

*Landscape Biographies:
Geographical, Historical
and Archaeological Perspectives
on the Production and
Transmission of Landscapes*

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Amsterdam University Press,
Amsterdam, the Netherlands, 2015.
437 pp., 108 figs. €99.00 cloth.

If for Shakespeare all the world's a stage and we are players on it, then for the contributors to this volume, all landscapes are texts and the factors that affect them are its authors. The essays in *Landscape Biographies: Geographical, Historical and Archaeological Perspectives on the Production and Transmission of Landscapes* stand as an apt coda for an intellectual trend that has been prominent in the study of landscapes across disciplines since the 1990s. Influenced by the “cultural turn” in the social sciences and humanities, geographers, historians, archaeologists, and others sought new ways to study landscapes that transcended the supposed limitations of the older “objectivist and constructivist approaches,” as Jan Kolen and Johannes Renes refer to them in the volume's introduction. Drawing on an idea introduced in the late 1970s, scholars began to deploy the metaphor of biography as a new framework for analyzing landscapes. “‘Landscape biographies’ might usefully be conceived of as an adaptive form of portraiture; personhood serving as the lens through which to view changes to the natural or built environment, to its social purpose or cultural imagination”

(p. 18). The culturalist approach forced us to think of landscapes not as something that has an ontological status outside of human representation. Instead, we should see them as social and symbolic constructions, and thus the aptness of the literary metaphor. Landscapes do not have histories but life stories; human agency and natural forces inscribe a certain narrative onto the landscape, and are thus its authors. And, as literary theories such as deconstructionism asserted, the text only obtains meaning in the telling and the reading.

After a lengthy introduction to the history of the biographical approach to the study of landscapes, the volume contains 17 substantive case studies that range widely across time, space, and academic discipline. Rather than discussing each chapter on its own, it makes more sense to separate them into clusters that revolve around a similar theme. Adopting this stance, we can divide them into six discrete groups. The first cluster, chapters 2–3, revolves around the question of authorship and, more specifically, on how human activities transformed wetlands and wilderness in Iceland and the Netherlands from “primordial” into “socialized” landscapes. The next three chapters focus on what we can call the long history of monuments. Each of them recounts the biography of an archaeological site and its standing, monumental remains, including famous ones such as Avebury. The emphasis of these chapters is on showing that sites such as megaliths have a life story that continues long after the moment in their life cycle that is considered important

has ended. In other words, the process of monumentalization, whereby a site is turned into a monument, is one that unfolds over time through a long and complicated process. The next two chapters tell more intimate stories by examining the biographies of personally owned estates that consist of a set of structures and the attendant landscape. Human agency shines through with exceptional clarity in these case studies because the impact on the landscape that decisions made by specific individuals can be traced so clearly.

The next four chapters move us from the countryside to the city and take us around the world with case studies grounded in Asia and the United States as well as Europe. They also deploy methodologies and analytical frames quite different from the earlier chapters. David Koren, for example, adopts a fairly straightforward urban history approach to write a biography of Shanghai, whereas Wim Hupperetz recounts the 800-year-old life story of the Dutch city of Breda through an examination of a single street. The next two essays revolve around memory and the processes of remembering and forgetting in the landscape. Though they draw on two disparate situations—one examines the postindustrial mining landscape of Limburg and the other contrasts Nazi Germany's traditionalist landscape art with modernist planning and landscaping—they both complicate our understanding of memory construction and modernity. The final group of essays range across art history, archaeology, and contemporary heritage management but are linked by a common theme, and that is that no matter how we look at them, landscapes have to be perceived as layered entities shaped by an inter-

active process of perception, reception, and action by both animate and inanimate actors.

All of the essays in this volume in one way or another adopt the landscape biography methodology, which itself was a product of the cultural turn in the human sciences. And, not surprisingly, they exhibit both the strengths and the weakness of the culturalist approach. The use of the metaphor of the landscape as text and the forces that interacted with it as its authors was a valuable corrective to previous approaches that downplayed human agency and privileged more natural factors. The culturalist emphasis on how representation was not just an act of perception but of creation as well was also a valuable observation. On the other hand, the repetition of shopworn culturalist jargon such as “phenomenology of landscapes,” “coscripting,” “symbolic representation,” “landscape dialectics,” and “symbolic ecology” detract more than they add to a meaningful analysis. Plus, there are too many passages written in a dense postmodernist prose that are no more penetrable now than they were 20 years ago. The major deficiency with this collection, however, stems from the fact that it appears at a time when the culturalist approach has been largely eclipsed.

Five years ago Patrick Joyce, a leading new cultural historian, correctly observed that “the cultural turn has indeed turned and there is no going back” (What is the Social in Social History, *Past & Present* (206), 2010, p. 215). The essays in this volume may have been cutting edge a decade or so ago, but now, after the paradigm shift to other approaches such as materiality, they seem out of date, providing few new insights and many banal and not especially original observations. I do not, however, want to end

on such a critical note. The collection under review captures extremely well how the cultural turn impacted in many and important ways how we studied landscapes. It would be a very good book to assign in graduate seminar in any one of a number of disciplines because it will give young scholars a thorough and comprehensive understanding of how we studied landscapes after the cultural turn and what the advantages were

of adopting a biographical approach. Having read this book and understood where we have come from, they would be in a better position to assess the current literature on where we are and where we are going in our studies of landscapes.

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