The Practice of Landscape History

Landscape study is uniquely appealing. It has its obvious and much-explored aesthetic dimension, but it also offers intellectual challenges of the most testing kind to engage the problem-solving skills of the landscape historian. Although there are various different approaches to the study of landscape, whether landscape is approached from an aesthetic, cultural, psychological or political perspective, it seems hard to justify any approach which does not require of its followers a basic understanding of landscape origins and formation. Just as art historians engage in studies in depth of artists, their personalities and formative influences as well as the topographical, social, economic and political environments of their existences, so it seems reasonable to presume that all serious students of landscape should have a basic understanding of the physical and cultural processes of landscape creation. Because of the immense inequalities between landscape research accomplished in different parts of the world, in this chapter most examples are derived from the UK, which contains the most intensely researched countrysides, while North American material is also introduced, particularly for the purposes of comparison and contrast.

Aesthetically, landscapes may be regarded as amounting to more than the sum of their components, but each landscape that one experiences is a totality composed of an assemblage of constituents whose origins and development can be researched. Equally, it can be argued, every landscape is the unique product of the complex and singular interactions between its various distinctive components. In a European rural landscape or countryside one might expect to find facets or elements such as fields, woods, settlements, routeways,
churches, field walls and hedgerows, and perhaps strongholds and recreational spaces. Each of these facets might be studied as a subject in its own right or, alternatively, each could be regarded in terms of its relationship and contribution to the overall scene. Landscape history embraces both possibilities.

**Approaches to Landscape Study**

To some extent, landscape might be regarded as being composed of *surfaces* or *spaces* which are defined, linked or fragmented by *networks*. This would describe the patterns of a fieldscape in which the field-spaces were bordered by hedgerows and criss-crossed by lanes and trackways quite well, while farmsteads and churches might be incorporated as *nodes*, though facets like villages – regarded as nodes but with both surface and node characteristics – would be less easy to integrate in such an excessively reductionist approach. It is more acceptable to suggest that most rural landscapes will be found to embody the following elements.

1. Land which has sustained the human occupants for many generations, and which bears the imprints, some prominent and some masked, of centuries of human exploitation, development and redevelopment.

2. Boundaries which define the territorial extent of individual and collective ownerships, forming network patterns which variously both delimit the divisions of property and provide visible statements of a (biologically) territorial nature. These boundaries will also include functional rather than territorial boundaries, like the divisions between individual fields on a single farm. Boundaries will include those between adjacent properties and others which delimit the extents of particular jurisdictions (such as the limits of sanctuary offered by a medieval church or the bounds of an American county). Also evident in the landscape may be fossilised political boundaries marking, say, the life-sustaining territory claimed by a prehistoric community, the extent of a feudal jurisdiction or a former international divide. Prominent in some landscapes are current international or intercultural divides.

3. Monuments and constructions created by humans in association with their economic, political, social and spiritual lives. These would include castles, churches and market-places, which can be