

4. Landscape and Culture

We have already made significant advances in considering the relationship between landscape and culture when considering both the notions of relative space and place in Section 2.2. and Section 3. In both contexts it became apparent that almost any representation of space by an artist is inevitably suffused consciously or not with the cultural signifiers woven or folded into that space as well as being conditioned by the cultural conditioning of the artist him or herself.

4.1. Social Science and the Landscape

Amongst the more recent approaches to landscape in the social sciences (though one touched on already) is the *existentialist approach*, that is, landscape as the biographer of its creator:

“the landscape is thoroughly and permanently imbued with struggle, tension and dialectical conflict” (Samuels 1978).

Samuel’s general thesis is that

“created landscapes of men are ... contingent upon contexts, but the responsibility of authors.” (Samuels 1979),

and where authors cannot be identified, the product of society.

4.1.1. Landscape as text

Such a contention that landscape can be read as an autobiographical text is clearly pertinent to the landscapes at the heart of this study, where Samuels’ (1978) “struggle, tension and dialectical conflict” are played out through the processes of agricultural improvement and landuse reform from the late 17th century through to the early 20th century. Conventionally the instigators of such improvement and reform, the landlords or their agents, are identified as Samuels’ (1978) “authors”, but it also has to be acknowledged that their actions are contingent on a contemporary context and in part the *responsibility* of a wider *society*.

“Our human landscape is our unwitting autobiography ... the man made landscape – the ordinary run of the mill things that humans have created and put on the Earth ... provides strong evidence of the kinds of people we are, and were, and are in the process of becoming” (Lewis 1979)

In this study the ordinary run of the mill things that humans have created and put on the Earth is seen as the record of the pre-clearance landscape pattern now overlain by sometimes more than one phase of re-organisation into planned crofting townships and then to the sheep farms that were the apparent immediate cause of the (Highland) clearances.

These phases of human occupation have left their marks and traces ensuring that the landscape remains as a complex palimpsest of social and cultural history (see Section 7.1.). In his seminal book (and later a television series) ‘the Making of the English Landscape’ the historian W. G Hoskins emphasises this documentary nature of landscape when he states that “the (English) landscape

itself, to those who know how to read it aright, is the richest historical record we possess.” (Hoskins 1955). Rose (1980) also sees landscape as biographical reflections of past society, but goes further and maintains that the preservation of such landscapes aids human identity ... “to know structures are durable” creates a “sense of being rooted in a place”.

4.1.2 *Reimagining the landscape*

However, Lowenthal¹ questions the objectivity, not of such landscape *texts* or *documents*, but rather of the way in which we chose to read them and hence the interpretations we place upon them (Olwig 2003).

“we shape landscapes to conform with illusory histories, public and private, that gratify our tastes.”
(Lowenthal 1985)

So Lowenthal goes beyond the existentialist position claiming “society recreates landscapes to present its vision of the past”. This re-creation involves a disregard for history, forming a society and a view of landscape that is characterised by *that disregarded*. Often this reimagining, though only in the minds eye, nonetheless creates a powerful mythology.

Paul Basu (2002) in his extensive research on the Scottish diaspora and its involvement in homecomings and roots tourism repeatedly stresses the gulf between the known history of the Highlands (particularly the ‘clearances’) and the imagined personal histories of the returning diaspora. Here a dominant cultural narrative of the Scottish Highlands and Islands comes to eclipse the particularities of personal family narratives. The meaning of this cultural narrative of eviction and migration is determined in relation to a semantic migration and:

“to other symbolic systems which arguably have little to do with Scottish migration at all.” (Basu 2004)²

4.1.3. *Landscape as cultural construct.*

So, landscape is produced by society, interacting with environment to create *a way of seeing* ... a way in which some Europeans have represented to themselves and to others the world about them and their relations with it and through which they have commented on social relations so that

¹ the contemporary analytical power of landscape derives in important measure from the timely ability of David Lowenthal to turn the critique of landscape on end. He did this by transforming the very contradictions embodied by landscape, which made it a liability as technical or scientific term, into a phenomenon for epistemological inquiry

² Firstly, knowledge of ‘past injustices’ is rarely derived from stories passed down within the family. Such knowledge is instead acquired from popular history books and historical fiction, as well as at Web sites and heritage centre displays that are often drawn from the same sources and which perpetuate their genocidal rhetoric. Secondly, the equation of Clearance with expulsion overseas is, generally speaking, spurious. The Clearances occurred at a time of huge social and economic transformation throughout the British Isles (and much of Europe), which included the general shift of populations from rural areas to the industrializing urban centres as well as the first waves of mass emigration – migrations driven as much by the so-called ‘pull factors’ of the New World (land, opportunity, the prospect of wealth, etc.) as by the ‘push factors’ of rural poverty, famine and, indeed, avaricious landlords.

“landscape is not merely the world we see, it is a construction, a composition of that world.”

It is this construction that is at the heart of much of the commodification of landscape and its marketing by the heritage and tourism industry. In their fascinating book *“Imagining Scotland: tradition, representation and promotion in Scottish tourism since 1750”* John and Margaret Gold examine the carefully crafted imagery that draws thousands of tourists to Scotland each year and explore how the pervasive vitality of this imagery is nurtured by both indigenous and international tourist agencies. (Gold & Gold 1995).

Much contemporary representational visual art reinforces that imagery focussing on the picturesque and the sublime in the interpretation of the landscapes of the Highlands and Islands. Examples abound, from D. Y. Cameron’s *Vision of the Hills* (Smith 1992) such as his oils *Hills of Ross* 1934, or his *Shadows of Glencoe* 1925, to the Scottish Colourists three of whom painted the Highlands and Islands. F. C. B. (Bunty) Cadell produced some works such as *Loch Creran* 1933 that were close in effect to those of Cameron, but the work he produced in Iona with Peploe in the 1920s had the fluency and assurance with colour and paint that marked them both out from their contemporaries. See for example Cadell’s *Luna from Iona* 1926 and Peploe’s *Ben More, Mull, from Iona* 1926. Both contrast with Fergusson’s *In Glen Isla* 1923 with its overt modernism in construction and technique. All of these works though seminal in many ways in their ability to revitalise Scottish painting in the inter war years say a lot about painting and little about the landscape they painted. The same is true today in the work of artists such as Donald Hamilton Fraser in his paintings of Northwest Sutherland.

According to Lowenthal then landscape cannot be studied *from the outside* that is a positivist approach is unsatisfactory

“landscape is created and interpreted by people in terms of imagined relationships with nature, with social roles, and interpretations between others and nature.” (Lowenthal 1985)

Bourassa maintains that the relatively new branch of human geography, *humanistic geography* is in large part a response to perceived inadequacies in the traditional approach with its goal of objective scientific detachment that:

“fails to grasp the fundamental matter of what it is to exist in or experience the landscape. (Bourassa 1991)

Perhaps one of the best examples of the significance of a subjective experiential engagement with landscape is afforded by the Australian aboriginal tribes of the Northern Territories. Their landscape

discourse is particularly pertinent because it pervades and informs their whole culture and especially the visual art they produce.³

“Everything about aboriginal society is inextricably woven with, and connected to, land. Culture is the land, the land and spirituality of aboriginal people, our cultural beliefs or reason for existence is the land. You take that away and you take away our reason for existence. We have grown that land up. We are dancing, singing, and painting for the land. We are celebrating the land. Removed from our lands, we are literally removed from ourselves.”

Section 4. **Landscape and Culture: Conclusions**

The main conclusions to be drawn from this Section are first, that landscape is a cultural construct. Because the term landscape had its roots in sixteenth century art in north west Europe the social and wider cultural meaning of the term is often conflated with its legacy as an established artistic genre. It is useful to keep these traditions separate and to regard landscape as a text recording the present and past relationships of society with its environment.

However, the iconography of this landscape text is complex and contested and the narrative written thereon is often re-imagined and reprocessed by successive generations. This situation requires that the landscape artist carefully deconstruct the available narratives and myths in seeking to represent the truth, or at least to interpret his or her own reading of the landscape clearly.

That much landscape art and landscape painting still takes the superficial aesthetically easy path of interpreting scenery as picturesque, romantic and sublime is disappointing!

³ Aboriginal people, when speaking in English of their connection to the land, often refer to land as "country". Anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose has described 'country' in this way:

"People talk about country in the same way that they would talk about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, feel sorry for country, and long for country. People say that country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, is sorry or happy. .country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life. Because of this richness, country is home, and peace; nourishment for body, mind, and spirit; heart's ease."

Not all Balgo paintings reflect the major myths and events of the Dreaming. Depictions of 'country', food-gathering, and initiation stories also have strong associations for each individual artist. The paintings depict the earth, dry watercourses, rock holes, sand hills and clay pans. These are all patterned into the painting with the careful use of dots which illustrate a mythological landscape, invisible yet pervasive.