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Introduction

It was only when I got to secondary school that I realized I wasn't supposed to like Rudyard Kipling. This was a blow. Not that I much minded leaving Kim and Mowgli behind. But *Puck of Pook's Hill* was a different story—my favorite story, in fact, ever since I had been given the book for my eighth birthday. For a small boy with his head in the past, Kipling's fantasy was potent magic. Apparently, there were some places in England where, if you were a child (in this case Dan or Una), people who had stood on the same spot centuries before would suddenly and inexplicably materialize. With Puck's help you could time-travel by standing still. On Pook's Hill, lucky Dan and Una got to chat with Viking warriors, Roman centurions, Norman knights, and then went home for tea.

I had no hill, but I did have the Thames. It was not the upstream river that the poets in my Palgrave claimed burbled betwixt mossy banks. Nor was it even the wide, olive-drab road dividing London. It was the low, gull-swept estuary, the marriage bed of salt and fresh water, stretching as far as I could see from my northern Essex bank, toward a thin black horizon on the other side. That would be Kent, the sinister enemy who always seemed to beat us in the County Cricket Championship. On most days the winds brought us a mixed draught

of aroma, olfactory messages from both the city and the sea: heavy traffic and fresh fish. And between them hung the smell of the old man himself: sharp and moldy as if it exuded from some vast subfluvial fungus growing in the primeval sludge.

Ten miles further downstream was the gloriously lurid seaside town of Southend, developed at the end of the last century as "the lungs of London." The pier was strung with colored lights and loud with the blare of band music, cracklingly amplified over the black water. The promenades were littered with flaccid, vinegar-saturated chips and you could, literally, get your teeth stuck into cylinders of Day-Glo-pink rock candy, the letters bleeding as you gnawed optimistically through the stick. Closer to home, the little port of Leigh still had shrimp boats in its harbor and cockle sheds on the dock. In St. Clements were buried its fishy fathers: not merely Richard Haddock (died 1453) but Robert Salmon (died 1641), whose epitaph claimed he was the "restorer of English navigation." Beyond the sheds, grimy sand, littered with discarded mussel shells and hard strings of black-blistered seaweed, stretched down to the gray water. When the tide went out, exposing an expanse of rusty mud, I could walk for what seemed miles from the shore, testing the depth of the ooze, paddling my feet among the scuttling crabs and the winkles, and staring intensely at the exact point where, I imagined, the river met the sea.

For it was there that my maritime Puck, perhaps an imp of Mercury, would meet me. He filled the horizon of my boyish imagination with yards of canvas and creaking timber; rope and tar and anchors and pigtailed. Broad galleys entered the river with rows of grunting oarsmen. Long boats with dragon heads at the prow and dull iron shields nailed to the side slid menacingly upstream. Galliot and caravels gently rose and fell with the estuary tides, sporting on their bowsprits beaming cherubs or turbaned corsairs with goggling eyes and dangerous whiskers. Great tea clippers, their sails billowing like sheets on our washing line, beat their way before the breeze to the London docks. In my watery daydreams the shoreline itself mysteriously dissolved its ratty pubs and rusting cranes into a somber riverbank woodland where the tops of trees emerged from an ancient, funereal fog. When I took a boat trip with my father from Gravesend to Tower Bridge, the docks at Wapping and Rotherhithe still had big cargo ships at berth rather than upmarket grillrooms and corporate headquarters. But my mind's eye saw the generations of the wharves, bristling with masts and cranes as if in a print by Hollar, the bridges top-heavy and overhung across their whole span with rickety timber houses, alive with the great ant-swarm of the imperial city.

I had not yet read the opening pages of *Heart of Darkness*, and years would pass before I discovered that Joseph Conrad had anticipated this Thames-side vision of English history bobbing on the roadstead tides. When I did eventually encounter Charlie Marlow and his somber colleagues aboard the yawl *Nel-*

lie, moored in the estuary, the "venerable stream" bathed in "the august light of abiding memories," I was as much reassured as disappointed. For it seemed that the idea of the Thames as a line of time as well as space was itself a shared tradition. Had I reached back further in the literature of river argosies, I would have discovered that Conrad's imperial stream, the road of commercial penetration that ends in disorientation, dementia, and death, was an ancient obsession. Before the Victorian steamboats pushed their way through the scummy waterweed of the Upper Nile and the Gambia, there had been Spanish, Elizabethan, and even German craft, adrift up the Orinoco basin, pulled by the tantalizing mirage of El Dorado, the golden paradise, just around the next bend.

Tragic futility, though, has a hard time lodging in the imagination of boys in short trousers. I had never seen the light over the Essex marshes as the "gauzy and radiant fabric" of Conrad's description, nor perceived the air upriver "condensed into a mournful gloom." To go upstream was, I knew, to go backward: from metropolitan din to ancient silence; westward toward the source of the waters, the beginnings of Britain in the Celtic limestone. But I would have been hard put to share Marlow's ominous vision of the ancient Thames, with proconsuls in togas shivering in the fearful damp, out at the very end of the world: "one of the dark places of the earth." I was too busy watching the ships move purposefully out to sea toward all those places colored pink on our wall map at school, where bales of kapok or sisal or cocoa beans waited on some tropical dock so that the Commonwealth (as we had been told to call it) might pretend to live up to its name. After the coronation of the young queen we were told that we were all "new Elizabethans." So it seemed right to daydream of our connections with the original version: with Drake and Frobisher at Greenwich, and with the Virgin Queen herself (looking amazingly like Dame Flora Robson) smiting her armored breast at the Tilbury encampment and rallying the troops against the Armada. Without a trace of Conradian blackness on my horizon, I wrote "A History of the Royal Navy" in twelve pages, illustrated with cigarette cards of galleons and dreadnoughts, courtesy of the Imperial Tobacco Corporation.

Though lines of imperial power have always flowed along rivers, watercourses are not the only landscape to carry the freight of history. When not paddling in the currents of time, I was gumming small green leaves to a paper tree pinned to the wall of my *cheder*, the Hebrew school. Every sixpence collected for the blue and white box of the Jewish National Fund merited another leaf. When the tree was throttled with foliage the whole box was sent off, and a sapling, we were promised, would be dug into the Galilean soil, the name of our class stapled to one of its green twigs. All over north London, paper trees burst into leaf to the sound of jingling sixpences, and the forests of Zion thickened in happy response. The trees were our proxy immigrants, the forests our implantation. And while we assumed that a pinewood was more beautiful than

a hill denuded by grazing flocks of goats and sheep, we were never exactly sure what all the trees were *for*. What we did know was that a rooted forest was the opposite landscape to a place of drifting sand, of exposed rock and red dirt blown by the winds. The diaspora was sand. So what should Israel be, if not a forest, fixed and tall? No one bothered to tell us which trees we had sponsored. But we thought cedar, Solomonic cedar: the fragrance of the timbered temple.

Every year the tempo of leaf-gumming accelerated furiously toward Tu bi-Shevat, the fifteenth of the month of Shevat: the New Year for Trees. The festival had originated in an arbitrarily established date that separated one year's tithed fruit from the next—an oddly pleasing way to celebrate the end of a tax year. In Israel, though, it had been wholly reinvented as a Zionist Arbor Day, complete with trowel-wielding children planting the botanical equivalent of themselves in cheerful, obedient rows. It was an innocent ritual. But behind it lay a long, rich, and pagan tradition that imagined forests as the primal birth-place of nations; the beginning of habitation. Paradoxically, as we shall see, this was a tradition that had prospered in the very cultures that had stigmatized the Jews as an alien growth and had periodically undertaken campaigns of murderous uprooting. But we knew even less about J. G. Frazer's *Golden Bough*, with its mythic connections between sacrifice and renewal, than we did of Conradian fatalism. Nor did it occur to us that the biblical Hebrews, like all the pastoral tribes of the ancient Near East, were certain to have contributed to the denuding of the Levantine hillsides. And even had we known, it wouldn't have mattered. All we knew was that to create a Jewish forest was to go back to the beginning of our place in the world, the nursery of the nation.

Once rooted, the irresistible cycle of vegetation, where death merely composted the process of rebirth, seemed to promise true national immortality. Even the fires that could strike the wooded hillsides (as they did south of Mount Carmel a few years ago), while superficially devastating, actually promoted the natural cycle of renewal. No wonder some of the very first trees to be planted in the pioneer settlements of coastal Palestine were imported eucalypts that not only fixed the drifting dunes but sent down deep subterranean ligno-tubers, which not only withstood fire but were actually made more robust and vigorous by the surface conflagration. Beneath the ashy crust, we knew, there would always be blessed vitality.¹

So we recited blessings over our paper tree as the sprouted descendant of the Tree of Life, guarded in the Garden of Eden, so the Scripture said, by an angel with a flaming sword. Our sixpenny-worth of arboriculture was re-creating that garden in the new Zion. And if a child's vision of nature can already be loaded with complicating memories, myths, and meanings, how much more elaborately wrought is the frame through which our adult eyes survey the landscape. For although we are accustomed to separate nature and human perception into two realms, they are, in fact, indivisible. Before it can ever be a repose for the

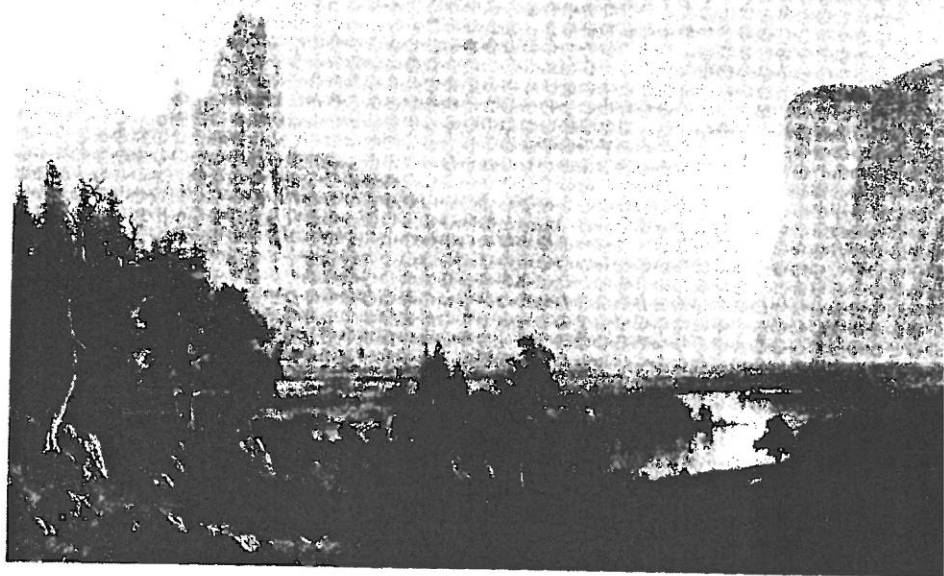
senses, landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock.

Objectively, of course, the various ecosystems that sustain life on the planet proceed independently of human agency, just as they operated before the hectic ascendancy of *Homo sapiens*. But it is also true that it is difficult to think of a single such natural system that has not, for better or worse, been substantially modified by human culture. Nor is this simply the work of the industrial centuries. It has been happening since the days of ancient Mesopotamia. It is coeval with writing, with the entirety of our social existence. And it is this irreversibly modified world, from the polar caps to the equatorial forests, that is all the nature we have.

The founding fathers of modern environmentalism, Henry David Thoreau and John Muir, promised that "in wildness is the preservation of the world." The presumption was that the wilderness was out there, somewhere, in the western heart of America, awaiting discovery, and that it would be the antidote for the poisons of industrial society. But of course the healing wilderness was as much the product of culture's craving and culture's framing as any other imagined garden. Take the first and most famous American Eden: Yosemite. Though the parking is almost as big as the park and there are bears rooting among the McDonald's cartons, we still imagine Yosemite the way Albert Bierstadt painted it or Carleton Watkins and Ansel Adams photographed it: with no trace of human presence. But of course the very act of identifying (not to mention photographing) the place presupposes our presence, and along with us all the heavy cultural backpacks that we lug with us on the trail.

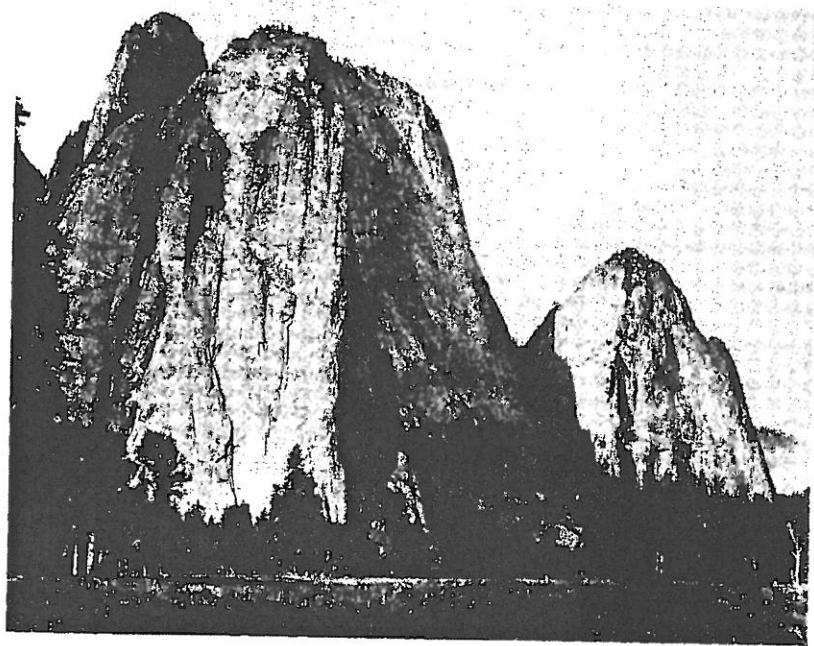
The wilderness, after all, does not locate itself, does not name itself. It was an act of Congress in 1864 that established Yosemite Valley as a place of sacred significance for the nation, during the war which marked the moment of Fall in the American Garden.² Nor could the wilderness venerate itself. It needed hallowing visitations from New England preachers like Thomas Starr King, photographers like Leander Weed, Eadwaerd Muybridge, and Carleton Watkins, painters in oil like Bierstadt and Thomas Moran, and painters in prose like John Muir to represent it as the holy park of the West; the site of a new birth; a redemption for the national agony; an American re-creation. The strangely unearthly topography of the place, with brilliant meadows carpeting the valley flush to the sheer cliff walls of Cathedral Rock, the Merced River winding through the tall grass, lent itself perfectly to this vision of a democratic terrestrial paradise. And the fact that visitors had to *descend* to the valley floor only emphasized the religious sensation of entering a walled sanctuary.

Like all gardens, Yosemite presupposed barriers against the beastly. But its protectors reversed conventions by keeping the animals in and the humans out. So both the mining companies who had first penetrated this area of the Sierra Nevada and the expelled Ahwahneechee Indians were carefully and forcibly



edited out of the idyll. It was John Muir, the prophet of wilderness, who actually characterized Yosemite as a "park valley" and celebrated its resemblance to an "artificial landscape-garden . . . with charming groves and meadows and thickets of blooming bushes." The mountains that rose above the "park" had "feet set in pine-groves and gay emerald meadows, their brows in the sky; bathed in light, bathed in floods of singing water, while snow-clouds avalanche and the winds shine and surge and wreathe about them as the years go by, as

Albert
Bierstadt,
*The Yosemite
Valley*, 1868

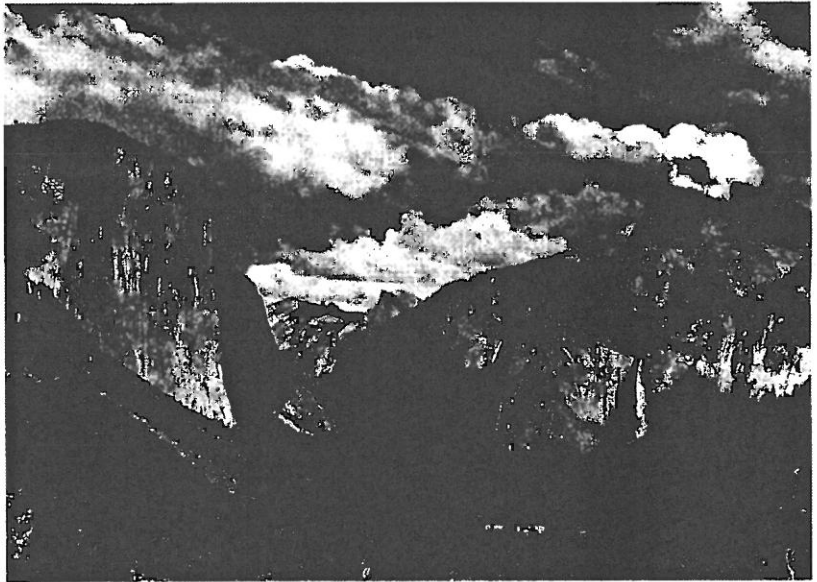


Carleton
Watkins,
*Cathedral
Rock*, 2,600
Yosemite.

if into these mountain mansions Nature had taken pains to gather her choicest treasures to draw her lovers into close and confiding communion with her."³

But of course nature does no such thing. We do. Ansel Adams, who admired and quoted Muir, and did his best to translate his reverence into spectacular nature-icons, explained to the director of the National Park Service, in 1952, that he photographed Yosemite in the way he did to sanctify "a religious idea" and to "inquire of my own soul just what the primeval scene really signifies." "In the last analysis," he wrote, "Half Dome is just a piece of rock. . . . There is some deep personal distillation of spirit and concept which moulds these earthly facts into some transcendental emotional and spiritual experience." To protect

Ansel Adams,
*Valley View
from Tunnel
Esplanade,*
Yosemite
National Park.



Yosemite's "spiritual potential," he believed, meant keeping the wilderness pure; "unfortunately, in order to keep it pure we have to occupy it."⁴

There is nothing inherently shameful about that occupation. Even the landscapes that we suppose to be most free of our culture may turn out, on closer inspection, to be its product. And it is the argument of *Landscape and Memory* that this is a cause not for guilt and sorrow but celebration. Would we rather that Yosemite, for all its overpopulation and overrepresentation, had *never* been identified, mapped, emparked? The brilliant meadow-floor which suggested to its first eulogists a pristine Eden was in fact the result of regular fire-clearances by its Ahwahneechee Indian occupants. So while we acknowledge (as we must) that the impact of humanity of the earth's ecology has not

been an unmixed blessing, neither has the long relationship between nature and culture been an unrelieved and predetermined calamity. At the very least, it seems right to acknowledge that it is our shaping perception that makes the difference between raw matter and landscape.

The word itself tells us as much. It entered the English language, along with herring and bleached linen, as a Dutch import at the end of the sixteenth century. And *landschap*, like its Germanic root, *Landschaft*, signified a unit of human occupation, indeed a jurisdiction, as much as anything that might be a pleasing object of depiction.⁵ So it was surely not accidental that in the Netherlandish flood-fields, itself the site of formidable human engineering, a community developed the idea of a *landschap*, which in the colloquial English of the time became a *landskip*. Its Italian equivalents, the pastoral idyll of brooks and



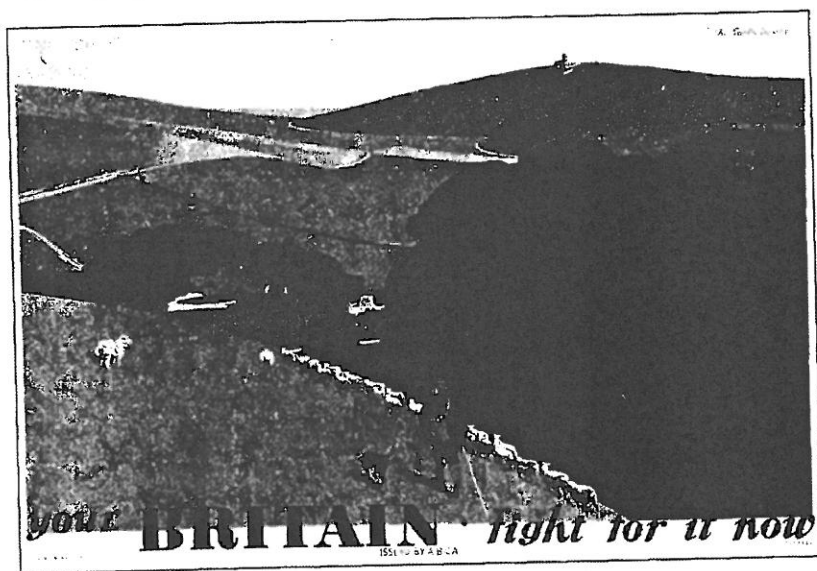
Henry
Peacham,
*Rura Mihi
et Silentium*,
from *Minerva
Britannia*,
1612.

wheat-gold hills, were known as *parerga*, and were the auxiliary settings for the familiar motifs of classical myth and sacred scripture. But in the Netherlands the human design and use of the landscape—implied by the fishermen, cattle drovers, and ordinary walkers and riders who dotted the paintings of Esaias van de Velde, for example—*was* the story, startlingly sufficient unto itself.

With the vogue for Dutch *landskips* established in England, the scholar-artist Henry Peacham included in his drawing manual, *Graphice*, the first practical advice to his compatriots on how to compose one. But lest anyone suppose that all they had to do was somehow translate the objects of their gaze into two-dimensional form, Peacham's book of emblems, *Minerva Britannia*, published the same year, set them right.⁶ Positioned beside an image of the British arca-

dia, Peacham's emblem *Rura Mihi et Silentium* made it clear that the rustic life was to be valued as a moral corrective to the ills of court and city; for the medicinal properties of its plants; for the Christian associations of herbs and flowers; and above all for its proclamation of the stupendous benevolence of the Creator. What his emblem was supposed to invoke was the quintessentially English scene: "Some shadie grove upon the *Thames* faire side/ Such as we may neere princely Richmond see."⁷ But the woodcut that the drawing master supplied as illustration looks a lot more like the poetic arcadia than the Thames valley. It is an inventory of the standard features of the humanist happy valley: rolling hills safely grazed by fleecy flocks and cooled by zephyrs moist and sweet. It supplied the prototypical image that was reproduced in countless paintings, engravings, postcards, railway train photographs, and war posters, which

Frank Newbould, World War II civilian-effort poster.



merely had to be executed in order to summon up loyalty to the temperate, blessed isle.

The framed border of Peacham's woodcut is strikingly elaborate, as such printed emblems often were. They acted as a kind of visual prompt to the attentive that the truth of the image was to be thought of as poetic rather than literal; that a whole world of associations and sentiments enclosed and gave meaning to the scene. The most extreme example of such deliberate framing was the so-called Claude-glass, recommended in the eighteenth century to both artists and tourists of "picturesque" scenery. A small, portable mirror backed with dark foil, it was named for the French painter who most perfectly harmonized classical architecture, leafy groves, and distant water. If the view in

the mirror approximated to this Claudian ideal, it was judged sufficiently "picturesque" to be appreciated or even drawn. Later variations tinted the glass with the light of a radiant dawn or a roseate sunset. But it was always the inherited tradition, reaching back to the myths of Arcadia, Pan's fertile realm populated with nymphs and satyrs, that made *landscape* out of mere geology and vegetation.

"This is how we see the world," René Magritte argued in a 1938 lecture explaining his version of *La Condition humaine* (color illus. 2) in which a painting has been superimposed over the view it depicts so that the two are continuous and indistinguishable. "We see it as being outside ourselves even though it is only a mental representation of what we experience on the inside."⁸ What lies beyond the windowpane of our apprehension, says Magritte, needs a design before we can properly discern its form, let alone derive pleasure from its perception. And it is culture, convention, and cognition that makes that design; that invests a retinal impression with the quality we experience as beauty.

It is exactly this kind of presumption that many contemporary landscapists find so offensive. So instead of having pictorial tradition dictate to nature, they have tried hard to dissolve the artistic ego within natural process.⁹ Their aim is to produce an anti-landscape where the intervention of the artist is reduced to the most minimal and transient mark on the earth. The British artists Andy Goldsworthy and David Nash, for example, have made works that invoke nature without forcing it into museum-ready shape: "found" sculptures from shoreline driftwood or naturally charred tree limbs; cairns made from beach pebbles; or balls of leaves and snow bound with thorns and twigs and sited so as to decompose or metamorphose with the natural processes of the seasons (color illus. 3). But while much of this minimalist landscape is always stirring and often very beautiful, it seldom escapes from the condition it implicitly criticizes. Quite as much as with Carleton Watkins or Ansel Adams, the camera is required to capture the natural moment. So the organizing move of the artist is merely displaced from the hand on the paintbrush to the finger on the shutter. And in that split instant of framing, the old culture-creatures re-emerge from their lair, trailing the memories of generations behind them.¹⁰

In the same chastened spirit, environmental historians have also lamented the annexation of nature by culture. While not denying the landscape may indeed be a text on which generations write their recurring obsessions, they are not about to rejoice in the fact. The arcadian idyll, for example, seems just another pretty lie told by propertied aristocracies (from slave-owning Athens to slave-owning Virginia) to disguise the ecological consequences of their greed. And they have made it a point of honor to restore a distinction between landscape and mandscape, and to see if a history could not be written that might not assume the earth and its diverse species were created for the express and exclusive pleasure of what Muir witheringly called "Lord Man."

Especially in the United States (where the interplay of men and habitat has long been at the heart of national history), the best environmental histories have brilliantly realized that ambition. Whether chronicling the ice-world of Antarctica, the fiery Australian bush, the ecological transformation of New England, or the water-wars of the American West, writers like Stephen Pyne, William Cronon, and Donald Worster have accomplished the feat of making inanimate topography into historical agents in their own right.¹¹ Restoring to the land and climate the kind of creative unpredictability conventionally reserved for human actors, these writers have created histories in which man is not the be-all and end-all of the story.

But though environmental history offers some of the most original and challenging history now being written, it inevitably tells the same dismal tale: of land taken, exploited, exhausted; of traditional cultures said to have lived in a relation of sacred reverence with the soil displaced by the reckless individualist, the capitalist aggressor. And while the mood of these histories is understandably penitential, they differ as to when the Western fall from grace took place. For some historians it was the Renaissance and the scientific revolutions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that doomed the earth to be treated by the West as a machine that would never break, however hard it was used and abused.¹² For Lynn White, Jr., it was the invention, in the seventh century A.D., of a fixed-harnessed plow that sealed the earth's fate. The "knife" of the new implement "attacked the land"; farming became ecological war. "Formerly man had been part of nature; now he was the exploiter of nature."¹³

Intensive agriculture, then, is said to have made possible all manner of modern evils. It gouged the earth to feed populations whose demands (whether for necessities or luxuries) provoked yet further technological innovations, which in turn exhausted natural resources, spinning the mad cycle of exploitation at ever more frantic revolutions, on and on through the whole history of the West.

And perhaps not even the West. Perhaps, say the most severe critics, the entire history of settled (rather than nomadic) society, from the irrigation-mad Chinese to the irrigation-mad Sumerians, is contaminated by the brutal manipulation of nature. Only the Paleolithic cave-dwellers, who left us their cave paintings as evidence of their integration with, rather than dominion over, nature, are exempted from this original sin of civilization. Once the archaic cosmology in which the whole earth was held to be sacred, and man but a single link in the long chain of creation, was broken, it was all over, give or take a few millennia. Ancient Mesopotamia, all unknowing, begat, global warming. What we need, says one such impassioned critic, Max Oelschlaeger, are new "creation myths" to repair the damage done by our recklessly mechanical abuse of nature and to restore the balance between man and the rest of the organisms with which he shares the planet.¹⁴

It is not to deny the seriousness of our ecological predicament, nor to dismiss the urgency with which it needs repair and redress, to wonder whether, in fact, a new set of myths are what the doctor should order as a cure for our ills. What about the old ones? For notwithstanding the assumption, commonly asserted in these texts, that Western culture has evolved by sloughing off its nature myths, they have, in fact, never gone away. For if, as we have seen, our entire landscape tradition is the product of shared culture, it is by the same token a tradition built from a rich deposit of myths, memories, and obsessions. The cults which we are told to seek in other native cultures—of the primitive forest, of the river of life, of the sacred mountain—are in fact alive and well and all about us if only we know where to look for them.

And that is what *Landscape and Memory* tries to be: a way of looking; of rediscovering what we already have, but which somehow eludes our recognition and our appreciation. Instead of being yet another explanation of what we have lost, it is an exploration of what we may yet find.

In offering this alternative way of looking, I am aware that more is at stake than an academic quibble. For if the entire history of landscape in the West is indeed just a mindless race toward a machine-driven universe, uncomplicated by myth, metaphor, and allegory, where measurement, not memory, is the absolute arbiter of value, where our ingenuity is our tragedy, then we are indeed trapped in the engine of our self-destruction.

At the heart of this book is the stubborn belief that this is not, in fact, the whole story. The conviction is not born from any wishful thinking about our past or our prospects. For what it is worth, I unequivocally share the dismay at the ongoing degradation of the planet, and much of the foreboding about the possibilities of its restoration to good health. The point of *Landscape and Memory* is not to contest the reality of this crisis. It is, rather, by revealing the richness, antiquity, and complexity of our landscape tradition, to show just how much we stand to lose. Instead of assuming the mutually exclusive character of Western culture and nature, I want to suggest the strength of the links that have bound them together.

That strength is often hidden beneath layers of the commonplace. So *Landscape and Memory* is constructed as an excavation below our conventional sight-level to recover the veins of myth and memory that lie beneath the surface.

The "cathedral grove," for example, is a common tourist cliché. "Words of veneration describe this land of *abs*," says one particularly breathless book on the old growth forests of the Pacific Northwest.¹⁵ But beneath the commonplace is a long, rich, and significant history of associations between the pagan primitive grove and its tree idolatry, and the distinctive forms of Gothic architecture. The evolution from Nordic tree worship through the Christian iconography of the Tree of Life and the wooden cross to images like Caspar

David Friedrich's explicit association between the evergreen fir and the architecture of resurrection (color illus. 1) may seem esoteric. But in fact it goes directly to the heart of one of our most powerful yearnings: the craving to find in nature a consolation for our mortality. It is why groves of trees, with their annual promise of spring awakening, are thought to be a fitting décor for our earthly remains. So the mystery behind this commonplace turns out to be eloquent on the deepest relationships between natural form and human design.

Whether such relationships are, in fact, habitual, at least as habitual as the urge toward domination of nature, said to be the signature of the West, I will leave the reader to judge. Jung evidently believed that the universality of nature myths testified to their psychological indispensability in dealing with interior terrors and cravings. And the anthropologist of religion Mircea Eliade assumed them to have survived, fully operational, in modern, as well as traditional, cultures.

My own view is necessarily more historical, and by that token much less confidently universal. Not all cultures embrace nature and landscape myths with equal ardor, and those that do, go through periods of greater or lesser enthusiasm. What the myths of ancient forest mean for one European national tradition may translate into something entirely different in another. In Germany, for example, the forest primeval was the site of tribal self-assertion against the Roman empire of stone and law. In England the greenwood was the place where the king disported his power in the royal hunt yet redressed the injustices of his officers.

I have tried not to let these important differences in space and time be swallowed up in the long history of landscape metaphors sketched in this book. But while allowing for these variations, it is clear that inherited landscape myths and memories share two common characteristics: their surprising endurance through the centuries and their power to shape institutions that we still live with. National identity, to take just the most obvious example, would lose much of its ferocious enchantment without the mystique of a particular landscape tradition: its topography mapped, elaborated, and enriched as a homeland.¹⁶ The poetic tradition of *la douce France*—"sweet France"—describes a geography as much as a history, the sweetness of a classically well-ordered place where rivers, cultivated fields, orchards, vineyards, and woods are all in harmonious balance with each other. The famous eulogy of the "sceptred isle," which Shakespeare puts in the mouth of the dying John of Gaunt, invokes cliff-girt insularity as patriotic identity, whereas the heroic destiny of the New World is identified as continental expansiveness in the landscape lyrics of "America the Beautiful." And landscapes can be self-consciously designed to express the virtues of a particular political or social community. The scale of the Mount Rushmore monument, as we shall see, was crucial to its sculptor's ambition to proclaim the continental magnitude of America as the bulwark of its democ-

racy. And on a much more intimate level, nineteenth-century advocates of the American suburban idyll, like Frank Jesup Scott, prescribed carpets of front-yard lawns, undivided by fences, as an expression of social solidarity and community, the imagined antidote to metropolitan alienation.

The designation of the suburban yard as a cure for the afflictions of city life marks the greensward as a remnant of an old pastoral dream, even though its goatherds and threshers have been replaced by tanks of pesticide and industrial-strength mowing machines. And it is just because ancient places are constantly being given the topdressings of modernity (the forest primeval, for example, turning into the "wilderness park") that the antiquity of the myths at their core is sometimes hard to make out. It is there, all the same. Driving at night along Interstate 84, through the relic of what was once "the brass capital of America," Waterbury, Connecticut, a creamy glow radiates from the top of a hill overlooking the freeway. A bend in the road suddenly reveals the light source as a neon cross, thirty feet tall—virtually all that remains of "Holy Land, USA," built by a local lawyer in the 1960s. Familiar as we are with religious theme parks, Holy Land seems immediately classifiable as a Catholic answer to Disneyland. But its siting as a hill pilgrimage, its devotional mission, and its conscientious if clumsy attempts to reproduce the topography of the Passion in southern New England mark it as the last *sacro monte*, the artificial Calvaries whose origins date back to the Italian Franciscans of the fifteenth century.

To see the ghostly outline of an old landscape beneath the superficial covering of the contemporary is to be made vividly aware of the endurance of core myths. As I write, *The New York Times* reports an ancient ash tree at El Escorial, near Madrid, where the Virgin makes herself known to a retired cleaning lady on the first Saturday of each month, much to the chagrin of the local socialist mayor.¹⁷ Behind the tree is of course the monastery-palace of the Most Catholic King of Spain, Philip II. But behind both are centuries of associations, cherished particularly by the Franciscans and Jesuits, of apparitions of the Virgin seated in a tree whose Eastertide renewal of foliage symbolized the Resurrection. And behind *that* tradition were even more ancient pagan myths that described old and hollowed trees as the tomb of gods slaughtered on the boughs and encased within the bark to await a new cycle of life.

Landscape and Memory has been built around such moments of recognition as this, when a place suddenly exposes its connections to an ancient and peculiar vision of the forest, the mountain, or the river. A curious excavator of traditions stumbles over something protruding above the surface of the commonplaces of contemporary life. He scratches away, discovering bits and pieces of a cultural design that seems to elude coherent reconstitution but which leads him deeper into the past. Each of the chapters that follow might be thought of as an excavation, beginning with the familiar, digging down through layers of

memories and representations toward the primary bedrock, laid down centuries or even millennia ago, and then working up again toward the light of contemporary recognition.

My own burrows through time only follow, of course, where many other conscientious moles have already dug, throwing up tracers for the historian as they push through obscurity. Many of the stories told in the book celebrate their perseverance and passion as they recount their labors. Some of these zealous guardians of landscape memory—like Julius von Brincken, Tsar Nicholas I's warden of the Polish primeval forest of Białowieża, or Claude François Denecourt, who invented the romantic hike in the woods of Fontainebleau—became so rooted in a particular landscape that they became its *genius loci*, the "spirit of the place." Others appointed themselves the custodians of an ancient tradition—like the prolific Jesuit Athanasius Kircher, who undertook to decode the hieroglyphs of Egyptian obelisks for the popes of Baroque Rome so that their transplantation could be seen as the pagan Nile baptized by Christian Rome, or Sir James Hall, who tied willow rods together in a primitive arch to prove that the pointed Gothic style had begun with the interlaced boughs of trees.

Colorful as many of these devotees of nature myths were, they were emphatically not just a motley collection of eccentrics rambling down memory lane. Each one believed that an understanding of landscape's past traditions was a source of illumination for the present and future. That conviction made them less antiquarians than historians, or even prophets and politicians. They waxed passionate about their favorite places because they believed they could redeem the hollowness of contemporary life. And I have followed them into the wild woods, upstream along the rivers of life and death, up into the high mountains, not in the spirit of a cultural camper but because so many of our modern concerns—empire, nation, freedom, enterprise, and dictatorship—have invoked topography to give their ruling ideas a natural form.

Joel Barlow, American poet, commercial agent, diplomat, and mythographer, was but one of these explorers who linked the passions of their own time to ancient obsessions of nature. He sought the origins of the Liberty Tree in the ancient Egyptian myth of Osiris's resurrection because he wanted to root the most important emblem of freedom in both the American and French revolutions in a cult of nature. That seemed to him to make the urge to liberty not just a modern notion but an ancient, irresistible instinct, a truly *natural* right.

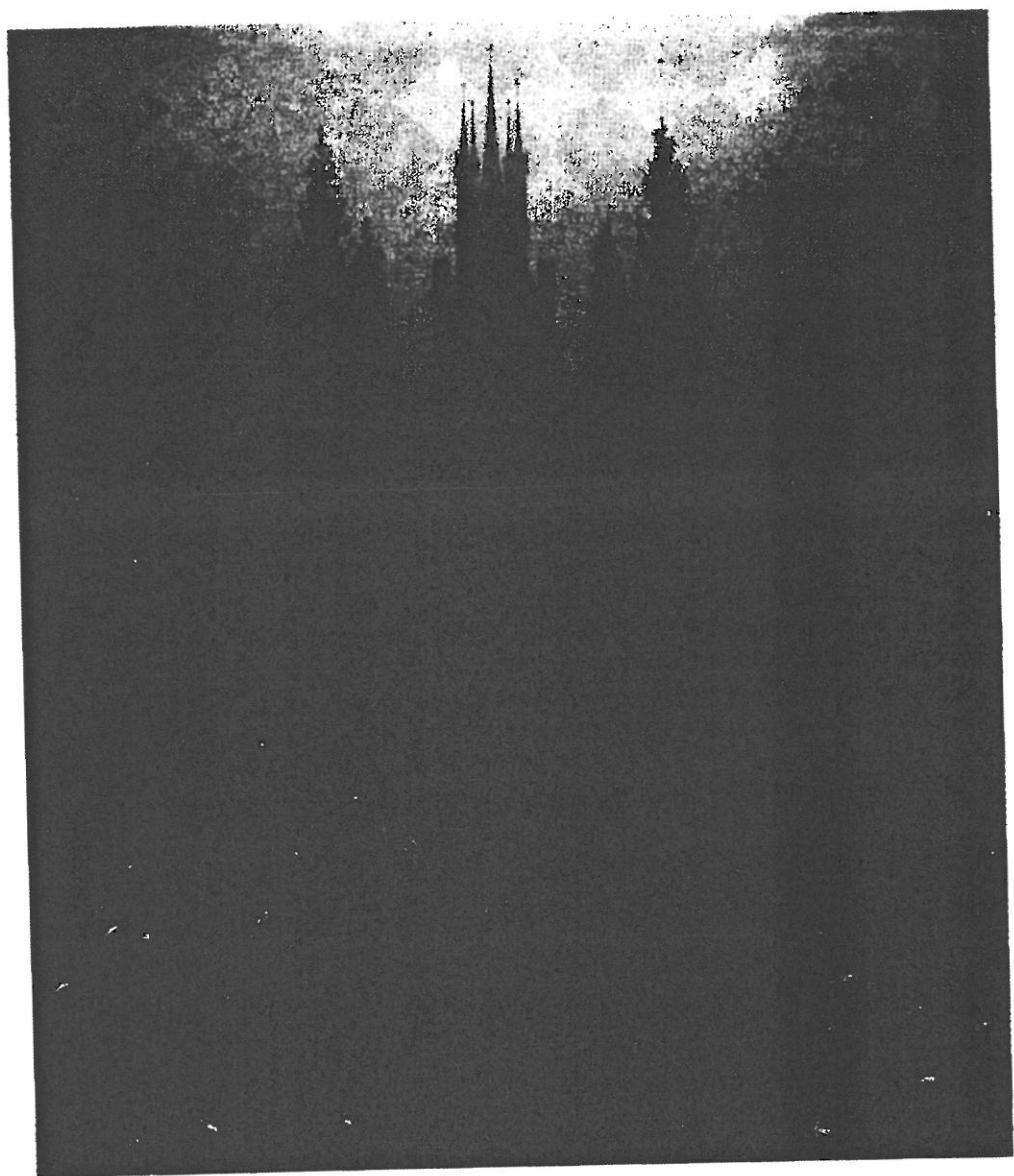
Barlow was following what, a century later, the great art historian and iconographer Aby Warburg would call the path of "social memory" (*sozialen Gedächtnisses*).¹⁸ As one might expect from a scholar trained in his tradition, Warburg was primarily concerned with the recurrence of ancient motifs and expressive body gestures in the later classical art of the Renaissance and Baroque. But he had read as deeply in anthropology and early social psychol-

ogy as in art history. So his inquiries took him well beyond the purely formal issue of the survival of particular gestures and conventions in painting and sculpture. For Warburg those were merely the indicators pointing to something profoundly surprising and even troubling about the evolution of Western society. Beneath its pretensions to have built a culture grounded in reason, he believed, lay a powerful residue of mythic unreason. Just as Clio, the Muse of history, owed her beginnings to her mother, Mnemosyne, a more instinctual and primal persona, so the reasoned culture of the West, with its graceful designs of nature, was somehow vulnerable to the dark demiurges of irrational myths of death, sacrifice, and fertility.

None of this means that when we, too, set off on the trail of "social memory" we will inevitably end up in places where, in a century of horror, we would rather not go, places that represent a reinforcement of, rather than an escape from, public tragedy. But acknowledging the ambiguous legacy of nature myths does at least require us to recognize that landscapes will not always be simple "places of delight"—scenery as sedative, topography so arranged to feast the eye. For those eyes, as we will discover, are seldom clarified of the promptings of memory. And the memories are not all of pastoral picnics.

For that matter, a striking number of those who have been the most determined investigators of nature myths, like Nietzsche and Jung, have not been among the most warmhearted enthusiasts of pluralist democracy. And even today, the most zealous friends of the earth become understandably impatient with the shuffles and scuffles, compromises and bargains of politics when the "death of nature" is said to be imminent, and the alternatives presented as a bleak choice between redemption and extinction. It is at this point, when environmental imperatives are invested with a sacred, mythic quality, which is said to demand a dedication purer and more uncompromising than the habits of humanity usually supply, that memory may help to redress the balance. For what I have tried to show in *Landscape and Memory* is that the cultural habits of humanity have always made room for the sacredness of nature. All our landscapes, from the city park to the mountain hike, are imprinted with our tenacious, inescapable obsessions. So that to take the many and several ills of the environment seriously does not, I think, require that we trade in our cultural legacy or its posterity. It asks instead that we simply see it for what it has truly been: not the repudiation, but the veneration, of nature.

Landscape and Memory is not meant as facile consolation for ecological disaster. Nor does it make any claim to solve the profound problems that still beset any democracy wanting both to repair environmental abuse and to preserve liberty. Like all histories, this is less a recipe for action than an invitation to reflection, and is meant as a contribution to self-knowledge rather than a strategy for ecological rescue. But if by suggesting that over the centuries cultural habits have formed which have done something with nature other than merely work



1. Caspar David Friedrich, *The Cross and Cathedral in the Mountains*, ca. 1812.

it to death, that help for our ills can come from within, rather than outside, our shared mental world, this book may not entirely have wasted good wood pulp.

Shelve it between optimism and pessimism—represented, as it happens, by two other kinds of wood-books. The volumes of the *xylothèque*, the “wooden library,” are the product of a time when scientific inquiry and poetical sensibility seemed effortlessly and wittily married: the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century (color illus. 4). In the German culture where modern forestry began, some enthusiast thought to go one better than the botanical volumes that merely illustrated the taxonomy of trees. Instead the books themselves were to be fabricated from their subject matter, so that the volume on *Fagus*, for example, the common European beech, would be bound in the bark of that tree. Its interior would contain samples of beech nuts and seeds; and its pages would literally be its leaves, the folios its *feuilles*. But the wooden books were not pure caprice, a nice pun on the meaning of cultivation. By paying homage to the vegetable matter from which it, and all literature, was constituted, the wooden library made a dazzling statement about the necessary union of culture and nature.

Two and a half centuries later, after the sunny confidence of the Enlightenment had been engulfed in catastrophe, after landscapes picturesque and sublime had been chewed up by war and fertilized by the bones and blood of the unnumbered dead, another German created a different kind of wooden book (color illus. 5). But on the pages of Anselm Kiefer’s book, history is written in letters of fire, and the optimism of the eighteenth century’s culture of nature is consumed in smoke. The leaves of the volume, called by the artist *Canterization of the Rural District of Buchen* (the district named for the beeches), are scorched by the conflagrations of total war, of the consummation of nature in atrocity.

We cannot help but think of fire as the element of annihilation. But both mythographers and natural historians know better: that from the pyre rises the phoenix, that through a mantle of ash can emerge a shoot of restored life. So if this is a book of memories, it is not meant as a lament at the cremation of our hope. Rather, it is a journey through spaces and places, eyes wide open, that may help us keep faith with a future on this tough, lovely old planet.