

Views Of American Landscapes



EDITED BY
MICK GIDLEY AND ROBERT LAWSON-PEEBLES

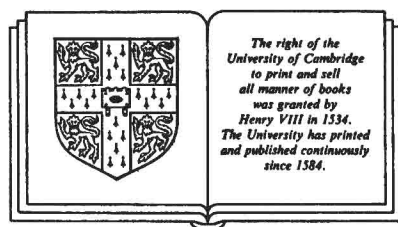


FOREWORD BY LEO MARX

Views of American Landscapes



EDITED BY
MICK GIDLEY
AND
ROBERT LAWSON-PEEBLES



CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge
New York Port Chester
Melbourne Sydney

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521364355

© Cambridge University Press 1989

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1989
This digitally printed first paperback version 2006

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Views of American landscapes/edited by Mick Gidley and Robert Lawson-Peebles.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-36435-3

1. United States in art. 2. Landscapes in art. 3. Art, American.
4. English literature – History and criticism. 5. United States in literature.
I. Gidley, M. (Mick) II. Lawson-Peebles, Robert.

N8214.5.U6V53 1989

700 – dc20 89-7227 CIP

ISBN-13 978-0-521-36435-5 hardback
ISBN-10 0-521-36435-3 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-03393-0 paperback
ISBN-10 0-521-03393-4 paperback

Notes on contributors

CLIVE BUSH is a Senior Lecturer in English and American literature at the University of Warwick. He has published interdisciplinary articles on many aspects of American literature and culture. He is the author of *The Dream of Reason* and three books of poetry: *Clearing the Distance*, *The Range Taken* and *Shifts in Undreamt Time*.

ROBERT CLARK teaches English and American Literature at the University of East Anglia. His previous publications include *History, Ideology and Myth in American Fiction, 1823–1852* and, as editor, *James Fenimore Cooper: New Critical Essays*.

GRAHAM CLARKE is Lecturer in English and American Literature at the University of Kent, where he also teaches in the American Studies programme. His publications include essays on nineteenth-century American poetry, Poe, Hawthorne, Hemingway, Olson, and Black fiction. He is the editor of a forthcoming book of essays on the American city.

STEPHEN FENDER has taught at Edinburgh, London and various American universities, and is now Professor of American Studies at the University of Sussex. His books include *The American Long Poem*, *Plotting the Golden West: American Literature and the Rhetoric of the California Trail*, and *American Literature in Context: 1620–1830*. He is editor of the *Journal of American Studies*.

MICK GIDLEY is Director of the Centre for American and Commonwealth Arts and Studies and Senior Lecturer in American Literature at the University of Exeter. His publications include *With One Sky Above Us: Life on Indian Reservations at the Turn of the Century*, *Kopet* (on Chief

Notes on contributors

Joseph), *American Photography*, and a forthcoming book on William Faulkner.

OLAF HANSEN, former Dean of his Faculty, is Professor of American Studies at the University of Frankfurt. He has published a selection of the writings of Randolph Bourne, numerous articles on American and German literary and cultural topics, and his study of American transcendental thought will shortly be published by Princeton University Press.

ALLEN J. KOPPENHAVER is Professor of English and American Studies at Wittenberg University, Ohio. As well as writing poems, plays, and several libretti for the composer Robert J. Haskins, he has contributed articles to a variety of journals on such figures as Charles Ives, T. S. Eliot and Winslow Homer.

ROBERT LAWSON-PEEBLES has held posts at Princeton, Oxford and Aberdeen before moving to Exeter in 1988 to lecture in American and Commonwealth Arts. His publications include *Landscape and Written Expression in Revolutionary America: The World Turned Upside Down* and articles on Henry George, Poe and William Carlos Williams. He is writing books on early American literature and Ernest Hemingway.

LEO MARX is the William R. Kenan, Jr, Professor of American Cultural History in the Program in Science, Technology and Society at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He is the author of *The Machine in the Garden* and *The Pilot and the Passenger: Essays on Literature, Technology, and Culture in the United States*, and editor (with Susan Danly) of *The Railroad in American Art*.

BERNARD MERGEN is Professor of American Civilization at George Washington University, where he also teaches courses in American material culture in association with the Smithsonian Institution. He contributed chapters to the three-volume *Handbook of American Popular Culture* and has contributed articles on such topics as the history of labour and leisure to such journals as *American Quarterly* and *South Atlantic Quarterly*. He is Associate Editor of *American Quarterly*.

CHRISTOPHER MULVEY is Course Director of BA Honours English at King Alfred's College, Winchester. He previously taught in New York for fifteen years. He has published *Anglo-American Landscapes* and is

Notes on contributors

engaged in writing *Transatlantic Manners* and editing the forthcoming *New York: City as Text*.

FRANCESCA ORESTANO teaches English and American literature at the University of Palermo, Sicily. She has published essays on such topics as Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope, Wyndham Lewis, the American college novel in the fifties, and Mary McCarthy. She is now writing a book on John Neal and the foundations of the early American Renaissance.

PHILIP STOKES moved out of illustrative photography into educational studies, then PhD research in photography at the University of Exeter. He teaches the history and theory of photography at Trent Polytechnic, Nottingham, and has published articles on Walker Evans and other figures.

Foreword

LEO MARX

Thus in the beginning all the world was America . . .

John Locke (1690)¹

Ever since the transatlantic voyages of discovery, Europeans have drawn upon topographical scenes and natural objects to represent their ideas of the New World. At first, indeed, the natural environment seemed to be the only source of images capable of signifying America. Of course Europeans also depicted the unexplored continent as the domain of the 'Indians', but the native Americans, like people of color on other continents, appeared to be savages, hence their presence scarcely contradicted the Europeans' notion that in the New World, before their arrival, nature was all – or virtually all. The Indians' exotic ways merely reinforced the contrast between the wild, undeveloped continent and the built environment of Europe. All of which helps to account for the persistent habit of representing America with images of landscape.

But to what extent, it may be asked, is this habit peculiar to the representation of America? After all, don't we associate every nation with images of its characteristic terrain? We probably do, yet in the American case certain special historical circumstances enhanced the iconographic significance of topography. The most obvious of those circumstances, already mentioned, was the European tendency to disregard the indigenous culture, to think of America as little more than a huge land mass. A second, related circumstance was the unusual coming together of this astonishingly abundant, pristine, seemingly unclaimed, seemingly boundless territory and the world's most 'advanced' societies. 'A very old and a very enlightened people . . . [has] fallen upon a new and unbounded country where they . . . may extend themselves at pleasure,'

wrote Alexis de Tocqueville: 'This state of things . . . is without a parallel in the history of the world.'²

Another of these special circumstances was the evolution of landscape as an aesthetic subject, and as a separate genre within the visual arts, at the time colonization was beginning. It is customary, in recounting the formation of ideas about America, to emphasize the hope of a new beginning that Europeans projected on the place, the *object* of representation (as in naming it 'the New World'); we tend to forget, however, that one *form* of representation they used – the art of landscape itself – also was new at that time. The idea of landscape as a distinct aesthetic kind had indeed just begun to seize the imagination of artists. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word 'landscape', meaning 'a picture representing natural inland scenery', first entered the language in 1603, four years before the first permanent English colony was established in Virginia. But the introduction of the word into English (it evidently was borrowed from the Dutch) did not of course mark the initial use of landscape imagery in art.³ Incidental images of natural scenery had had a place in the visual arts since antiquity, and they had appeared with increasing frequency during the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Toward the end of the sixteenth century, however, a fundamental change in sensibility occurred; people took a much greater interest in the meaning and value of nature, and artists developed a new feeling for the beauty of natural scenery.⁴

In earlier periods images of the countryside had served almost exclusively as background, or as a source of adjunctive icons in ecclesiastical, mythological, or history paintings, and in portraiture. (One thinks of those tantalizingly detailed glimpses of the distant landscape we get in Renaissance portraits.) But these were subsidiary images, included chiefly for illustrative, symbolic, or allegorical purposes. In such paintings the landscape invariably represented something other than itself. The artists were not attempting to transcribe what they saw in the terrain, or to express their own feelings about it, but rather to evoke a more beautiful, divinely ordered, universal reality concealed behind the visible surface of things. To them the landscape was an embodiment of an ideal cosmos. But towards the beginning of the seventeenth century European painters, especially in Holland, began treating landscape as a subject sufficient unto itself. What requires emphasis here is that the appearance of an independent genre exclusively devoted to landscape

Foreword

coincided with the establishment of the first permanent European colonies in North America.⁵

The rising interest in natural scenery at this time was closely bound up with the fundamental transformation of Western culture. During the era of colonization, say between 1492 and 1776, European scientists and philosophers effected a radical change in prevailing ideas about the nature of nature, and about relations between mind and nature. To simplify greatly, before the scientific revolution associated with the discoveries of Galileo, Kepler, and Newton, and the new empirical theory of knowledge associated with Bacon, Locke, and Descartes, the reality hidden behind the surface of natural appearances had been conceived as a completed structure of unchanging universals. To get at the truth about nature, accordingly, it was necessary to grasp those timeless forms of being. But the scientific rationalists shifted the locus of reality away from abstract universals to observable, concrete particulars. They gave credence to the increasingly popular assumption that individuals could discover the truth by means of their own immediate sense perceptions.

This heightened trust in the capacity of individuals to perceive the essence of reality through direct observation also was bound up with the mentality of the merchant capitalists who then presided over the economic expansion of Europe. Mercantile success depended in large measure on each investor's judgment of the future profitability of competing ventures, including many overseas projects. In this period, indeed, their attention was being drawn to the immense profits that could be gained from prudent investments in North American real estate. The convergence of the merchant class's material and aesthetic motives in this period is suggested by the development of its taste for the contemplation of landscape, both in nature and in art. (In Holland and in Florence, where the new genre of landscape painting flourished, merchants were in fact the chief patrons of landscape painting). Like their contemporaries among the natural scientists and empirical philosophers, these men of business enjoyed the close, detailed observation of nature's visible face. They liked to think of the hard materiality of the earth's surface as an ultimate repository of order and beauty, meaning and value.

This change in sensibility was accompanied by several important technical innovations – changes in the how as well as the what – within

the visual arts. Artists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries devised new ways of transcribing the observable particulars in the external world. The discovery of the principles of light and perspective enabled them to convey the illusion of objects existing in a defined, recessed, habitable, unified or, in a word, real space. These technical, quasi-scientific discoveries prepared the way for the creation of less abstract and symbolical, more lifelike, pictures of the landscape.

Comparable innovations in technique, in form, also enabled English writers to convey a more localized sense of place. Between the time of Shakespeare, whose settings tended to be general and vague, and the time of Defoe, landscape description in imaginative writing took on greater specificity. Implicit in the new form, 'the novel', as it developed in the period, was the culture's enhanced respect for the significance of particular characters rather than generalized types, and for *novel*, 'once only' events in specific times and places. Defoe probably was the first English writer, as Ian Watt has observed, 'who visualized the whole of his narrative as though it occurred in an actual physical environment'.⁶ The rapidity and intensity with which interest in topography then seized the novelistic imagination becomes evident when we consider how brief an interval separates Defoe's work from the virtuoso performances of landscape art by Walter Scott and James Fenimore Cooper.

But the development of new, more realistic descriptive techniques does not mean, as might be supposed, that eighteenth-century writers and artists had abandoned the notion of landscape as a figuration of ideal nature. To be sure, they now could create more compelling mimetic images of the visible world, which is to say a more credible illusion of having transcribed in detail what they actually saw in – and felt about – specific locales. (It was in this period that landscape painters took to working out of doors, directly 'from nature'.) Yet most artists put these new 'realistic' techniques in the service of one or another idealizing project. Often their chief aim, as exemplified by the work of Claude Lorrain and Nicolas Poussin, the most influential landscapists of the age, was to celebrate the neoclassical concept of nature as the only locus, save for divinity, of harmony, order, and beauty. In the eighteenth century a number of theorists defined new, ostensibly universal categories – the Beautiful, the Sublime, the Picturesque – for classifying responses to external nature. Thematic and formal conventions derived from Virgil were widely used to convey an updated version of the ancient pastoral

Foreword

ideal: a harmonious way of life that reconciled the root conflict between art and nature by combining the best features of each. This vision of a 'middle landscape' was to be a fount of powerful icons for the new American republic, a nation whose citizens liked to think of themselves as inhabiting a terrain midway between the overcivilization of *l'ancien régime* and the savagery of the western frontier.⁷

All of the essays that follow are about the ways that English and American writers, painters, and photographers represented the American landscape. Looking mainly but not entirely at the century and a quarter following the Revolution, the essayists examine the preconceptions, ideological biases, aesthetic conventions, and discursive practices that shape accounts of the North American continent. Their common subject, in other words, is the meaning of America as it was embodied in images of landscape. Although the essayists do not subscribe to any single definition of landscape, an admittedly slippery word, they initially assume, with John R. Stilgoe, that it 'means more than scenery painting' or 'a pleasant rural vista'. According to him it means

shaped land, land modified for permanent human occupation . . . A landscape happens not by chance but by contrivance, by premeditation, by design; a forest or swamp or prairie no more constitutes a landscape than does a chain of mountains. Such land forms are only wilderness, the chaos from which landscapes are created by men intent on ordering and shaping space for their own ends.⁸

In treating wild, unmodified nature as landscape, many of the contributors to this volume part company with Stilgoe. They do not require, as he does, that a stretch of wilderness be materially developed, made into 'shaped land', in order to be considered a landscape. They recognize human shaping as a criterion for distinguishing landscape from mere land, but they accept a non-literal, non-physical or symbolic 'shaping', one accomplished by an act of mind or imagination, as satisfying that requirement. When an image of raw nature is embodied in a work of art – a literary account, a painting, a photograph – it thereby acquires the status of landscape. (Looking at a terrain through a 'Claude glass' – a small, portable, empty picture frame – was another, eighteenth-century means of shaping chaotic nature.) Landscape on this view is not the unmediated physical terrain itself; it must be, as Stilgoe contends, a socially constructed entity; but, in contradistinction with his view, the

essayists in this volume assume that an unruly wilderness satisfies that requirement – becomes a landscape – when it is represented in words, paint, or photographic images. They regard the act of representation itself, quite apart from the specific subject, or the artist's interpretation, as imposing the requisite degree of order, value, and meaning upon the seeming chaos of the wilderness.

Having adopted this broad conception of landscape, the contributors to this volume necessarily attach great importance to those influential men for whom the American terrain was primarily an economic fact. During the colonial period, political economists and philosophers often cited the vast expanse of unused North American land to illustrate the proposition that things which exist outside the economic system have no value. According to exponents of early capitalism, marketability was the key to all value. This was John Locke's claim when he made his famous assertion, in a chapter entitled 'Of Property', that 'in the beginning all the world was America'. His often misconstrued point here is not so much the general resemblance between the American wilderness and the prehistoric state of the world, it is the function of commodity exchange as a necessary precondition of all social value. The lands of America, he is saying, are destined to remain worthless until they are included in a capitalist system.

for I ask, what would a man value ten thousand or a hundred thousand acres of excellent land, ready cultivated, and well stocked too with cattle, in the middle of the inland parts of America, where he had no hopes of commerce with other parts of the world, to draw money to him by the sale of the product? It would not be worth the enclosing, and we should see him give up again to the wild common of nature whatever was more than would supply the conveniences of life to be had there for him and his family.

Thus in the beginning all the world was America . . .⁹

The predominance of this economic conception of land created many of the problems faced by artists and writers in depicting the American landscape. Some who accepted the primacy of exchange value represented the New World by mere catalogues – itemizations of potentially useful objects – as if they were adequate descriptions of place. Others attempted to reconcile the idea of land as commodity with the inherited belief, a legacy of feudalism, in the stewardship of land as the basis of community. The difference between economic and other – political, moral, aesthetic, metaphysical – meanings of land is the key to one set of

Foreword

conflicts that recurs in these essays. Another set arises, as we have seen, from the many disparities between American facts and imported pre-conceptions. Several focus on the peculiar difficulty of accommodating the observed details of the American scene – above all its seemingly prehistoric, scaleless character – to received aesthetic categories, or to the enhanced illusion of creating an exact transcription of reality made possible by the new nineteenth-century technology of representation, the camera.

The essays are divided into three sections. Section I contains discussions of several broad issues affecting the North American landscape and the equivocal patrimony of Old World aesthetics. The second and third sections develop the dialectic of place and idea, experience and pre-conception, response and convention, implicit in the first. Section II contains essays about specific aspects of Anglo-American cultural relationships, and the essays in Section III deal with the evolution of a vernacular style grounded in the particulars of American experience. If the contributors to this volume discern any large, encompassing tendency at work in the depiction of the American landscape, it is the ubiquitous aspiration for direct, original response – a response to the American terrain unmediated by inherited conventions. It is an impulse like that which inspired the innovations of Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Winslow Homer, and Paul Strand. It is an expression of that yearning, attributed by Wallace Stevens to the ‘latest freed man’, for the liberty, the self-transformative possibilities of pure being: ‘to be without a description of to be’. The prospect of that kind of freedom, like having ‘the ant of the self changed to an ox’, was held forth by the sun (how it ‘came shining into his room’) or, in other words, by the American landscape.¹⁰

Notes

- 1 ‘An Essay Concerning the True original, Extent and End of Civil Government’, in E. A. Burt, ed., *The English Philosophers From Bacon to Mill* (New York: The Modern Library, 1939), p. 422.
- 2 *Democracy in America*, ed. Phillips Bradley (New York: Vintage Books, 1945), vol. 2, p. 36.
- 3 The use of a corrupt form of the word, ‘landskip’, dates from 1598, and almost certainly owes its origin to the emerging Dutch school of landscape painting. See Henry V. S. Ogden and Margaret S. Ogden, *English Taste in*

Leo Marx

Landscape in the Seventeenth Century (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1955), pp. 5–6.

- 4 For a persuasive account of that change, see Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1959).
- 5 For more comprehensive interpretations of this history, see Enzo Carli, *The Landscape in Art* (New York: William Morrow, 1980); Kenneth Clark, *Landscape into Art* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975); Peter C. Sutton, ed., *Masters of 17th-Century Dutch Landscape Painting* (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, 1987).
- 6 *The Rise of the Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), p. 26.
- 7 For an analysis of the use of the pastoral myth and its conventions in the interpretation of American experience, see Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).
- 8 John R. Stilgoe, *Common Landscape of America, 1580–1845* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 3.
- 9 Locke, 'Essay', p. 422.
- 10 Wallace Stevens, 'The Latest Freed Man,' in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1957), pp. 204–5.

Acknowledgements

This book had its origins in plans for a series of workshops convened by the editors as part of the Biennial Conference of the European Association for American Studies in April 1986. The conference was held at the Hungarian Academy of Arts and Sciences, beside the Danube, in Budapest. It often seemed appropriate that between sessions of debate on American landscapes it was possible to emerge into a city of striking and seemingly endless vistas. The workshops' warmth of atmosphere – and perhaps their productivity – owed much to the hospitality of our Hungarian hosts. We were also pleased that the workshop speakers willingly agreed to revise papers in the light of discussion and further reflection. Together with some additional essays, they are presented here in amended form as, we hope, a coherent book. We would like to thank Andrew Brown of Cambridge University Press for his trust and encouragement. We are grateful to Leo Marx for his Foreword. We would like to offer formal thanks here to the many persons in a variety of institutions who provided illustrations and permissions to reproduce them; annotation of permissions is given in the list of illustrations. We would like to express gratitude to the universities of Aberdeen and Exeter for financial and other support. Patricia Dowse of American and Commonwealth Arts at Exeter was very helpful in sending out letters to keep the project moving. We would especially like to thank Sarah Moore, who wrestled successfully with the word processing of the whole script.

Mick Gidley and Robert Lawson-Peebles

Contents

	<i>List of illustrations</i>	<i>page</i> vii
	<i>Notes on contributors</i>	xi
	Foreword	xv
	LEO MARX	
	<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xxiii
1	Introduction	1
	MICK GIDLEY AND ROBERT LAWSON-PEEBLES	
	<i>Prospects</i>	
2	'Gilded backgrounds': reflections on the perception of space and landscape in America	13
	CLIVE BUSH	
3	The impermanent sublime: nature, photography and the Petrarchan tradition	31
	OLAF HANSEN	
4	American landscape and the figure of anticipation: paradox and recourse	51
	STEPHEN FENDER	
5	Trails of topographic notions: expeditionary photography in the American West	64
	PHILIP STOKES	
	<i>Anglo-American perspectives</i>	
6	The absent landscape of America's eighteenth century	81
	ROBERT CLARK	
7	Ecriture and landscape: British writing on post- revolutionary America	100
	CHRISTOPHER MULVEY	

Contents

8	Dickens goes west ROBERT LAWSON-PEEBLES	111
	<i>American illustrations</i>	
9	The Old World and the New in the national landscapes of John Neal FRANCESCA ORESTANO	129
10	Landscape painting and the domestic typology of post- revolutionary America GRAHAM CLARKE	146
11	Winter landscape in the early Republic: survival and senti- mentality BERNARD MERGEN	167
12	The dark view of things: the isolated figure in the American landscapes of Cole and Bryant ALLEN J. KOPPENHAVER	183
13	The figure of the Indian in photographic landscapes MICK GIDLEY	199
	<i>Index</i>	221