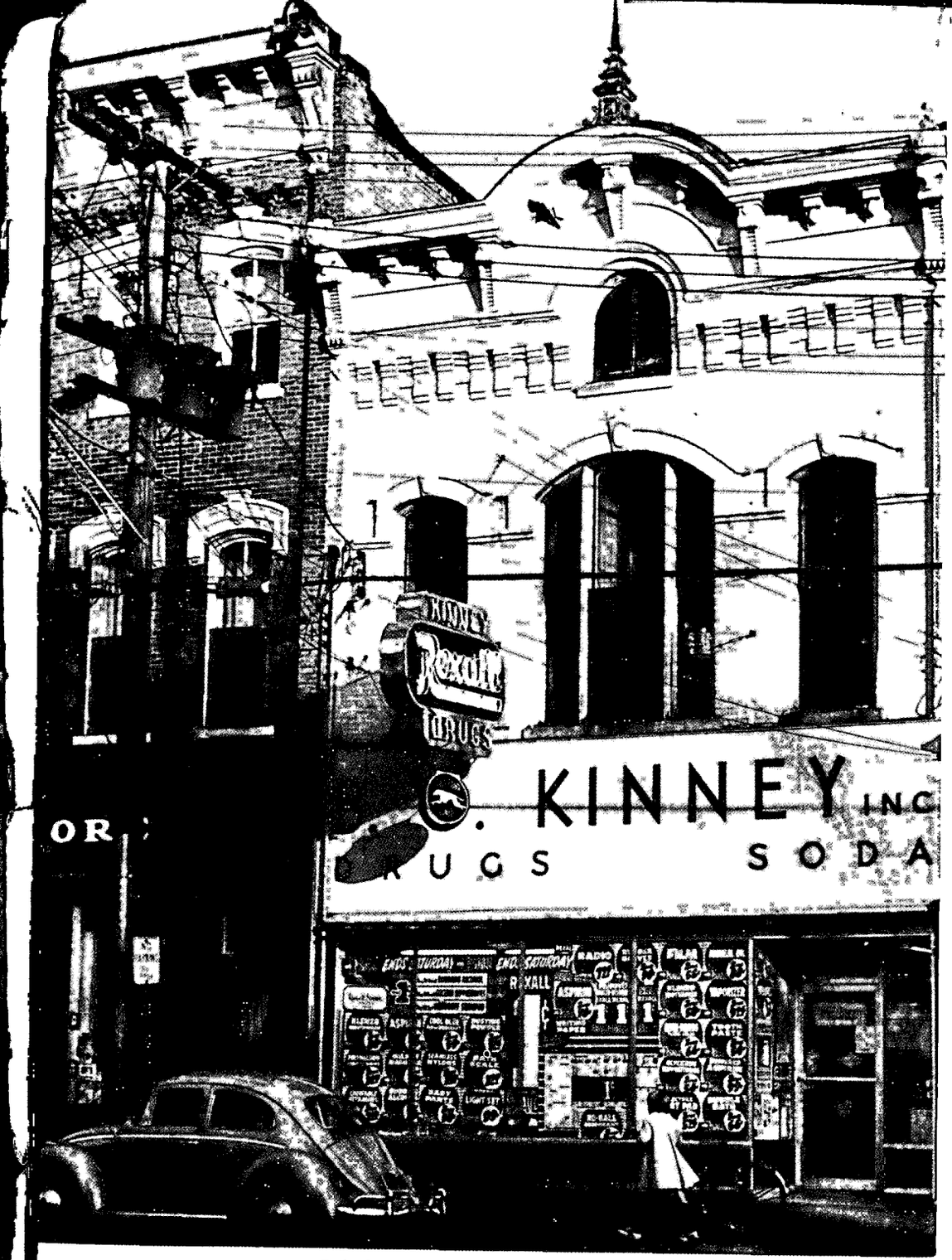

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THE INTERPRETATION OF ORDINARY LANDSCAPES

Geographical Essays

D. W. Meinig, Editor
J. B. Jackson
Peirce F. Lewis
David Lowenthal
D. W. Meinig
Marwyn S. Samuels
David E. Sopher
Yi-Fu Tuan

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Preface

The set of essays is offered as a coherent introduction to a lively and expanding realm of interest. The nine essays are themselves an exhibit of the vitality of the topic "landscape." Their coherence comes not from any explicit collaboration nor the forcing efforts of an editor, but arises naturally from the fact that these seven very independent writers are well attuned to one another's ideas.

Although we have labeled these essays with our field, we intend no such limitation in their use. To call them "geographical" suggests something of a common perspective, but one which seems to us to be necessarily involved in some degree in almost any approach to "landscape." We have sought to serve a range of interests well beyond the usual bounds of any one academic guild, just as we ourselves have obviously been nourished by a wide variety of writers.

The opening essay is a spirited assertion of some fundamentals by one of America's most successful teachers and writers about landscape. This particular piece is a revised and expanded version of an article published under the title "Axioms of the Landscape" in the special issue on 'Teaching the Landscape" of the *Journal of Architectural Education* (vol. 30, September

1976, pp. 6–9). The second essay, "The Beholding Eye," was prepared originally as the opening lecture for an experimental course on the American Landscape and was first published in *Landscape Architecture* (vol. 66, January 1976, pp. 47–54). Permission to reprint these two articles is gratefully acknowledged.

The remaining essays derive from a special series of public "Landscape Lectures" presented at Syracuse University. I thank my companions for their willingness to join in these explorations and to prepare manuscripts for this volume. A special feature of that program was the showing, for the first time in America so far as we know, of the BBC-2 Television film, "The Making of The English Landscape," based on the work of and featuring as narrator and guide Professor William G. Hoskins. Because the approach and achievements of Professor Hoskins are so central to the theme of this volume I prepared the final essay as a brief assessment of his work and used it also as a means of making some comparisons with the work of Mr. J. B. Jackson, who has been the most widely influential American catalyst of landscape study. I am especially indebted to these two gentlemen for their gracious cooperation. During each of two recent sojourns in Britain I spent a pleasant afternoon with Professor Hoskins in his home in Exeter discussing his work and career. With similar generosity, Brinck Jackson agreed to stop over at my home on one of his transcontinental journeys (this time in a Datsun pickup) and respond to my nagging array of questions about his life's work. I also owe thanks to Peter Jones of BBC-Television, Roy Millward of Leicester University, and Eric Major of Hodder & Stoughton for information about the Hoskins films and books, to Hodder & Stoughton for permission to quote extensively from *The Making of The English Landscape* and *Leicestershire*, and to Blair Boyd for permission to quote many passages from *Landscape*. These good people are of course not to be burdened with any responsibility for the particular interpretations I have made. I thank Nancy Amy and Joyce Berry of Oxford University Press for their skilled help, and Michael Nickerson for assistance in preparing the index. As usual, I have had the ready support in many ways of my departmental Chairman, Professor Robert G. Jensen; both the lecture series and the preparation of the manuscript have been aided by the Cressey-James Fund.

Syracuse, New York
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D. W. M.

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THE INTERPRETATION OF ORDINARY LANDSCAPES

Introduction

Landscape *is an attractive, important, and ambiguous term.*

It is attractive because it may bring immediately to mind some pleasant prospect: a piece of the countryside, the particular setting of some memorable place; it has an earthy, out-of-doors connotation, it may remind us of environmental or ecological matters; it may suggest special attention to the design and care of our surroundings, or the depiction and interpretation of interesting scenes; to some it may even be regarded as a way of viewing man as well as of admiring nature.

It is an important term because it does carry all these connotations and more, and is thereby involved in major matters of professional interest and of public concern. *Landscape* is a technical term used by artists and earth scientists, architects and planners, geographers and historians. It is also an important dimension of many issues relating to the development, alteration, and management of our cities and towns and countrysides. But

beyond all these, it is important because it is a common word which is increasingly used to encompass an ensemble of ordinary features which constitute an extraordinarily rich exhibit of the course and character of any society. As Peirce Lewis spiritedly argues, if we want to understand ourselves, we would do well to take a searching look at our landscapes.

Because *landscape* is used by so many different people for such a variety of purposes, it is inevitably an ambiguous term. There are problems of translation between fields and often uncertainties of exact meaning even within any one. When J. B. Jackson, our most catholic and discerning spokesman, who bound a good portion of his life directly to the very word, confesses (as he does in this book) that after twenty-five years he still finds the concept of landscape elusive, we are fairly warned not to aspire to a clean and clear definition, and not to be surprised at some variation in usage among the seven authors of this volume. Nevertheless, the reader deserves some indication of the general sense of the term which informs these essays. In the hope of clarification we shall begin by differentiating *landscape* from some closely related concepts; to say first of all what it is not. This is done not to establish rigid restrictions to its use, but to distill something closer to an essence which can be put to good and varied service.

Landscape is related to, but not identical with, *nature.* Nature is a part of every landscape, but is no more than a part of any landscape which has felt the impact of man. In this view landscape is always inclusive of man and nature, rather than a way of distinguishing, or at least emphasizing, nature, as is still not uncommon in some fields, such as art and earth science. Indeed, the idea of landscape runs counter to recognition of any simple binary relationship between man and nature. Rather, it begins with a naive acceptance of the intricate intimate intermingling of physical, biological, and cultural features which any glance around us displays. Landscape is, first of all, the unity we see, the impressions of our senses rather than the logic of the sciences.

Thus every landscape is a scene, but landscape is not identical with *scenery.* The very idea of scenery is limited, a conscious selection of certain prospects, locales, or kinds of country as having some attractive aesthetic qualities. Scenery has connotations of a set piece, a defined perspective, a focus upon certain features, a discrimination based upon some generally received idea of beauty or interest; whereas landscape is ubiquitous and more inclusive, something to be observed but not necessarily admired. Interest in landscape may involve aesthetics but it is not defined by it. As with

landscape art, the study of landscape is necessarily reflective in some degree of philosophies and taste and subject to shifts in styles and emphasis, but the landscape is ever with us and we are ever involved in its creation.

Landscape is all around us. It is related to, but not identical with, *environment,* as several of the authors make explicit. Environment is an inherent property of every living thing, it is that which surrounds and sustains; we are always environed, always enveloped by an outer world. Landscape is less inclusive, more detached, not so directly part of our organic being. Landscape is defined by our vision and interpreted by our minds. It is a panorama which continuously changes as we move along any route. Strictly speaking, we are never in it, it lies before our eyes and it becomes real only as we become conscious of it. As Tuan says, "We can think, therefore we are able to see an entity called landscape." Environment sustains us as creatures; landscape displays us as cultures.

As discerned sectors of our environments, landscapes are related to, yet not identical with, *places.* Place commonly refers to a definite area, a fixed location; events "take place" and we can be *in* a place. But place, too, has its ambiguities. There is, most basic of all, the difference between general recognition of certain areas as places, and a personal sense of place. The one is a public concept, the other private; we all live intimately with both. The first kind of place depends upon some public agreement as to name, location, and character; some legibility, some identity commonly understood. Our personal sense of place depends upon our own experiences and sensibilities. It is unique to each of us in its content and in the way it relates to general social definitions of places. Thus each of us creates and accumulates places out of living whenever we pierce the infinite blur of the world and fix a piece of our environment as something distinct and memorable. Such memories of place almost certainly depend in some degree upon landscape, upon the external visible character of localities. Yet the two are not the same. As David Sopher suggests, for some people the sense of home as a place may be grounded much more upon human relationships than upon the memory of landscape. In this way place is experiential to a degree landscape is not, although the way we see landscape does depend upon experience and purpose. Still landscape tends to be something more external and objective than our personal sense of place; and something less individual, less discrete, than the usual named place; it is a continuous surface rather than a point, focus, locality, or defined area.

Landscape is a portion of the earth's surface, related to, but not identical with, *region, area,* or *geography.* There are complexities and ambigu-

We regard all landscapes as symbolic, as expressions of cultural values, social behavior, and individual actions worked upon particular localities over a span of time. (P.J. Hugill)

ities here which have been important and at times vexing in the field of geography. Such problems grow out of its long and rich heritage, they reflect shifts in Western intellectual history, differences in emphasis among nations, difficulties of translation between languages, and the differential impact of allied fields. These matters are well covered in standard references[1] and are far too complicated to review here. We may note that there was a period between the World Wars when many American geographers tried to define their discipline in terms of landscape. That proved to be a stimulating but not, in the longer run, satisfying concept and it is obvious from current professional literature that while landscape remains an important focus of geographical interest the field itself could not possibly be comfortably encompassed within the bounds of common concepts of landscape. And this is so not just because of a recent emphasis upon geography as a more theoretical spatial science, but because of the special analytical perspective which has always been characteristic of the field. That oldest

In its focus upon the vernacular, cultural landscape study is a companion of that form of social history which seeks to understand the lives of ordinary people. (P.J. Hugill)

badge and basic tool of geography, the map, is a symbolic abstraction of spatial relationships and is applied by geographers to the study of many phenomena which are not directly part of the visible landscape. On the other hand, maps may be useful in the study of landscape but they cannot be sufficient, for the landscape must be visualized and if not directly by our own eyes then by means of the best substitutes. The photograph or drawing, the depiction of the surficial totality of a scene, provides a more revealing illustration than a map. Nevertheless the relationship between landscape and geography remains intimate even if noncommensurate. As David Lowenthal has noted, "beyond that of any other discipline . . . the subject matter of geography approximates the world of general discourse; the palpable present, the everyday life of man on earth, is seldom far from our professional concerns."[2] On the basis of logic, tradition, and product, we may fairly claim that geographers have a special vocation for landscape study.

Our concern in these essays for that everyday life of man on earth is indicated in our title. We specify *ordinary landscapes* to indicate our primary interest in that continuous surface which we can see all around us. We cannot, of course, study everything, but we can try to see those elements we do study in context, as being parts of an ensemble which is under continuous creation and alteration as much or more from the unconscious processes of daily living as from calculated landscape design. Insofar as we focus on particular landscapes, we are dealing primarily with vernacular culture. In this sense, landscape study is a companion of that form of social history which seeks to understand the routine lives of ordinary people. And indeed, the relationship with social history is even closer for although we begin with the "palpable present," with that which we can see, *interpretation* will demand more than can be seen in a mere glance and a concern for more than the palpable objects themselves. For the meaning of the ordinary is rarely obvious. We regard all landscapes as symbolic, as expressions of cultural values, social behavior, and individual actions worked upon particular localities over a span of time. Every landscape is an accumulation, and its study may be undertaken as formal history, methodically defining the making of the landscape from the past to the present, as in the great work of W. G. Hoskins and his associates. And every landscape is a code, and its study may be undertaken as a deciphering of meaning, of the cultural and social significance of ordinary but diagnostic features, as shown in numerous revealing essays by J. B. Jackson.

It is not, however, the intent of the essays in this book to prescribe any exact form of study but to explore possibilities and to invite others to do the same. It is an immense realm which needs many kinds of explorers. Any landscape is so dense with evidence and so complex and cryptic that we can never be assured that we have read it all or read it aright. The landscape lies all around us, ever accessible and inexhaustible. Anyone can look, but we all need help to see that it is at once a panorama, a composition, a palimpsest, a microcosm; that in every prospect there can be more and more that meets the eye.

Notes

1. Preston E. James, *All Possible Worlds, A History of Geographical Ideas* (New York: Odyssey Press, 1972), pp. 229–32, 399–402; Marvin W. Mikesell, "Landscape," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, vol. 8, (New York: Crowell-Collier and Macmillan, 1968), pp. 575–80.
2. David Lowenthal, "Geography, Experience, and Imagination: Towards a Geographical Epistemology," *Annals*, Association of American Geographers 51 (1961): 241.