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LIFESCAPES

Why does landscape matter to us? We rarely articulate the often highly individual ways it can do so. Drawing on eight remarkable unpublished diaries, Jeremy Burchardt demonstrates that responses to landscape in modern Britain were powerfully affected by personal circumstances, especially those experienced in childhood and youth. Four major patterns are identified: 'Adherers' valued landscape for its continuity, 'Withdrawers' for the refuge it provides from perceived threats, 'Restorers' for its sustaining of core value systems, and 'Explorers' for its opportunities for self-discovery and development. *Lifescapes* sets out a new approach to landscape history based on comparative biography and deep contextualization, which has far-reaching implications. It foregrounds family structures and relationships and the psychological dynamics they generate. These, it is argued, were usually a more decisive presence in landscape encounters than wider cultural patterns and forces. Seen in this way, landscape can be understood as a mirror reflecting our innermost selves and the psychosocial influences shaping our development. This is a compelling and original study of the relationship between individual lives and landscapes.

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LIFESCAPES

The Experience of Landscape in Britain, 1870–1960

JEREMY BURCHARDT
University of Reading

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‘O! The one life within us and abroad’
S. T. Coleridge

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A NOTE ON THE SUBTITLE

Lifescapes began as an investigation of landscape experience in England. But personal landscapes do not map neatly onto national boundaries. Many of the most compelling landscape experiences of the eight diarists selected for study took place in Scotland or Wales. This is therefore a book about landscape experience 'in Britain' but not about 'British landscape experiences'.

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PREFACE

Landscapes, and perhaps especially rural landscapes, can affect people profoundly. Moreover, they can do so in deeply personal and often enduring ways. Yet the private meanings that landscape holds for us often go unarticulated and leave few traces in the historical record. Probably for this reason, they have hitherto received little attention from historians. The aim of *Lifescapes* is to develop a methodology that will open up this deep history of landscape and to apply it in the specific historical context of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century England. The methodology can best be described as comparative landscape biography and it is deployed here in relation to the experiences of eight contrasting individuals, in the hope of bringing a much wider history into view.

Landscapes are not just the backdrop to life: through the meanings and significance we attribute to them, and the encounters we experience in them, they can be vital to our well-being and even, as the lives reconstructed in this book demonstrate, to our emotional equilibrium and development. Our relationship with landscape is a mirror of our lives in which both short-term circumstances and long-term structural features are reflected. More particularly, aspects of ourselves – thwarted hopes, longings and needs – that do not find expression or fulfilment in our everyday lives are often projected onto and can sometimes even be partially satisfied through landscape. Hence paying close attention to the roles landscape played in people's lives in the past illuminates the human constraints and limitations imposed on them by the societies in which they lived. To study the experience of landscape is also to study the human condition and the adequacy with which different forms of society are adapted to it.

As this perhaps suggests, this book is not a conventional history. It is at once more particular and more universal in its methods and aims than most histories – more particular because it seeks to reconstruct an aspect of its subjects' lives (i.e. the significance of rural landscapes to them) in painstaking biographical detail, and more universal because it does so with a view to identifying aspects of our relationship to landscape that are not necessarily specific to the times or places under study. This sits uneasily with the traditional historiographical preference for 'splitting' rather than 'lumping' – emphasizing

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the contrasts rather than the commonalities between different historical events and circumstances. Nor, despite appearances, should this book really be classified under the heading of biography or life writing. It shares with biography a commitment to the – ultimately of course unattainable – ideal of comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the life under study and to its representation in chronological order. But whereas biography is typically descriptive, my aim is analytical. The individual lives presented here are studied with a view to what they can tell us about the wider implications of one particular facet of them – the affective significance of rural landscapes. Nor should this book be considered an example of prosopography or group biography because the individuals studied do not form part of a group. Indeed, in order to maximize the range and diversity of the study, they were on purpose selected to be as different from each other as possible, except in the centrality of rural landscapes to their lives. My aims are closer to those of analytical collective biographies such as James Hinton's humane and enlightening *Nine Wartime Lives* (2010) and *Seven Lives from Mass Observation* (2016), but my premises and methods are very different. *Nine Wartime Lives* is principally focussed on a short period of its subjects' lives (the Second World War), while *Seven Lives from Mass Observation* is a slim volume confined to brief albeit captivating overviews. The core methodological principle of *Lifescapes*, by contrast, is in-depth contextualization. Only, I maintain, by reconstructing as many aspects as possible of the life of the individual concerned can the full implications and bearings of the role of landscape in their lives be understood. Similarly, I argue that our experience of landscape is shaped as much or more by long-term factors, often operating at a lifelong scale, as it is by immediate circumstances. These change, if they do at all, only very slowly, so a long-span approach is essential. These methodological considerations, and the need to achieve a sufficiently broad basis for comparison, explain the length of the book.

In some respects the questions this book asks and the conclusions it reaches belong as much to psychology as to history or life writing. Nevertheless it is motivated by very different interests and concerns than contemporary experimental psychology, and it adopts radically different methods. While experimental psychology is admirably rigorous, the price to be paid for this is that it often stops well short of addressing the more complex aspects of human motivation and behaviour that Freudian and other psychoanalytical approaches seek to explain. Conversely, psychoanalytical theories lack empirical verification and are difficult to retrofit to the messy complexity and incompleteness of historical evidence. Psychoanalytical influences can doubtless be discerned in this book behind the scenes but I have not felt constrained (nor do I have the expertise) to impose a specific psychoanalytical framework on the evidence. Perhaps, indeed, the approach I have taken is closer methodologically to that of a novelist than to that of most historians, biographers or

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psychologists. Certainly I have sought, insofar as it lies in me, to bring a novelist's sensibility, interests, flexibility and interpretative freedom to bear on my reading of the source material. This, it seems to me, is a legitimate and indeed logical response to the widespread recognition among historians, and within the humanities more generally, of the inherent and inescapable subjectivity of historical interpretation. Although non-historical disciplines such as the natural sciences may be able to avoid this through the experimental method, even the most influential historical and sociological models such as those formulated by Marx, Weber or Foucault remain contentious and unverifiable. Where my approach differs sharply from a novelist's is that I have accepted the historian's fundamental discipline of subordination to the evidence. I have invented nothing, tried to avoid suppressing anything and have taken as the litmus test of my interpretations how fully they account for all the evidence of which I am aware.

Just as this book is distinctive and, I hope, innovative in its methodology and disciplinary orientation, so it is in its understanding of landscape. Two approaches have dominated landscape history: the material and the cultural. Each has generated a rich and diverse literature. Within landscape history, the best-known and most influential examples of the first are W. G. Hoskins' *The Making of the English Landscape* (1955) and Oliver Rackham's *The History of the Countryside* (1986). Fascinating and rewarding as the material approach to landscape history can be, however, it tells us little about the wider significance of landscape. Here the cultural approach, exemplified by works like Simon Schama's *Landscape and Memory* (1995), David Matless' *Landscape and Englishness* (1998) and Paul Readman's *Storied Ground* (2018), is more revealing. Indeed, across a broad swathe of the arts and humanities, the cultural approach to the study of landscape has become overwhelmingly dominant. It is underpinned by broader interpretative and methodological shifts within disciplines such as social and cultural history and historical geography, notably the so-called linguistic or cultural turn, which emphasizes the role of large-scale cultural formations or 'discourses' in shaping or even determining the ways of perceiving, thinking, feeling, uttering and acting available to people in any particular cultural context. The cultural approach construes our relationship to landscape in terms of larger cultural constructs such as national identity, regionalism, modernity, the rural idyll and so forth. This has yielded important insights into the shifting cultural co-ordinates of landscape and the way these relate to policy and, more doubtfully, the economy (as in Martin Wiener's 1981 study *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit*). What is less clear is how much it tells us about the actual experience of being in the landscape. The cultural approach draws mainly on texts produced by writers, artists, scholars and policymakers, and it is not at all clear that these are representative of the way less-prominent and less-privileged people experienced the countryside. How far were cultural discourses about national

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identity, modernity, planning or whatever in the minds of non-elite people when they were out and about exploring rural England? Did the value such people set on the countryside derive from their exposure to discourses of this kind? The evidence presented in this book suggests that cultural formations had some influence on the role rural landscapes played in everyday lives, especially for people with literary interests. However, even for these people, distinctive personal influences, notably childhood experiences and family, residential and employment circumstances, affected the way they related to the countryside and the significance it held for them far more deeply than discursive ones. This directly challenges, at least in relation to landscape, a generation of historiographical assumptions that culture determines experience. Rather, this book maintains, a close, long-run, in-depth biographical reading of the evidence suggests that the affective significance landscape held for people was predominantly shaped by the often highly personal circumstances and situations of their lives, especially those encountered in childhood. Moreover, it might reasonably be argued that it is primarily for this affective significance to millions of people that the countryside should matter to social historians, rather than for the more speculative consequences that have been attributed to its cultural representation.

Closer, perhaps, to the understanding of landscape advanced in this book is what has become known as the 'new nature writing'. Some of the best examples of this, such as Nan Shepherd's *The Living Mountain* (written in the 1940s, published 1977), are not in fact especially new, but it is only recently, through the work of writers like Richard Mabey, Roger Deakin, Kathleen Jamie, Robert Macfarlane and Helen Macdonald, that the new nature writing has emerged as a distinct genre. It is difficult to summarize so diverse a body of work but one feature that it has in common, and which links it closely to the perspective of this book, is that it is centrally concerned with the experience of landscape (and of rural landscapes withal). Moreover, it typically seeks to explicate this through a close, biographical focus on what happens when someone is in or moves through a particular landscape. In many respects *Lifescapes* is a historian's counterpart to the new nature writing. However, I am also seeking to extend it in different directions. As a primarily autobiographical, even confessional genre, new nature writing at its best is able to render responses to nature and the countryside with remarkable fidelity. I hope to replicate this in the setting of comparative biography, a challenging undertaking given that biographers, unlike autobiographers, do not have direct access to their subjects' inner experiences. The new nature writing is characteristically immediate in another sense too – as a record of experience, it is primarily concerned with the present or recent past rather than with more extended personal histories. Even though they prompt authorial thoughts that range far and wide through myth and prehistory, for example, the walks and voyages described in Macfarlane's *The Old Ways*

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(2012) themselves play out over a matter of days and weeks. The new nature writing rarely connects the responses it registers with such close attention over the long arc of a lifetime, nor with enduring dispositions, character traits and emotional structures. There are exceptions: works such as Mabey's *Nature Cure* (2005) and Macdonald's *H Is for Hawk* (2014) do relate encounters with nature to deep personal experience over an extended time period and show how the two can exist in a dynamic relationship with each other. Yet even these unfold primarily over a period of two or three years, admittedly with some extended retrospect, so cannot follow the ongoing and developing connections between lives and landscapes over long timescales in the ways I have tried to in *Lifescapes*. There are also significant differences in aims, method and style between the often anecdotal, reflective, literary, first-person mode of the new nature writing and the analytical, comparative, evidence-based, third-person mode in which *Lifescapes* is written. Wide as these differences are, however, they represent complementary and, it seems to me, equally valid ways of exploring a vast and, until recently, almost unmapped region of human experience.

* * *

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Lifescapes is dedicated to the memory of Edward and to Margaret Morris. Their farm in Saxelbye, Leicestershire, was my second home in childhood, where, many years ago, the seed this book grew from was sown.

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