The Discovery of Landscape

‘Landskip’, observed an English connoisseur of the visual arts in 1606, ‘is a Dutch word, and it is as much as we should say in English landship, or expressing of the land by hills, woods, castles, seas, valleys, ruins, hanging rocks, cities, towns etc. as far as may be showed within our horizon’ (Henry Peacham, *The Art of Drawing*, p. 28). This statement drew attention to a new artistic concept in England. Landscape painting was virtually non-existent at this time; while visual representations of the land exist from earlier periods, they tend to be peripheral to the main purpose of a picture, as evident in certain portraits which include a rural background. Similarly, writers devoted surprisingly little attention to the aesthetic representation of their native land, often eschewing attention to local detail in favour of generic pastoral environments, informed by classical and continental sources. Over the following decades, however, painters and poets developed increasingly coherent approaches to the representation of landscape. This movement was influenced not only by continental art, but also by political and cultural forces within England itself. From the reign of Elizabeth there was a fresh interest in the country, especially among the landed elite. In particular, the development of cartography informed new understandings of the land, whether as an entire nation (as in Christopher Saxton’s 1579 *Atlas*) or as the property of individual landowners (as in the vogue for estate maps). Increasingly thereafter the land became an object not only for empirical investigation, but also for aesthetic representation. By the eighteenth century, those who looked for the pleasures of landscape were no longer confined to the social elite, and while they might include aristocrats such as Celia Fiennes, both men and women of the middling sort began to claim landscape as their own.

The present chapter is concerned with this literary and cultural movement. It suggests that the mature landscape poetry of the mid-seventeenth century is the product of various converging influences apparent from the reign of Elizabeth, and it traces into the eighteenth century the increasing popularity of a language of landscape which came to be known
as the picturesque. The selection of material begins with two works of Elizabethan pastoral literature, which combine classical and continental literary conventions for the treatment of rural life with idealized representations of an identifiably native environment, then traces an interest in landscape through works of chorography and topographical poetry. In the middle decades of the seventeenth century, which is represented here in the work of William Strode, Anne Kemp and (at greatest length) Sir John Denham, landscape poetry adopted more regularized forms, influenced not only by the visual arts but also by political and philosophical movements. A powerful ethos of rural retirement infuses much of the rural poetry of this period, particularly that written by royalists during the turbulent decades of the 1640s and 1650s, when traditional structures of society appeared to be under threat. (Hence there are many points of connection between the texts in this section and those in Chapters 3 and 4 below.)

When such writers turned to the landscape, therefore, there was inevitably more at stake than aesthetics. Indeed the texts in this section evidence various ways in which representations of the natural environment are infused with ideology, particularly as dominant forces within society seek to legitimize and glorify their positions. In the reign of Elizabeth, Edmund Spenser was drawn to celebrate the beauties of rural England within the context of a panegyric on its queen. The wondrous monarch and her beautiful land are, in a sense, imaginatively fused. Subsequent writers looked increasingly to local scenes, often reflecting in the process on specific owners of the land. As Richard Carew’s description of a Cornish estate amply demonstrates, the appreciation of landscape was effectively reserved for the propertied through much of the seventeenth century. However, the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were remarkable for a huge increase in domestic tourism. As Britain’s infrastructure of roads developed, the cost of travel dropped and rather than being the preserve of the wealthy, travelling emerged as a leisure activity for a much wider section of polite society and was catered for by an increasing number of guidebooks and manuals such as William Gilpin’s hugely popular series of Observations. Though less frequently, women travelled and wrote of their travels, and as Miss J—M—’s letter suggests, like men, women were forced to place themselves, their class, and their gender in relation to the cultural assumptions of their readers. If such travellers did not own the rural landscapes they viewed, in recognizing land as landscape – whether visually or verbally – they nevertheless claimed a form of aesthetic ownership of the scene before them. In this sense the picturesque at once denied the ownership of others (strikingly in its rejection of gardens and ‘made’ scenery) while asserting an aesthetic possession all its own, even if that possession took the fleeting form of a sketch, a view or a scene described.