

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/3

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Landscape and Littleton

A few years ago the ecologist E.O. Wilson developed a theory he called biophilia. His idea was that human beings are inherently drawn to nature and that furthermore, they appreciate above all a landscape that features a view over water, a cleared stretch of open land dotted with trees, and a forest or hills in the distance. He points out that throughout history, from the earliest palaces and villas to contemporary corporate structures, designers will create environments with these features, even if they have to remake the original terrain to do so.

In fact, landscapes of this sort are increasingly rare. Some of the finest natural vistas, which once inspired artists have been spoiled by commercial development. With this in mind, over the past few years, I have been traveling around seeking out areas that exhibit all the qualities that the painters of landscape have used as models.

Long views of this sort can still be found even in sections of modernizing Europe. You find them in the Roman Campagne, where Salvator Rosa, who was among the first landscape painters worked, along with later artists such as J.M.W. Turner and Thomas Cole. You find them in southern France, especially around Provence, which inspired the French Impressionist painters. They still exist in sections of Holland, where the Dutch landscape painters worked in the 17th century. And they can also be found in England, in the Fens, for example, the region favored by the landscape painter, John Constable.

You also can still find good views throughout North America, where painters were the first to recognize the elements of the sublime in wilderness sites and subsequently popularize them. The first of these wild vistas, much despoiled now or at least reduced, were the views over the Hudson River to the Catskill Mountains, painted by Thomas Cole in the mid 1800s. Cole was joined by other artists, such as Frederick Church and Asher B. Durand who were grouped together to create what is known as the Hudson River School. Some of the artists in this same group moved west later in the 19th century and began to portray views of wilderness, the Rockies in particular. In fact it has been theorized that it was the work of these landscape painters that softened the generally blind, commercial, winner take all American public for an appreciation of wilderness. The end result was the creation of the National Park System, the first such preservation project in the world.



Long lake, Littleton Massachusetts

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Some of the best landscapes can be found on a smaller scale here in New England, the view of the great Oxbow of the Connecticut River, for example, which was painted by Thomas Cole in 1830. Coastal New England also has some good views, such as the Newburyport marshes, which were painted over and over again by the Luminist artist Martin Johnson Heade. On an even smaller scale, you can find inviting views around Old Lyme, Connecticut, an area characterized by small fields, low hills patterned with laurels, the Connecticut River to the west, and salt marshes along the Long Island Sound coast to the south. This was the region favored by a small group of early twentieth century American Impressionists known as the Lyme School.

Ironically, considering the density of its population, New England has hundreds of lesser-known vistas, such as the view across Lake Champlain from western Vermont to the often clouded Adirondacks, or the small farms and villages of the Hill Towns in central Massachusetts.

After years of poking around searching for places of this sort, I found another one of these scenic landscapes not half a mile from my house in Littleton. Coming into town from the east, along the Great Road, you pass through the so-called Gateway to the town, which offers a fine rural idyll of hayfields and pumpkin fields, with low hills to the north and south. Approaching the town center from the west, once you clear a small, unappealing strip mall, you break out into the rolling fields of the area known traditionally as Scratch Flat. The land here stretches across the cultivated fields of two working farms and sweeps up to a forested ridge on the east, a view that might have been a subject for someone like Camille Pissarro, who favored rural aspects and country scenes.

The other good view can be found on the town beach at Long Lake, especially at sunset. This small body of water is much appreciated for its recreational opportunities, swimming and boating and the like, and is made all the better by town regulations passed back in the 1950s, which discourage the use of high powered motor boats. But the other feature is the view across the lake to the forested banks and the low glacial ridges. Unlike most of the small lakes and ponds all across New England, the shores of Long Lake are generally unhoued and wild. Three quarters of the banks are now protected from development, either by the town, or by the New England Forestry Foundation, which owns property on the western banks. The small town beach lies on the eastern shore, and the few



Thomas Cole: The Oxbow

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houses that dot the northern shore actually add to the view by offering a few understated focal points.

I daresay any of the landscape painters of the past would appreciate the vistas here. John Constable would love the roiling cloudscape that sometimes churns up over the green hills beyond the lake in late afternoon. The Hudson River School painter Jasper Cropsey would appreciate the fiery colors of the trees on the western banks in autumn. Any of the water-loving French Impressionists, including Monet or Renoir, would love the stillness of the lake on summer evenings, and would also no doubt appreciate the colorful little moth-like sails of the boats that tack here and there on sunny days, not to mention the coves of florid water lilies on the southern banks.

The fact is, if you look around with a sharpened eye for such things, you can find the elemental and even mythic landscapes that E.O Wilson and art historians have written about right here at home in the town in which I live --- you don't have to travel the world to find such views.

The question is, how many other people who live here, or in any other forgotten little corners of New England small towns, actually see landscape? There are those who look out over fields and forests and see only commercial possibilities. That is currently an issue that is emerging in Littleton; what will be the future of this unrecognized, yet worldly landscape?

The lake has been saved. No further development can take place and despoil the wild views of the western shores. Scratch Flat, at least for the time being, is safe too. The working farms that characterize the area are enjoying the benefits of the increased appreciation for locally-grown foods, and the owners are third and fourth generation farmers, not the type that give up and flee to the bright lights of distant cities. It is the Gateway to Littleton that is now endangered. Proposals are afoot in the town to develop the area.

A few years ago, I went to a planning meeting that was working on the three districts that planners have created to determine the future land use patterns in the town. One of those districts was the eastern approaches characterized now by agricultural lands known as the Gateway, an area given the decidedly prosaic name, "Area C". The planners who were working on the plots held a plebiscite, asking the public to vote on what they thought should be done with each district. I was watching carefully how the people of the town would vote in this quintessential, democratic means of deciding what to do with land, and the vote to keep Area C in agriculture was overwhelmingly favorable, above 86 percent, as I recall.

So in the end, if town officials respond to the desires of the people, as they should, the Gateway to Littleton is safe, or at least should be under a democratic system.

Henry Thoreau wrote, with only a hint of irony, that he had traveled much in his life --- in Concord. With a little luck and help from the various town boards, if these viewscapes are saved, I might be able to say the same.