

WHAT LANDSCAPE MEANS TO ME

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In my long-distant youth, I cycled around the country lanes of my native southwest Leicestershire. For those like me who were fortunate enough to be taught medieval social and economic history, rather than the dreary lists of kings and queens, I learnt much about how the land was organised for food and fibre. I therefore had a much better understanding of ridge and furrow systems, the peculiar patterns which marked the deserted villages, as well as the enclosure of the three-field systems into much smaller fields and the arrival of hedges and field margins in our landscape. In practice, these features of the landscape were blindingly obvious to anyone prepared to glance but more than anything else it fascinated me that I could link learning in the classroom with the greater understanding of the landscape as I cycled around in my summer holidays. In my later years it has also led me to reflect a great deal on the fact that many of us “ologists” are so fascinated by the unique and distinctive that we can ignore the commonplace.

I now find it very interesting to go back to my native county and reflect on why the landscape has changed. There are fewer hedgerows, field margins and trees in the landscape, the fields are enlarged, and in places the old rig and furrow has been ploughed up. Whilst the changes are perhaps no more dramatic than those of the enclosure period, they are very widespread beyond my native county. Much of the landscape devoted to agriculture across the Member States of the European Union has changed out of all recognition by all-pervasive effects of the Union’s Common Agriculture Policy. This myopic concentration on food production is to the detriment of our landscape, it reduces its appeal to me and certainly reduces its contribution to biodiversity: all of those effects appal me. It has happened over such a short period and there have been no checks and balances to ensure some of the character of the landscape has been left. It is interesting to me that my old world of understanding the history of the landscape and my new world of grappling

with the impact of the CAP on the landscape, particularly in Scotland, come together. So the issues which intrigue me are understanding what the causes of landscape change are, thinking how I feel about them as a citizen, and deciding what I would like to do about them in my day job as an environmental bureaucrat.

My real intellectual interest in landscape however came through geography – a life-long addiction. This is greeted by my family as “oh no not another moraine” or as they probably say privately “another moraine for the old moron”. At school I got totally hooked on how the landscape was formed in terms of natural processes. I became a professional geomorphologist and later an amateur one. What intrigued me initially was how the textbook examples of glaciation manifested themselves in real landscapes when, in my late teens, I made my first visits to Scotland – Arran and Skye, and wandered the hills and dales of the Lake District.

Reality really dawned in my early twenty's when, as a field geomorphologist, I was instructed to go and make a geomorphological map of the Feugh basin in Aberdeenshire. Oh dear, I had such limited knowledge of Scottish landscapes and a lot of textbook knowledge. Basically I had to fill-up a map at 1:10,560 scale with internationally agreed symbols. Once completed I was immediately sent away to cover an even a larger area in upper Deeside of Aberdeenshire. This certainly got me into the way of looking at the landscape in detail. Unfortunately, as there was a product to be made in the form of a map I only looked at the geomorphology. I know very well from going back to these places on many occasions since that there were lots of things I really did not see which are interesting in their own right but would not fit into my international geomorphological symbols. To relieve the boredom of mapping on my own day in day out, I had more experienced colleagues accompany occasionally. Few were as insightful in my world as the outstanding Irish quaternary geologist Francis Millington Syngé. Not only did he tell me how to look at individual elements in the landscape, but he sought to connect those elements to interpret the whole story of its evolution. He also tried to teach me how to sketch these in my notepad, but I am afraid that his beautifully

constructed and very elegant sketches were far beyond my artistic prowess and patience.

In more recent times, working with a whole bunch of natural science “ologists” has opened my eyes to many other aspects of the landscape which I had never thought about before. How for instance does one look at the landscape and know where you would expect to find an eagle eyrie or understand the subtle transitions between the different types of bog or patterned ground landscapes of the Flow Country of Caithness and Sutherland? Hopefully, I opened their eyes to aspects that they had not appreciated before. So another thing I have learnt is the sheer stimulation and excitement of going into the landscape with people of different expertise.

It is pleasing that we now have new wider approaches to the understanding of landscape: the development of landscape ecology, the adoption of futures approaches within natural regions and a greater focus on understanding how landscapes work from the point of view of natural systems and processes. These are absolutely vital if we are to achieve the best results environmentally from modifications to the landscape. Assessing the character and the ability of landscapes to absorb change is also very important. But I am disappointed that many landscape experts seem very unwilling to get into the business of evaluating landscapes rather than just assessing their character. We all have to make judgements as professionals and it is beholden upon the landscape profession to make judgements and ensure that we have the landscape contribution alongside that of biodiversity and earth heritage.

Another fascination to me is the challenge of understanding a landscape which is entirely different to anything one has seen or read about before. That is what happened when I made my first trip to Iceland. Volcanoes under ice-caps frequently melting them and creating great floods, frequently erupting and spreading a deadhand dust over an otherwise productive agriculture landscape was an eye-opener. Some of the hills just looked like the slag heaps next to the old town gas works back home, but this was nature in the raw and the recent. Seeing mosses and lichens creeping over land which is a

few years, rather than many millions of years, old and giving it a different colour and texture in the variable light conditions of the country was an entirely new experience. Interestingly the Icelandic landscape is so peppered with tales from the Settlement in the 10th century, as written down in the legendary Sagas, that the human dimension is almost always to be seen; apart from those areas where literally Europe and America are going on there separate ways as the two continental plates continue to part company.

Readers must now be thinking that this guy is only interested in landscape formation and has no interest at all in landscape aesthetics or more to the point what landscape means to him beyond the academic and the intellectual. Well there is another side to "what landscape means to me". I do not have a favourite landscape as it very much depends on my own mood, on the season and the time of day, and how much time I have. There are times when I like the open and expansive landscapes of the Cairngorms plateau or of the Serengeti plains. There are equally times when I feel in more tune with enclosed and intricate landscapes of the Angus Glens, the higher areas of Fife or the magical Porsmork in Southern Iceland. I am happy with landscapes in all of the seasons: the awesome landscapes of the Scottish Highlands where winter weather conditions are so dominant, the wonderful hues of the spring greens particularly in wooded and forested landscapes as along the shores of Loch Lomond, the summer landscapes with light and shade created by billowing cumulus clouds in places like the Howe of Mearns in eastern Scotland, and the low light and shadow effects of autumn bringing out elements one has never seen before, such as the field systems of Leicestershire. Light is also important in totally changing the colour of mountain and rocks. In one moment for instance, near where I live in Edinburgh, Salisbury Crags is a dull grey volcanic rock and in another moment, in the early morning or late evening sun, it glows just like the red sandstone rocks of Petra in Jordan.

I should not get too carried away with the aesthetics because for me there are many landscapes which have been degraded and devalued. We can do something about degraded landscapes if we put our mind to it. The re-

modelling of the oil shale and coal bings of West Lothian and more particularly the spoil heaps of the old slate quarries at Ballachulish in Glencoe and Llanberis in North Wales are excellent examples. It is not that I am against artefacts in the landscape. I think, for instance, that isolated buildings can enhance the landscape providing that they have been well-designed and well-sited. However, I hate overhead pylons and power lines perhaps because I was brought up in the flat plains of southwest Leicestershire where the original super grid marched across the landscape in a very visually intrusive manner - and still does. I am beginning to change my mind on wind turbines. From the position of thinking that they should be in and around settlements on less visually intrusive sites, I have come round to think that on some prominent sites they may add a new interest in and a new dimension to the landscape and therefore define a new character. I feel this about the wind farm on the Southern Upland edge at Soutra which can be seen from Arthur's Seat in Central Edinburgh. My stopping point, however, is the possibility of the development of wind farms on every prominent hill.

So landscape means many things to me and basically I cannot live without it. In the new multi-occupational phase of my life I want to spend more time understanding it, helping other people to understand it and just simply to enjoy looking at it and being in it.

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