

## Landscape Now

Author(s):

Alexandra Harris

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## Gardening the Archive: A Conversation between David Alesworth and Hammad Nasar

Author(s):

David Alesworth, and Hammad Nasar

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## BRITISH ART STUDIES

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# Landscape Now

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### PARTICIPANTS

Alexandra Harris  
Susan Owens  
Fiona Stafford  
Rachel Hewitt  
Felicity Myrone  
Anna Pavord  
Emily Hayes  
Barney Norris  
Caroline Garrett  
Mark Bills

### PROVOCATION BY

Alexandra Harris  
*Professorial Fellow in English*  
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### Nature Writing and Landscape Art

We are in the midst of a new era of place perception in Britain. Questions of what landscapes mean to us, who sees them, and what they are for are all being debated now with an intensity perhaps unmatched since the first great age of domestic tourism, landscape painting, and aesthetic philosophy in the late eighteenth century. Work on the history of landscape art has influential roles to play today more than ever, so please do join this conversation about the place of art and the history of art in national understandings of landscape now.

The surge of interest in writing about nature, place, and environment has been one of the great literary stories of the last twenty years. A wealth of fine contemporary work has been joined on the bookshop front tables by reissues of books, which formerly had slipped quietly out of print. The list of the independent publisher, Little Toller, swells with a harvest of new editions each season, with writing by W.H. Hudson, Edward Thomas, and George Ewart Evans accompanying original monographs by Tim Dee this year on the birdlife of landfill sites, and Fiona Sampson on limestone country. John Stuart Collis is once more back in his wood, jacketed with the red spine

of a Vintage Classic, his voice coming from the 1940s to introduce the contrasting pleasures of farm work and forestry. Non-fiction with a strong element of memoir is the defining form here, though to my mind some of the most powerful place-writing has been in fiction. Places are taking readers to books (loved plots, threatened habitats, newly discovered margins); books are showing readers possible new ways of seeing their environments. There are clear lines of connection with other art forms, especially with folk-inspired music, and with film-making. I don't want to make a mixed parliament sound like a monolithic entity, but it seems fair to speak of a cultural phenomenon.

Where are the most fertile connections being made with the landscape tradition in art? Is it possible to think through our most pressing questions in relation to pictures, or is landscape in two dimensions now most widely recognised as the orientation of paper in a photocopier?

In many respects, landscape art is a well-acknowledged source of inspiration and a guiding force in contemporary thinking. Look at the scale of the Tate's Paul Nash exhibition, look at the Royal Academy opening its new doors to Tacita Dean's *Landscape*, and the National Gallery (with Tim Barringer as curator) asking us to think carefully about the colonial dreamlands of Thomas Cole. Read the fine essays on rural eeriness in which Robert Macfarlane gauges the obscure sense of threat in work by artists from Alan Reynolds to Derek Jarman. I was grateful for Compton Verney's gathering of new work in *Creating the Countryside*, a glimpse of what artists are doing and have done with profoundly visual subjects, but I wanted more.

Are there pictures we might be thinking about more keenly in this vital phase of debate about how we understand and inhabit our surroundings? I'm not (not really) suggesting that artists and art historians release their "nature classics" with new introductions in a big book or exhibition or website. But I do observe that while readers are offered new ideas about landscape writing at every festival (several festivals are devoted to the subject) and with every Amazon click and with each week's *Caught by the River* newsletter, it can be harder to get much purchase on developments in contemporary visual arts and art history. Work by art historians is not always being brought to the common table; few booksellers, for example, would think to promote James Hamilton's biography of Gainsborough (or indeed his *Turner*) among the nature and country books—though an encounter between Gainsborough and George Monbiot might be worth pursuing.

I mention these matters of reach, promotion, curation, and connection because art is one of the most powerful ways human beings possess for exploring complex questions of perspective, beauty, possession, and belonging. There has been much writing on "edgelands", for example, but still, when I try to make up my mind about the value of an edge place (often in fact an in-between place), when I try to get it in focus, to *see* it, I refer myself to Prunella Clough and then perhaps to George Shaw or Julian Perry and if Bosch appears that is bad news but perhaps Turner's foreground litter will help. Painting allows me to see "here" through other eyes. This is purely anecdotal, but consciously or unconsciously, we are all finding our way by a series of analogous landmarks.

Here's another example—and it may prove a significant one. The owners of the Knepp Castle Estate in West Sussex have been conducting a radical experiment in rewilding for the last fifteen years. In a grippingly argued book on the rationale for the project, Isabella Tree records the heartfelt objections of local people who hated the look of the pig-rootled mud and the scrub encroaching where previously there had been a fine park laid out by Repton. I used to walk there myself and I sympathise. Isabella Tree asks, quite rightly, how it is that an artificially designed and unproductive environment should seem more beautiful than one in which natural processes

are thriving (though the debate about what is natural and what is “wild” in any one place is complex and perhaps unresolvable). In the middle of a book about the future of British nature there is discussion of eighteenth-century aesthetics. This is where we need art and an understanding of the history of art—in the middle, in the midst of our dilemmas about how to farm, about where to build houses, about what to keep alive from the past and what to cast into the long grass. Don’t we need Landscape Art 101 to be readily available on the shelves with its closely worked arguments reaching far beyond academic specialists? But immediately this begs the question: which arguments, which kinds of history, and ways of seeing?

#### Landscape and the Arts of Place

The very term “landscape art” brings difficulties (and many delights) because it separates out work in an established genre with received conventions from the wealth of other visual responses to the land. The geographer Tim Cresswell, in his widely used textbook *Place*, draws a firm distinction between landscape and place: “we do not live in landscapes”, he writes, “we look at them”. In this account (drawn partly from Raymond Williams, who argued that: “a working country is hardly ever landscape”), the unified view or prospect disappears once we live and move and have our being in it: landscape becomes “place”. This tallies with the often-repeated argument that it is only possible to perceive “landscape” when one is at a distance from nature and from the immediate contingencies of work on the land. At its most basic: the labourer sees a hedge with a hole in it and sheep about to get into a clover field; the detached viewer (gentry, tourist, painter) sees the unifying effects of light, the tree as repoussoir framing the hill beyond. Where this leaves myriad artists including Thomas Bewick, John Sell Cotman, and Peter de Wint is still a puzzle to me, though probably not one to be worked out here.

W.J.T. Mitchell (in *Landscape and Power*) valuably questioned the Ruskinian version of events (also espoused by Kenneth Clark) in which a new kind of landscape perception is born from the European renaissance. He proposed alternative histories of landscape that follow the power structures of global imperial politics. Looking for answers closer to home, turning to the resources of local history, I’ve been trying in my own research to get closer to an understanding of what places have looked like to different kinds of people living in them. I want to find evidence for what “views” have looked like to people, other than the makers and consumers of landscape art. It’s hard: I’ve been reading for two years—parish registers, local histories, antiquarian guides, court proceedings, wills and inventories, tithe maps, a very occasional diary; I’ve been wondering at the skill and sensitivity of local historians like Margaret Spufford and many who followed her lead—yet still I’m baffled by the difficulty of reaching the landscape feelings of the past. There is work to be done here, I think, by people skilled in the interpretation of historical documents and landscape archaeology in conversation with art historians whose job it is to ask “what did she *see*?” At any rate, new thinking is needed if we are to fathom the historical relationships between landscape and place, and if we are to honour the experience of those many people who find that years of life and work on a patch of ground have deepened rather than dispelled their wonder at the landscapes around them.

If we keep talking about landscape painting and perception as necessarily separate from the real life and work of a place, we risk occluding strong ideas of landscape held by those who are deeply familiar with a place in practical as well as contemplative ways. Whether we are reaching back to life before (or without access to) the grammars of Western landscape painting, or looking again at Lambert, Wootton, and Wilson, or thinking about contemporary artists, it may be fruitful to reunite landscape with local knowledge and local people, from the airy prospects to make out local habitations and names.

Turner in his *Liber Studiorum* proposed six categories of landscape art and offered models of each: mountainous, marine, architectural, historical, pastoral, and elevated pastoral. Today we could increase the number of categories tenfold and still not be done. Long after landscape was supposed to be an exhausted genre (Mitchell thought it had pretty much expired by the end of the nineteenth century), artists have been making powerful use of the old conventions to question our viewing of contemporary environments (is this power-plant sublime, is this data farm fit for pastoral?). The old grammars—revised, battered, and revived—give us powerful frameworks for contemporary thought. But also let us stay alert to the shifting position of landscape art within a much broader range of imaginative responses to place, many of which will have little to do with the composition of views or the *shape* of the land. The “views” that gripped Ivon Hitchens, the foremost British landscape painter of the mid-twentieth century, were hardly views at all but sheltered ponds and overgrown woodland tracks. Is the portrait of a tree a landscape painting? What about a semi-abstract response to the colour and containment of my (very small) back garden? And a topographical watercolour of my scuffed hallway rug? Momentous times lie ahead for landscape art and its history, which is after all nothing less than the story of how we have looked about us on this earth.

RESPONSE BY

Susan Owens

*Independent Scholar*

“Nature writing” is certainly a publishing phenomenon; so why is writing about visual depictions of the landscape not more fully a part of this? It is, of course, partly down to economics. Art historians know only too well how few publishers will consider taking on a highly illustrated book: the costs are too high. Booksellers hesitate to stack expensive art-books on tables just inside the shop, and as a result art-history sections can feel like rarefied enclaves, the books on their shelves about art, not about life. Which, given the widespread British passion for landscape painting, is regrettable.

But there is a deeper problem here too. “Nature writing” has thrived precisely because it is about life—the most compelling of these books, by writers such as Robert Macfarlane, Helen Macdonald, and Roger Deakin, speak to us about what it is to be human and offer us a fresh and inspiring perspective on our relationship with the natural environment. “Art writing” rarely reaches out to us in this way. One of the problems is art history’s emphasis on establishing beginnings and categories; too much tidiness can be a limiting factor.

The seventeenth-century miniature painter Edward Norgate set the tone in his widely circulated treatise *Miniatura, or the Art of Limning* (1627–1628, rev. 1648), in which he determined what landscape is, and what it is not. He dismissed the use made by Old Masters of landscape backgrounds, for example, as mere “filling up the empty Corners”. Well, it depends on what you mean by landscape. In searching for the origin of a genre that, as far as he was concerned, was “soe new in England, and so lately come a shore, as all the Language in our fower Seas cannot find it a Name, but a borrowed one ...”, Norgate tacitly swept aside thriving native traditions in which depictions of hillsides, trees, rivers, and so on were either central or frequently encountered: book illustrations, maps, bird’s eye views of coastlines made for military purposes or of estates for legal reasons; and the decorative arts including tapestry, needlework, and stained glass. At the grandest end of the spectrum, think of the decorative frieze in the High Great Chamber at Hardwick Hall (completed ca. 1599) depicting a wooded scene, with real saplings nailed on for extra verisimilitude; or at the most modest, consider the “stained cloths” often

painted with landscape scenes, ubiquitous from the medieval period to the seventeenth century in all but the humblest homes (now, sadly, all but disappeared) (fig. 1).



Figure 1

*Stained cloth hanging*, unknown date. Collection of Owlpen Manor, Gloucestershire. Digital image courtesy of Owlpen Manor, Gloucestershire.

Literature and drama can also offer insights into how people thought about landscape. Sir Gawain's journey through the "wyldrenesse of Wyrle" can tell us a lot about how landscape was perceived towards the end of the fourteenth century. If in the first decade of the seventeenth century you saw a production of *As You Like It* or *King Lear*, surely you would have come away with a strong visual sense of the Forest of Arden or Lear's barren heath. How did literature inform visual art, and vice versa? I suspect there are many fruitful connections to be made, if we can only think and write about visual art in a wider cultural context. I cannot say whether or not this is likely to win over more publishing firms, but it might just get us closer to how people, at different times and in different places, have pictured their surroundings.

RESPONSE BY

Fiona Stafford

*Fellow & Tutor in English Literature, Somerville College  
University of Oxford*

The Thames was whiter than the sky, glistening in the early light and seemingly frozen within London's special geometries: bridge horizontals underlined by wires; parallel towers, with steel cross-hatching and suspended rectangles of dazzling glass; matching stacks of overlapping diamond line graphs. For a moment, the train window framed the perfect symmetries of the scene as cleverly as a Claude glass or camera. Though there was no real land to be seen, I was the classic detached spectator, looking at a defined landscape, spread out but separate, behind a large, grubby pane of reinforced glass. And yet from the next bridge, whether to the east or west, the Thameslink carriage that was carrying me across might have appeared as an integral part of the endlessly moving cityscape, slotting into the horizontals until the next train came along the track. I was on my way from the Midlands to the South coast and so by no means part of this place—but still absorbed momentarily into someone else's morning vista. Perhaps the rest of the carriage load made this crossing everyday? The woman sitting beside me might work in that tall office block and get off at the next stop to make her way into a scene that was already a memory

—or mere blank—for her fellow travellers. If it's possible to step in and out of landscapes, perhaps landscape art is not so separate after all? And far from remaining clearly confined and controllable, or indeed, achingly separate, it is endlessly mobile and elusive, brimming with suggestions, hidden stories, and invitations? At its best, landscape art can make the glass dissolve and allow us to be part of a living place—or at least to recognise that others might be. The invitation into a landscape painting might be a river or a road, a tree in blossom or a sunlit stone, a broken doorway, a rusting truck, a shadow or a dog or a cloud, or it might be a particular arrangement of lines or forms that speak an unexpectedly familiar language. There's no need to have been there to feel someone else's place—a prospect is something anticipated—but landscape art may speak in a different tone to those who remember what's suddenly before their eyes.

Richard Long took his first firm strides into the landscape of the 1960s, bringing out the art inherent in different physical terrains, bringing slate and rock into galleries to challenge conceptions of what landscape art might be. But his new materials were as old as the hills and his radical lines followed those of unknown generations and great predecessors like Turner, who felt his subjects with rain-drenched cheeks and numbed hands. Norman Ackroyd sails into the seas and around the islands he sketches and etches (fig. 2). His scudding clouds, stark rocks, wind surge, and sea-bird silhouettes taste of the salt and sound of roaring waters. These are inhabited solitudes, whose life is felt and shared by the sharp eye, skilled hand, and profound sympathy of the artist. Fellow Yorkshireman, David Hockney, has revisioned their native county through media deepened and brightened by London, California, great artists of the past and, perhaps most of all, by powerful feelings of homecoming. Just as Cookham was always there for Stanley Spencer, though utterly transformed by his wartime experience, Hockney's Yorkshire is forever there and yet forever changed and changing. A brilliant yellow watercolour rolls a lifetime of knowledge and experience into its big round bales, while still celebrating the emphatic now-ness of a particular field in 2004. An apparently empty harvest field can be as full of life and action, as generous with its invitations, as any group of figures or conversation piece.



Figure 2

Norman Ackroyd, *Off Herma Nesse - Shetland*, 2018, etching, 24 × 38 cm. Digital image courtesy of Norman Ackroyd.

Landscape art is not often given to shattering, because, at its best, it has the power to dissolve the pane of separation and help us out of the glass cases that keep the world at bay. Whether in installations, etchings, paintings, or sketches, landscapes imagined intensely by great artists are not just there to be seen, but felt. And the viewer is there, too, side by side, and free to step into a



world that has suddenly opened up, or to stand, as if barefoot, feeling the ground, and breathing in the special air.

RESPONSE BY

Rachel Hewitt

*Lecturer in Creative Writing and Deputy Director of the Newcastle Centre for  
Literary Arts*

*Newcastle University*

“An equal, wide survey” is how the historian John Barrell has characterised mid-eighteenth-century British landscape art and poetry’s aesthetics: the vast, almost boundless prospects, with their varied but harmoniously united components, all seen through the eyes of an elevated, detached observer. That pithy phrase, “an equal wide, survey”—taken from James Thomson’s 1735 poem *Liberty*—perfectly enacts how those particular aesthetic decisions have acquired the status of the natural and inevitable. What could be more uncontroversial and rational—less tainted by ideology—than a survey or map?

But maps are really far from unbiased representations. And neither are mid-eighteenth-century landscape aesthetics impartial, inexorable, or, for that matter, “equal”. Barrell has meticulously exposed how those landscapes aggrandised the figure of the “benevolent and retired” landed gentleman as the ideal observer, with his elevated detachment, ownership of fixed property, eye to “public virtue”, and working knowledge of the interdependence of multiple trades. Via landscape painting and poetry, the benevolent, retired gentleman became chief trustee of British territory—God’s land-agent on earth.

Such landscapes were provoking rich creative dissent by the eighteenth century’s end, particularly from political radicals. Landscape art identifies the literal and metaphorical landmarks, values, and shibboleths around which the territory unites. And dissent from the equal, wide survey’s politics could be expressed through disruption of its aesthetics.

Let’s return to the map analogy. Admittedly, there is far from an easy equivalence between cartography and landscape painting. Henry Fuseli was catty about landscapes that failed to transcend “map work”: “tame enumeration of hill and dale, clumps of trees, shrubs, water”. But there are also fruitful convergences, as the “equal, wide survey” descriptor indicates. Owners of landed estates were important patrons of map-making *and* landscape painting, often as parallel endeavours to shore up national identity. Sir John Clerk of Penicuik enthusiastically commissioned landscape painters, including Alexander Runciman, alongside surveyors of national and estate maps. There is scope for much greater excavation of landowners’ role in bolstering post-Union Scottish identity through the patronage of landscape art and cartography. And the map analogy for landscape painting has mileage, too, I think, in encouraging us to consider the barely concealed politics of landscape representations.

The radical poet and printmaker William Blake angrily opposed the equal, wide survey’s aesthetics and politics: its “disposition to ... generalizing and classification”, its search for “one system” among “variety”. He identified it, and Reynolds’ *Discourses on Art*, with elitist “Noblemen’s Opinions in Art and Science”. Blake’s own landscapes and maps bucked those traits, emphasising particularity over unity, imagination over empiricism; as in his 1801 “Corrected and Revised Map of the Country of Allestone”, an imaginary territory (fig. 3). There is important work being done, by Hayley Flynn among others, on Blake’s interactions with, and subversions of, the eighteenth-century British landscape tradition.

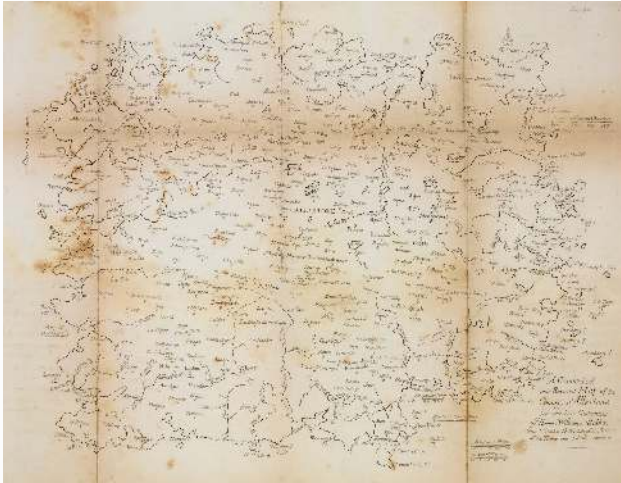


Figure 3

William Blake, *Corrected & Revised Map of the Country of Allestone* (detail), 1806, map. Collection of University of Cambridge Library (Keynes.U.4.10). Digital image courtesy of University of Cambridge Library.

To my mind, the most fascinating and under-researched examples of dissenting landscapes derive from women, kicking against the pricks (as it were); kicking against the white, landed, male observer's supremacy. Women were excluded from the chief contexts of mid-eighteenth-century landscape representation: effectively locked out of land-ownership, the military, the Royal Academy and Royal Society, and the male aristocrat's political experience and power. Women were discouraged from accessing sublime elevated viewpoints, leaving their coaches, or getting their boots muddy. Edmund Burke surmised that women had a much closer affinity to "beautiful" — not sublime — landscapes, because both were characterised by smallness, fragility, timidity, delicacy, and pallid colours.

Nonetheless, female landscape painters, and even a few female map-makers, persisted. Germaine Greer has described how, debarred from the tradition in which detached elevation aligns with male authority, women landscape artists have sought radical new viewpoints. This might be the intimate proximity of Elizabeth Blackwell's botanical illustrations in *The Curious Herbal* (1737–1739), or Anna Laetitia Barbauld's departure from Enlightenment materialism towards the fantastical landscapes of the 1775 "New Map of the Land of Matrimony"; or, more recently, Thérèse Oulton's disorienting, curtailed, vertiginous landscapes, shown as if from the window of a banking aeroplane (fig. 4). And this is happening in poetry too. Helen Mort's poetic landscapes dizzyingly dissolve the distance between observer, page, and land, until "your eyes collect new rain" and "your words are rockfall". Aptly, the collection in which Mort first came to prominence for her charting of the pioneering, disruptive female observers of landscape was titled *No Map Could Show Them*. Has the equal, wide survey become obsolete?



Figure 4

Thérèse Oulton, *Untitled No 7*. Digital image courtesy of Thérèse Oulton / Marlborough Fine Art.

RESPONSE BY

Felicity Myrone

*Lead Curator, Western Prints and Drawings*

*British Library*

Alex invites us to join in a conversation about “the place of art, and the history of art, in national understandings of landscape now”. She notes that over the last twenty years there has been an upsurge in interest in writing about nature, place, and environment not seen since the late eighteenth century, and sees connections between nature writing, music, and film. Alex considers the term “mixed parliament” for this variety of genres. Picturing Places, a website launched in 2017 by the British Library, puts this idea into practice. We deliberately bring together a wide range of genres and formats—prints, drawings, printed and manuscript text, maps, objects such as globes, peepshows, and jigsaws, even a cuneiform tablet—with a resulting wide date range that currently stretches from ca. 605 bc to 2008. Over ninety authors from early career to established scholars have contributed to the site, and I hope the result is effective rather than confusing; the plural voices and variety of objects examined should surprise, encourage new ways of seeing, and increase awareness of the art historical, cultural, and institutional barriers that have led to ingrained and inaccurate perceptions of topographical art as a lesser form of landscape art.

Projects like cataloguing the British Library’s King’s Topographical Collection can also heighten our awareness of the power of categorisation and curation. We should actively question acts of selection, organisation, manipulation, and re-presentation, which may be highly personal, will certainly be partial, and are quite possibly transient. There is the institutional context to consider, as well, and the histories of classification, categorization, and exclusion or inclusion that it entails. These histories are largely hidden from sight when the institution in question is functioning effectively—a library or museum user can reasonably expect to locate the things they are looking for today without having to consider the potentially convoluted history of locations it may have had in the past.

At the British Library, large collections of works deemed topographical, including George III’s, have historically been seen as the realm of the map library, and indeed categorised as maps (fig.

5). Sets of plates which may be held by both the British Museum and British Library will previously have been fully catalogued as prints—which is to say, as art—by the former, but given no more description than “views” or “without letterpress” when recorded by the latter (fig. 6). It takes a dedicated scholar to appreciate the wealth of the countless prints and drawings at the British Library when the vast majority of catalogue records for the items they are found in make no reference to artist, engraver, medium, title, date, or subject of their contents.



Figure 5

Michiel van Overbeek, *De Ladyinghe In Her Perck*, circa 1663–66, pen and ink wash, 10.6 × 20.4 cm. Collection of British Library (Maps K.Top.124 Supp.fol.58). Digital image courtesy of British Library Board.



Figure 6

Michiel van Overbeek, *View of Margate, Kent*, circa 1663–66, drawing, 10.7 × 21.3 cm. Collection of The British Museum (11929,0511.22). Digital image courtesy of Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

Tens of thousands of prints and drawings have been rediscovered and fully catalogued for the first time over the last five years, and while George III’s collection is only one amongst hundreds at the Library, that should be seen as an opportunity rather than a threat. The Library with its myriad voices in manuscript and printed texts alongside the often overlooked but outstanding visual collections is uniquely well equipped for those wanting to research exactly the question Alex poses in her second piece—“what did she see?”. Alex writes of momentous times ahead for landscape art and its history, and I hope the collections of the British Library may be seen fertile ground for research on this topic.

This should, I would argue, encourage a greater consciousness of the history of collections, not as a specialised and separate area of historical enquiry but as a means of understanding the objects of our enquiry with greater historical accuracy. Why should four drawings by the same artist and from the same tour be “placed” in three different collections, one as part of the Royal Collection of drawings, two in the King’s Topographical Collection, and one in the British Museum, and what effect does this have on their perception? The historical classification and location of these drawings is a matter of material interest in this conversation about the place of “art”, and the art of “place”.

RESPONSE BY

Anna Pavord

Writer

Raymond Williams was a hero to my magnificent tutor, Richard Hoggart. So I feel disloyal in disagreeing, profoundly, with Williams’s words (in *The Country and the City*, 1973) that: “A working landscape is hardly ever a landscape.” That is an extraordinarily proscriptive statement, almost an eighteenth-century one, when the only landscapes that mattered to the first landscape

painters and the first landscape tourists were the wildish ones with mountains: the Lakes, of course, North Wales and the Highlands.

A landscape is made initially by geology and weather, but most of the ones we look at now in Britain bear evidence of generations of labour. Inhabiting the landscapes to which I respond most warmly are the ghosts of those who have occupied it and left their marks on it, from the Iron Age people who hacked the chalk of Eggardon Hillfort in West Dorset into its dramatic ramparts and ditches to the shepherds (like the one that William Turner of Oxford painted near Stonehenge), whose animals effectively maintained the great grassy sweeps of country we call downs.

Capability Brown himself said that as landscapers, sheep were rather more important than he was. And the landscapes he created were not only beautiful but also profitable. It was one of the reasons he was so successful. Estate accounts show that the grass of his landscape parks was often let out for grazing because at the time Brown was working, rents from pasture were higher than those for arable land. In late eighteenth-century Norfolk, pasture could be let for at least £3 an acre; arable brought in 50 shillings. And the sheep looked good. "There cannot be more interesting objects of view, in a park, than well-chosen flocks and herds, nor more appropriate to the rural scene, than their voices", wrote John Lawrence in *The Modern Land Steward* (1801). Different imperatives produce different ways of seeing landscape. But the painter's prospect is not the only one that matters. Lord Ribblesdale, for whom James Ward painted his immense canvas of the sublime, *A Landscape, Gordale Scar, Yorkshire*, was certainly as interested in the provenance and breeding of the great white bull that Ward set so prominently in the foreground of the picture, as he was in the landscape against which it is set.

Raymond Williams went on to say that: "the very idea of landscape implies separation and observation." Observation, of course, because we can't take in, respond to a landscape without looking at it. But separation? No. The superb landscape I look out on every day offers peace, solace, delight. But also engagement. The genesis of my book *Landskipping* lies in a landscape close to home, a view over a gate, a prospect that welcomes you into rather than separates you from the land.

Before I even contemplated writing this book, I commissioned George Wright, a photographer I have worked with for decades, to photograph this particular landscape over the course of a year (fig. 7 and fig. 8). It was a landscape that always stopped me, was always different, but I wanted to understand why. George's photographs tracked, not only the course of the seasons, which has such a profound effect on the land we look out on, but also the dramatic changes produced by the passage of the sun. Until I laid his pictures out, I'd not fully realized that, because I looked south over the gate, the sun moved from left to right over the scene in front. The shadows of course move with the sun, falling in the morning from left to right, in the evening from right to left. As they move, they highlight a ditch, or a depression where stone has been dug out for a boundary wall, a grassed over track, horizontal lynchets made on the slope, tumuli, burial mounds, disc barrows of the long dead. Work? Yes, a lot of work stitched into this landscape. Separation? No. For me, never.





Figure 7

George Wright, *West Dorset*, 8.41 am on the 11 January 2012, photograph.



Figure 8

George Wright, *West Dorset*, 8.29 am on the 20 October 2012, photograph.

#### RESPONSE BY

Emily Hayes

*Research Associate, Humanities and Social Sciences  
Oxford Brookes University*

#### From Black Boxes to Brexit: The Magic Lantern's Lessons in Perspective

Any question regarding how women and men of diverse socio-political backgrounds or belief systems have looked about themselves on this earth demands an answer encompassing the histories of optics and visual technologies. Dating from the seventeenth century and rapidly repurposed from the philosopher's cabinet for use in popular and commercial shows, the magic lantern is an overlooked instrument as much of natural philosophy as of histories of both art and the environment.

Throughout the nineteenth century and well into the early twentieth century, the lantern and the lantern slides it projected showed what people saw and what they wanted to see; travel and topographical subjects, broadly described as geographical, comprised the most popular forms of enlightening and educational entertainment.

Itinerant pedlars of lantern shows and professional lecturers illuminated a European, even global, stock of landscape images and their collections reveal diverse ways of seeing, knowing, and fashioning European lands. The women and men who staged such shows, and who depended on ticket sales to make their precarious livings, shaped and were shaped by popular tastes and audiences. For those seeking visions of the past, the black boxes of lantern slides and their associated archives and ephemera constitute a rich and barely mined seam of evidence.

Peeping at what and how people saw—from hand-painted scenes to photographic views of British and imperial landscapes from the 1860s onwards—reveals a vibrant and spatially varied tradition of lantern shows across Britain, which illuminated many of the key journeys that fed British geographical imaginations. The Regent Street Royal Polytechnic Institution (RPI) staged shows on the explorer Richard Burton's pilgrimage to Mecca, the expeditionary artist Thomas Baines' travels in Africa, and the Arctic Franklin search party expeditions, among many others. Charles Dickens was a frequent attendee.

From the 1880s up to the 1950s, the Royal Geographical Society's (RGS) lantern lectures moulded the public perception of nature as a distinct entity designed for scientific scrutiny, and notions of humanity's place within it. However, in the final decades of the nineteenth century, RGS audiences of all ages also reported experiences of virtual travel within the space of the lantern lectures. British landscape literature and travel writing of this era were fashioned in the light of such interactive multimedia performances of place and space. The RGS sustained a tradition of engaging with nature by giving its creators a platform and by nurturing its audiences. Scenes of imperial and colonised lands attracted huge audiences. Yet images, as we know, are not innocent. Stylistic forms, and interpretations of them, were often imported from across the colonies and beyond. Fashioned as imperialism reached its zenith and as a global consciousness derived from the activities of institutions such as the RGS – as well as the nascent academic discipline of geography – British landscape art and landscape writing may not be so native to these islands after all. Historical geography offers a profoundly ethical approach to their study by demonstrating how the local and the global interpenetrate across the individual–national–global sliding scale of artistic, literary, and intellectual imaginaries. We should therefore be wary of setting up and confirming national traditions in our study of lantern slides and of British engagements with landscape in art and writing more broadly.

In order to map the relations between notionally popular shows and a broader artistic scene, from vignette engravings in books to theatrical backdrops and the fine arts, scholars are investigating the makers of the exquisite hand-painted slides projected at the RPI. At the RGS for over forty years, the clerk by day and lanternist and lantern slide maker by night, Harry Simpson (1864–1940) fashioned worlds, and audience perceptions of them, by remediating photographs and hand-drawn and painted images into slides to illustrate lectures. Though the effects of this process were perhaps subtle, as scholars aver, the act of remediation was not simply replication, but transformation. Activities at both the RGS and the RPI afford glimpses of how notions of landscape were crafted, and then propagated amongst diverse audiences.

In the 1890s, RGS audiences were thrilled by the abstract photographic studies of wave forms by the chemist turned geographer Vaughan Cornish—then a rising star of the RGS. By the 1930s, Cornish's interests had shifted towards eugenics and landscape heritage activism. My work therefore maps the confluences of Cornish's pursuits and their common source in a notionally progressive scientific outlook.

Such concerns resonate today. The various Brexit scenarios blotting our horizon threaten to transform the physical and social geography of what we imagine to be Britain. The bringing of popular landscapes views back from the obscure and into sight offers a timely lesson in perspective.



Figure 9

Paul Sandby, *The Magic Lantern*, 1763, drawing, 37.2 × 53.8 cm. Collection of The British Museum (1862,1011.890). Digital image courtesy of Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

RESPONSE BY

Barney Norris

*Martin Esslin playwright in residence at Keble College  
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### Landscape and Localism

The landscape tradition in art is being most interestingly developed, to my mind, precisely where it tackles the very occlusion Alexandra Harris writes of here, and expresses the strongly felt ideas about landscapes of those who are articulating their home places. It is in the work of artists expressing their own hinterland and backyard that landscape art lives for me in contemporary painting, just as landscape lives most vividly in contemporary writing in the labyrinthine explorations of home and memory in the work of Ciaran Carson.

The curious quality I find in the work of painters whose subject is their own world is that they use painting as a means of making strange the world they intimately know. This struck me forcefully last summer when I encountered the work of Saul Cathcart at the Crypt Gallery in St Ives. Artistically, that town is, of course, a temple to kitsch, but Cathcart's impressionistic, quite jazz-inflected plein-aire paintings were a bold rebuttal to all the blue rectangles on sale elsewhere. Documenting live interactions between the artist and the place he was painting, usually a place within a few miles of his home, they dramatize a meeting place between an inner and an outer landscape, so that what became visible in the gallery was what it had felt like to be in that moment.

Looking at Cathcart's work brought to mind my engagement over the last few years with the work of David Inshaw, another painter whose project is to burnish the views around him and make them strange. Inshaw has become an abiding preoccupation for me in the last few years, because we both gnaw at the same corner of carpet—his work and my work are both excavations of the secret heart of Wiltshire. When I first encountered Inshaw's paintings, I was struck by how very similar his conclusions about the place seemed to be to my own—how Wiltshire helped him, as it had helped me, to perceive that life is a dream, and that all meaning and all magic



exists in the geometry of things, the relation of one thing to another and the spaces between, the absences and gaps.



Figure 10

David Inshaw, *Our days were a joy and our paths through flowers*, 1972, oil on canvas, 135.9 × 212.1 cm. Collection of Bristol Museum and Art Gallery (K4142). Digital image courtesy of Bridgeman Images.

What these two very different painters absolutely share is that they are both engaged in saying, “this is what it feels like to be here”. Their act of estranging may be a compelling window into places for tourists, but it is also a means of finding expression in the localities they document, a window for local feeling, local knowledge, to break like first light out into the world. Landscapes are mute. Hills do not give up the secret of what they mean, water is indifferent to us, and every blade of grass will forget us when we leave it behind—and that strangeness is in every painting; but in the work of people who have spent a long time with the places they paint, the nebulous significance of everywhere can become more richly and densely textured and expressed.

RESPONSE BY  
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My job is to restore works of art. I do not spend my time dissolving varnish, retouching oil paint, or reframing delicate canvases, but instead I recommend the pruning of trees, the rebuilding of a derelict ha-ha and a review of the grazing regime. Designed landscapes—gardens, landscape parks, urban public parks—are three-dimensional works of landscape art. Unlike most buildings, they do not have a clearly defined function guiding the architect’s design. Like many paintings, they were, and are, often created simply to be enjoyed, reflecting the fashions, tastes, and aesthetic movements of the day.

Designed landscapes are, however, a complicated branch of landscape art. They are fragile palimpsests, usually with several layers of design. This makes them difficult to interpret or categorise, and often hard to pin down to a single aesthetic movement or designer. They were often created by amateurs with ample wealth and a large team of gardeners—no longer sustainable in modern times. In some cases, these artworks have become equally, if not more, important for their scientific or archaeological value, especially where parkland trees have been

allowed to mature into fine veterans or an eighteenth-century prospect mound turns out to have been constructed in 2400 bc.

Parks and gardens cannot be preserved exactly as originally conceived and finished by their creator, nor can they be accurately restored like a building or converted for a more economically viable modern use. They are constantly changing from season to season and year to year and, if unmanaged, trees grow, lakes silt up, scrub takes over. Often this change is slow but significant, so that a key view will gradually disappear and be forgotten and a lake will evolve into wet woodland, halving its size. There can be much objection from a community when we propose felling trees, until the lost view is revealed and people realise what they have been missing for the past fifty years.

Much of my work involves the rediscovery of unmanaged landscapes and the teasing out of their significant features based on documentary research and site surveys. "Significance" is a key term in all modern conservation management. For each landscape, we have to condense its qualities into a "statement of significance", summarising the values of a site, be they archaeological, cultural, ecological, aesthetic, or communal. This may appear to be a rather blunt instrument: how can one group of individuals with particular tastes, backgrounds, and knowledge begin to assess the multiple qualities of a place? However, designation or funding has to be justified in some way, and an assessment that identifies the national or local context of a landscape is an essential starting point.

The designation of designed landscapes is a relatively recent development. The twentieth century saw the loss of many gardens and landscape parks, particularly following the demolition of country houses. The decline in surviving examples resulted in the founding of the *Register of Historic Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest* in 1983 by English Heritage. The Register now contains over 1,600 sites, including landscape parks, town gardens, public parks, and cemeteries. Like listed buildings, landscapes are graded I, II\* or II, based on their significance. The organisation judges the national value of a landscape based on several criteria, including date of construction, association with a nationally important designer or other individual, or group value with other historic buildings or sites. Inclusion on the Register is the most effective way of protecting a landscape from development, but it is non-statutory and is only a material consideration in the planning process. You do not need consent to plough up a Repton park (although you might find yourself in trouble if it is in the curtilage of a listed building).

As well as protection, designation can also be the key to unlocking financial support for conservation. Two of the principal sources of funding are the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and Countryside Stewardship, administered by Natural England. Both sources are invaluable in helping to support our landscape heritage, but they have their limitations. The HLF will require a landscape to be publicly accessible and Stewardship, being a scheme to support agricultural land, limits its funding to grazed parkland. Financial support for gardens or pleasure grounds, especially those in private ownership, is limited, and this makes them vulnerable to neglect and decay.

Conserving designed landscapes is a challenge, both financially and practically. There are very few instances where it is possible to comprehensively restore the original work of art and have the resources to maintain it. They are transient compositions that evolve over time, where a creator's scheme can be degraded or enhanced by natural processes, subsequent owners, differently skilled gardeners, or the visions of new designers. Every landscape is unique, but

together they play a major role in our national heritage and the environment of contemporary Britain.



Figure 11

Simon Bonvoisin, *View across the lake in Lydiard Park, Swindon*, before restoration, 2004.



Figure 12

Simon Bonvoisin, *View across the lake in Lydiard Park, Swindon*, following restoration funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, 2006.

RESPONSE BY

Mark Bills

*Director*

*Gainsborough's House, Sudbury*

Gainsborough's House: Landscape and Place, Past and Future



Figure 13

*Gainsborough's House – view of front entrance from Gainsborough's Street*, 2010, photograph.

Gainsborough's House is the childhood home of Thomas Gainsborough (1727–88), which was purchased in 1958 through a national fund-raising campaign with artists at its forefront. Its doors opened to the public in 1961 and have remained open ever since. They will be closing in 2019 for the first time in sixty years, to allow the House to reinvigorate itself as a national centre for Gainsborough and to revive the town of its most famous son. The thoughts raised in this conversation piece have particular relevance to us, as engagement with the art of landscape is critical to our future vision.

The country town of Sudbury is filled with echoes of the art of Gainsborough. Here are the ghosts of the material that inspired the burgeoning artist. As Philip Thicknesse, one of Gainsborough's first biographers, recalled, *there was not a Picturesque clump of Trees, nor even a single Tree of beauty, no, nor hedgerow, stone, or post, at the corner of the Lanes, for some miles round about the place of*

*his nativity, that he had not so perfectly in his mind's eye, that ... he could have perfectly delineated.*

It is a place, one might even argue, that inspired Gainsborough's restless search for a rustic idyll he evoked in his landscapes, a place where you can still see the water meadow and cattle — motifs in many of his paintings. This gives us a rare opportunity to show his art within the physical spaces that formed his creative imagination. The relationships between art, artist, and landscape are complex ones and we need to think about topography, imagination, and the creative process. We believe that the exploration of these relationships offers great opportunities for the future visitor.



Figure 14

*The Water Meadows, Sudbury*, 2015. Digital image courtesy of A. Purkiss.

Relevant to this development is the distinctness between the inside and the outside. This is something that we are addressing in a newly constructed Landscape Studio, which is part of the creation of a 500 square metre landmark building designed by ZMMA. On a third level of the new building, which will rest on ground sloping southwards, the Studio will have a panoramic south-facing window looking over the town of Sudbury to the landscape of *Mr and Mrs Andrews*. In this way, we can bring the landscape into the building, giving visitors the opportunity of seeing, through the architecture, the external long view of the landscape as it exists today counterpointed by the eighteenth-century paintings displayed inside the gallery. The Landscape Studio will also explore other elements of the art of landscape. We discovered that visitors are particularly interested in the creative process, which is often mysterious to them. How do artists take the three-dimensional reality of what they see physically in front of them and transfigure or reflect it into oil paint on canvas? Using a *camera obscura* and popular eighteenth-century optical devices, we will explore and illustrate this question for visitors.

Starting out from the early conversation pieces in which Gainsborough brings together two aspects of his art with differing emphases, the future Gainsborough's House will offer visitors the chance to be part of a conversation piece themselves and, we hope, to develop their own conversations with landscape and place. The newly refurbished house and new galleries are due to open in Spring 2021."

## About the author

Alexandra Harris is the author of *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper* (Thames & Hudson, 2010) and *Weatherland: Writers and Artists under English Skies* (Thames & Hudson, 2015), which was adapted for BBC Radio 4 and shortlisted for the RSL Ondaatje Prize. Recent work includes essays on William Cowper and Dennis Creffield, and the catalogue text for Tacita Dean's show *Landscape* at the Royal Academy. A book about perceptions of place will be published by Faber & Faber. She is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, and her work on this "Conversation Piece" was made possible by the award of a Philip Leverhulme Prize.

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