Fast Influencings

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Review of Landscape and Memory. Simon Schama. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995. 578 pp. $40.00 ISBN 0-679-40255-1

However rich your sense of literary landscapes—the rolling park Elizabeth Bennett gets muddy crossing or the forest that darkens Young Goodman Brown's life or the mountain that Wharton's Charity Royall must climb to find her mother or the rivers that Langston Hughes conjures—Simon Schama's new multidisciplinary study Landscape and Memory will deepen it grandly. A humanities professor at Columbia, Schama explores what forests, waters, and mountains have meant to western culture (there is also a short account of Chinese mountain art). While Schama focuses on myth and culture, he acknowledges at the start that his study of nature exists in a current cultural setting aswarm with environmental issues. "At the heart of this book is the stubborn belief that this [the potential mindless race toward a machine-driven universe] is not, in fact, the whole story . . . Instead of assuming the mutually exclusive character of Western culture and nature, I want to suggest the strength of links that have bound them together" (14).

And links abound in this lavishly illustrated text, framed by the same quotation from Thoreau:

> It is vain to dream of a wildness distant from ourselves. There is none such. It is the bog in our brains and bowels, the primitive vigor of Nature in us . . . (578)

Through hundreds of references to artists, traveloguists, rulers, poets, historians, and entrepreneurs—some well known, some quirkily obscure—Schama examines landscapes that have defined national identities (the Bialowieza woods in Poland), literary/aesthetic movements (the Romantics' obsession with the Alps), and transcultural religious beliefs (the similarities in water rituals in Christian and pagan systems, from the Nile to the Thames). In each the symbiosis between natural "fact" and mythic "construction" reinforces what teachers of literature have always assumed, how natural entities, such as the Mississippi River in Huckleberry Finn or the tree in "The White Heron," for example, are both good characters and symbols. Schama, too, like the good teacher in a discussion, frets "whether it is possible to take myth seriously on its own terms, and to respect its coherence and complexity, without becoming morally blinded by its poetic power" (134). He judges individuals so "blinded" (is any of us exempt?) with bemusement (the London dockman become impressario, John Taylor), admiration (the revolutionary artist J. M. W. Turner or the gifted fountain sculptor Bernini), or disgust (the fascist-fascinated Gutzon Borglum of Mount Rushmore fame). In addition to this range of judgements personalizing what is essentially a "fat history book," Schama includes vignettes from his own history—visiting the Polish woods where his Jewish ancestors brokered timber sales or recalling his immigrant father's love of the Thames whitebait feasts or his daughters' fears of the dragon-like experience of the redwoods north of Mendocino. His experiences of landscape reflect ours in many ways.

Even though explicit literary-landscape connections familiar to most English teachers are few (Schama does discuss Byron and Shelley in the Alps, the Transcendentalists, the Brothers Grimm, among others), Schama's book nevertheless provides a loamy base for transplanting our own favorite imaginary landscapes. He makes us see the power of the mythic scape that informs all people's encounters with nature. When Schama chronicles the Nazis' desperate hunt for a medieval copy of Tacitus' Germania: or, On the Origin and Situation of the Germans (A. D. 98), he reveals a chilling example of nature myth's power to seduce and to unhinge. Borglum's monomania about mountain symbolism resembles Goring's about the magic woods of Bialoweiza. (The section on Borglum includes the story of Rose Powell, a 1930's ur-feminist who labored tirelessly to have Susan B. Anthony's head included on Mount Rushmore.) On a cheerier note, Schama explains fully the greenwood myths attaching England's forests that produced both the real Magna Carta and the fictional Robin Hood.

Venturing beyond the educational or literary text is salubrious for English teachers; in Simon Schama we find a bracing blend of crisp prose intellectual relish, and enthralling esoteria to delight a long journey's reading. After his detailed account of the importance of English hard woods, notably the oak, for the spiritual and naval survival of British folk, I am much more appreciative of my children's childhood books The Oak Tree and The Giving Tree or the inheritance problems in Sense and Sensibility. On a more practical level, Schama's use of art will inspire me to incorporate more pictorial myth into my literature assignments. (For example, I want to explore images of the middle passage or the Ohio river to enhance my students' encounter with Beloved.) Between Schama's book and last year's study by Professor David Nye, American Technological Sublime, teachers can much more fully understand the sets, natural or manmade, which affect authors and their characters.

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