

F. H. A. Aalaen, Kevin Whelan, and Matthew Stout, eds., *Atlas of the Irish Rural Landscape*

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Aalaen, F. H. A., Kevin Whelan and Matthew Stout, eds. *Atlas of the Irish Rural Landscape*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997. 352 pp., illus. Cloth, \$49.95, ISBN 0-8020-4294-5.

The *Atlas of the Irish Rural Landscape* complements two other similar initiatives undertaken by the Royal Irish Academy: the more comprehensive *Atlas of Ireland* (1979) and the *Irish Historic Towns Atlas* that has been appearing as a series of fascicles since 1986. However, this most recent R.I.A. venture has a special mission: "to increase appreciation of the Irish rural landscape as a central element of national heritage, to demonstrate its relevance in education and public policies, and to inspire fresh approaches to landscape study and management." No mere exercise in rear-window romanticism, the volume's Preface emphasizes a progressive gaze: "the atlas underscores the need for more informed care of our landscape and the promotion of a modern way of life in rural areas that understands and respects landscape heritage, enriching rather than diminishing it." Further, dependence upon a "managerial élite" is rejected in favour of a community-based "informed stewardship" consisting of an enhanced awareness of rural heritage and environmental understanding (p. 7).

But two questions are begged by these objectives: why the focus on "landscape" and why the representation of the results in an "atlas"? Simply put, what is presented is a sophisticated and comprehensive view of landscape, and this is not your usual run-of-the-mill atlas!

An old — and somewhat sexist — truism has it that "history is about chaps and geography is about maps." That being the case, an atlas concerned with visualising the role of human activities and values in producing a particular geography is an effective approach to rendering the essence of a distinctive place. Moreover, this *Atlas of the Irish Rural Landscape* demonstrates how far we have come from the work of such sixteenth-century Flemish cartographers as Ortelius and Mercator, whose conveniently bound volumes of maps initiated the modern atlas. No longer mere cartographic compendiums of capes and bays and cities and states, atlases have transcended this gazetteer role to be more interpretive devices concerned with the

representation of environmental, social, economic, cultural, and political analysis.¹

Thus, the *Atlas of the Irish Rural Landscape* does present numerous maps at a variety of scales that imaginatively and colourfully display spatial distributions of the great variety of environmental and social phenomena that together constitute the past and present rural worlds. But there is more to this atlas than maps. Photographs, plans and diagrams, paintings, and tables of data are all marshalled to empower the visual display and analysis of Ireland's landscape. And these are accompanied by excellent scholarly texts produced by twenty-one contributors from such diverse, yet complementary, fields as geography, environmental science, archaeology, palaeobotany, history, architecture, and landscape ecology. I am sure Ortelius and Mercator would be impressed by the way their initial exercise in information management has been turned into such a powerful analytical device.

As for the landscape-focus, the rationale is best expressed in the words of the famous French geographer, Vidal de la Blache: for him, landscapes were "medals struck in the image of their people" (p. 30). Thus, they are at once a composite artefact consisting of an amalgam of inherited relics of human activities, a visual narrative of a society's development through time, and also an essential agency in people's identification with a particular place. Indeed, the point is made that perhaps Ireland constitutes "an ideal island laboratory for the study of landscape history" because of its varied ecology, long history of human occupation, well preserved archaeological record, and the persistence of traditional lifestyles (p. 19).

These themes are all well demonstrated in each of the volume's four principal sections. The first, "The Making of the Irish Landscape," consists of three chapters that effect an evolutionary interpretation from a "deep time perspective" from prehistory, through the "plantations," to the present. The second section adopts a more analytical posture with eight chapters devoted to such "Components of the Irish Landscape" as bogs,² forests, fields, buildings, settlements, demesnes, communications, and mining, power, and water. The problem of rural continuity in the face of post-industrial

pressures in a centralizing Europe are addressed in the third section, "The Challenge of Change." Finally, the volume closes with a collection of six "Regional Case Studies" that demonstrate the academic analysis and policy concerns that are central to the volume.

What emerges through all of this is a forward-looking concern for landscapes as "important cultural, ecological and economic assets" with a shift away from the past practices of protecting exceptional sites to the advocacy of the better management of all landscapes. The well-recognized iconic role of landscapes in nurturing national identity and cultural continuity has received much attention.³ But what is being argued here is the recognition of the pragmatic concern for social well-being that is at the heart of recent rural development policies. For the

Council of Europe, rural landscapes are vital for fundamental social and psychological needs, as a source for spiritual and artistic inspiration, and a repository of wisdom of past generations' experience of living in particular places.⁴ No mere exercise in romantic nostalgia or retro-chic, therefore, F. H. A. Aalen concludes that landscapes, "provide a font of ideas on how we can best use our land, consistent with the wider search for ecological sustainability and socio-economic well-being" (p. 30). Clearly, these comments are of relevance to societies other than Ireland, and the assumptions, methods, and conclusions reached in *Atlas of the Irish Rural Landscape* constitute an important contribution to the understanding of both traditional places and their role in an increasingly complex world.

NOTES

1. The impressive three-volume edition of the *Historical Atlas of Canada* is the most recent example of this genre. See volume 1, R. C. Harris, ed., *From the Beginning to 1800* (Toronto: 1987); volume 2, R. L. Gentilcore et al., eds. *The Land Transformed* (Toronto: 1993); and volume 3, D. Kerr et al., eds., *Addressing the Twentieth Century* (Toronto: 1990).
2. For those of an etymological bent, the observation that the Irish language has 130 words "specific to bogland" (p. 28) reminds us of a similar linguistic point regarding the Inuit and their linguistic engagement with snow and ice!
3. Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels, *The Iconography of Landscape: Essays on the Symbolic Representation, Design and Use of Past Environments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Stephen Daniels, *Fields of Vision: Landscape Imagery and National Identity in England and the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1995).
4. ECOVAST, *A Strategy for Rural Europe* (Brussels: 1995); Council for the Protection of Rural England, *Local Influence* (London: 1955); Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy, *Grounds for Choices: Four Perspectives for the Rural Areas of the EC* (The Hague: 1992).

Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire : The Conception of Photography*

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Batchen, Geoffrey. *Burning with Desire : The Conception of Photography*. Cambridge, Mass. : MIT Press, 1997, 273 p. 35 \$US, ISBN 0-262-02427-6.

Il ne faut pas s'y méprendre, *Burning with Desire* n'est pas le titre du dernier album du bluesman John Lee Hooker, mais plutôt un livre sérieux (parfois austère) qui interroge l'origine et l'essence de la photographie. Son titre est d'ailleurs inspiré d'une lettre que Louis Daguerre, co-inventeur de la photographie, adressait en 1826 à Nicéphore Niépce et dans

laquelle il affirmait « brûler de désir » de voir aboutir les expériences de ce dernier sur la façon de fixer mécaniquement les images de la nature. Rédigé par Geoffrey Batchen, professeur associé d'histoire de l'art à l'Université de New Mexico, *Burning with Desire* est le fruit d'une recherche entreprise dans le cadre d'une thèse de doctorat à la fin des années 1980.

Qu'en est-il au juste de cette étude ? D'emblée, l'auteur nous précise que l'objectif de son essai est ni plus ni moins de réécrire l'histoire de l'origine de la photographie et, de là, tenter de retracer l'identité première de ce mode