, and perhaps fewer post-modernist students of landscape who could interpret a pattern of earthworks at a deserted village site. As the study of landscape has grown, so its branches have grown apart.

The growth in enthusiasm for landscape studies has been sustained for more than two decades, but it is plain that, in the UK particularly, two strong and largely separate strands of interest have been involved. One is represented by a broadly-based upwelling of interest in landscape history among scholars and amateur enthusiasts, and the disciplinary backgrounds of some of the figures associated with the interpretation and popularisation of cultural landscapes underlines the interdisciplinary nature of this field of study: W. G. Hoskins (historian), Christopher Taylor (geographer-turned-archaeologist), Oliver Rackham (botanist), Tom Williamson (archaeologist), Trevor Rowley (geographer/historian), M. W. Beresford (historian), Brian Roberts (geographer), Jack Ravensdale (historian), Mike Aston (geographer-turned-archaeologist) and Della Hooke (geographer). The other strand arises from the development of a new humanistic geography as a reaction to geography's drift into spatial science. Subsequently, this strand has given rise to interest in place, post-modernism, aesthetic approaches to landscape and symbolism in landscapes. Diversity is sometimes a source of strength in landscape studies, a protection against the tyranny of the current fad or an imposed standardisation of thinking. In some ways, however, it is a weakness:

Despite the best efforts of the Landscape Research Group in the UK and the journal *Landscape* in the USA, there is no formalised discipline of landscape studies, with its own methodologies and university departments. In the absence of any organisational or disciplinary unity, landscape studies all too often consist of a great variety of unrelated perspectives, tied only loosely to the environment and its representation. (Mills, 1997 p. 122)

This book is not an attempt to present a new theory of landscape, and neither does it seek to advance one approach or interpretation at the expense of others. Rather, *it aims to identify, introduce and explore the different approaches to landscape*. As with the branches on a tree, some of these approaches are close and share connections, while others are further apart. The aesthetic approach and landscape evaluation are linked by the fact that both concern human tastes in landscape and they have part of their literatures in common. The political realities of life ensure that the studies of power and of symbolism in the landscape will frequently overlap, while the psychological aspects of the human relationship to landscape permeate most fields of enquiry. Within the broad area of landscape study different workers pursue their own specialisms, the nature of which will affect their interpretation of landscape in general and of other specialisms in particular. (My own specialist background is in the field of landscape history.)

The differences between some approaches are quite profound. Landscape historians concerned to discover the evolution of countrysides and towns have traditionally regarded landscape as being like a palimpsest (a document on which the original writing has been erased to make room for other writing but yet is still faintly visible). However, Daniels and Cosgrove, writing from a post-modern perspective, considered that: 'landscape seems less like a palimpsest whose "real" or "authentic" meanings can somehow be recovered with the correct techniques, theories or ideologies, than a flickering text displayed on the word-processor screen whose meaning can be created, extended, altered, elaborated and finally obliterated by the merest touch of a button' (1988 p. 8). Underlying this interpretation is a fundamental division in the comprehension of landscape. On the one hand there is the conventional practice of regarding landscape as a material or tangible portion of a natural and cultural environment. On the other there is the treatment of landscape as 'a way of seeing' which is associated with Daniels and Cosgrove and their

disciples, who interpret landscape as a painterly way of seeing the world which creates a picturesque view (Duncan, 1995 p. 414).

There is also an implicit difference in outlook between those who might claim to examine cultural landscapes in a scientifically detached manner and those who rejoice in their own engagement with the landscape. Rose explained that:

Such pleasure in and awe of landscape is often celebrated by geographers, but with hesitation, even treated with suspicion. Pleasure in the landscape was often seen as a threat to the scientific gaze, and it was often argued that the geographer should not allow himself to be seduced by what were described as 'the sirens of *terrae incognitae*' (Wright, 1947, p. 1). (1992 p. 10)

Landscape has many facets and there are many ways in which it can be represented:

Landscape may be represented by painting, drawing or engraving; by photography, film and theatrical scenery; by writing, speech, and presumably even music and other 'sound images'. Before all these secondary representations, however, landscape is itself a physical and multisensory medium (earth, stone, vegetation, water, sky, sound and silence, light and darkness, etc.) in which cultural meanings and values are encoded, whether they are *put* there by the physical transformation of place in landscape gardening and architecture, or *found* in a place formed, as we say, 'by nature'. . . Landscape is a medium in the fullest sense of the word. It is a material 'means' (to borrow Aristotle's terminology) like language or paint, embedded in a tradition of cultural signification and communication, a body of symbolic forms capable of being invoked and reshaped to express meaning and values. (Mitchell, 1994 p. 14)

The different interpretations applied to 'landscape' have been explored by Barrell, who considers that the term arose as a painter's word:

it was introduced from the Dutch in the sixteenth century to describe a pictorial representation of countryside, either as the subject itself of a picture, or as the by-work in a portrait, the background of scenery behind the main subject. Later the word

came to include within its meaning both this sense, of countryside represented in a picture, and another, more loose, of a piece of countryside considered as a visual phenomenon. (1972 p. 1)

He added that:

Both these senses of the word 'landscape' had this in common, that they referred to a tract of land, or its representation in painting, which lay in prospect – that is to say, which could be seen all at one glance, from a fixed point of view; and in this respect both senses referred to particular locations.

Later, in the mid-eighteenth century, however, a more general meaning became associated with the word so that one could speak of 'the landscape' of a place, and this sense goes beyond the spatial confinement which the sense of *a* landscape as a prospect had imposed, and landscape acquired a meaning similar to 'terrain'.

Perhaps the most lucid explanation of the ambiguities surrounding the multiple layers of meaning associated with landscape was provided by Cosgrove (1984). He wrote of the active engagement of the human subject with the material object and the suggestion that 'area' and 'region' might be regarded as the equivalents of 'landscape': 'In other words landscape denotes the external world mediated through subjective human experience in a way that neither region nor area immediately suggest. Landscape is not merely the world we see, it is a construction, a composition of that world. Landscape is a way of seeing the world' (p. 13). The alternative identification of landscape as a passage of scenery which is seen rather than perceived was described by Bryan (1958 p. 1): 'Landscape, the dictionary tells us, is a portion of land or territory which the eye can comprehend at a single view including all the objects it contains.'

The location of landscape study in relation to other academic disciplines has changed with the passing years. Before the Second World War, the study of landscape was widely regarded as being at the very core of geography, and even in 1958, P.W. Bryan, the President of the Geographical Association, felt able to claim that:

the essential core of geography is the relationship between human activity and the physical setting or stage upon which human activity takes place . . . this relationship itself is expressed in the

landscape which results from the changes and adaptations of the physical background made by man in his efforts to satisfy his needs . . . with the study and interpretation of this changed landscape as its central feature geography has a distinctiveness of outlook as a whole which marks it off from other subjects. (1958 p. 1)

In the 1950s and 1960s, however, landscape fell from favour in geography. In his *The Nature of Geography* of 1939, Richard Hartshorne, geography's leading guru, had rejected landscape as the central organising concept of geography and argued that the concept of landscape adopted in American cultural geography derived from the German *Landschaft* which had two meanings, one being 'a restricted piece of land' while:

It was, however, also used, as in English, to refer to the 'appearance of a land as we perceive it', e.g. 'the section of the earth surface and sky that lies in our field of vision as seen in perspective from a particular point'. This 'aesthetic' usage of the term enabled users to shift 'from the landscape as sensation to the objects that produce that sensation'. (Olwig, 1996 p. 630)

This, according to Hartshorne, caused confusion, with the same word being used in two different ways: 'Hartshorne's solution to the problem of landscape was essentially to abandon it in favour of geography as a science of region and space' (Olwig, 1996).

The subjective qualities which made landscape unacceptable to geographers in an era of spatial science and quantification would later commend it to geographers who were disorientated and disillusioned by the excesses and failures of the positivist movement. In 1985 Cosgrove wrote that:

Recently, and primarily in North America, geographers have sought to reformulate landscape as a concept whose subjective and artistic resonances are to be actively embraced. They allow for the incorporation of individual, imaginative and creative human experience into studies of the geographical environment, aspects which geographical science is claimed to have devalued at best and at worst ignored. (p. 45)

He continued: 'American humanist geographers have adopted landscape for the very reasons that their predecessors rejected it.

It appears to point towards the experiential, creative and human aspects of our environmental relations, rather than to the objectified, manipulated and mechanical aspects of those relations'. Landscape, though, did not provide a banner under which all factions could unite, and in 1994 Duncan commented: 'There is little question that the new cultural geography is itself fragmenting. For example on the one hand there is a group of scholars who primarily analyse landscapes and, on the other, there are those who concentrate on space and place' (p. 362).

Cosgrove noted that: 'The frequent association in geographical writing of landscape with studies of the impact of human agency in altering the physical environment serves to remind us that landscape is a *social* product' (1984 p. 14). Several writers commented on the importance of landscape in studies of the relationship between humans and their setting, but there was lively discussion concerning the direction which such studies should follow:

The study of landscape provides for geographers a means of analysing and organizing the surrounding material environment, confirming the major tenet that we look to that material environment for concrete expression of the facts of human experience. Yet despite the well-established position of landscape study within the discipline there remain questions concerning how landscape is defined, and even greater questions concerning the relationship between landscapes and human beings. (Kobayashi, 1989 p. 165)

Kobayashi also writes: 'Geographical definitions of landscape abound, of course, but they are seldom critical, and an attempt to follow through upon upon the logic of these many definitions leads to many loose ends and contradictions.'

Here, I focus on the different approaches to landscape study. A certain amount of subjective judgement has been involved in the identification of these approaches. Were the task to be attempted by a selection of landscape enthusiasts then some approaches would have been recognised by all, while in other respects the choices might be different. Landscape history, landscape evaluation, the perception of landscape, an aesthetic approach, one concerning symbolism or iconography and one concerning the relationship of structure and scenery would probably feature on virtually every list. There is no sign of any halt to the growth in interest in landscape, but whether in years to come there will be a progress to a more coherent discipline

of landscape studies or whether, instead, the divisions between the objective and subjective appreciations of landscape will deepen remains to be seen.

Note

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