Building Nations, Transforming Landscape

CATHERINE BRICE

David Peters Corbett, Ysanne Holt and Fiona Russell, eds., *The Geographies of Englishness: Landscape and the National Past 1880–1940* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 400 pp., $65.00, ISBN 0300094884.

Christopher David Ely, *This Meager Nature. Landscape and National Identity in Imperial Russia* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2004), 289 pp., $42.00, ISBN 0875803032.

Vera Kreilkamp, ed., *Eire/Land* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003), 300 pp., $45.00, ISBN 1892850052.

Thomas M. Lekan, *Imagining the Nation in Nature: Landscape Preservation and German Identity, 1885–1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 334pp., £35.95, ISBN 0674010701.

François Walter, *Les figures paysagères de la nation. Territoire et paysage en Europe (16e–20e siècle)* (Paris: Editions de l'EHESS, 2004), 524 pp., €47.00, ISBN 2713218195.

Books with titles including the words 'nature', 'environment', 'landscape' and/or 'nation' have proliferated recently, witnessing to a general enthusiasm for the topic. As often, however, the enthusiasm breaks down into a variety of problems and approaches which need to be analysed in more detail. The works to be discussed in this article belong to three different categories, of which the first, including Ely's *This Meager Nature*, Corbett, Holt and Russell's *The Geographies of Englishness* and Kreilkamp's *Eire/Land*, focuses on the construction of landscape identities basically through art – both painting and literature. Lekan's *Imagining the Nation in Nature* is a study of German environmental policies from the end of the nineteenth century up to the collapse of the Nazi regime, while Walter's *Les figures paysagères de la nation* looks at the way in which landscape came to be an expression of nationhood in Europe from the sixteenth to the twentieth century.

Most of these works are part of the recent upsurge in research on nation-building in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. More precisely, they relate to modernist or constructivist theories of nationhood, which see nations and nationalism

Faculty of Humanities, Université de Paris XII-Val-de-Marne, 61 av. du Général de Gaulle, 94010 Creteil, France; catherine.brice@free.fr.

Contemporary European History, **16**, 1 (2007), pp. 109–119 © 2007 Cambridge University Press
doi:10.1017/S0960777306003651 Printed in the United Kingdom

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777306003651 Published online by Cambridge University Press

as phenomena that arose subsequent to the French Revolution, linked to aspects of modernity such as capitalism, industrialisation, the birth of the bureaucratic state, urbanisation, secularisation and so on. Nations and nationalism were, in fact, inventions. Our authors argue, however, that the factors governing the creation of nationhood may be very diverse: economic, political, social, cultural or a combination thereof. In contrast to this modernist approach, 'ethno-symbolists' such as Anthony Smith stress continuity, the persistence of myths, symbols and values from the past which still strengthen and give meaning to the modern nation. The works we are dealing with here all assume that nationhood is an invention, a construct; their main interest is the cultural factors in that construct, most particularly those of landscape and territory.

In 1989 Orvar Löfgren published a seminal article entitled 'The Nationalization of Culture', proposing landscape as one element in the blueprint for the construction of national identity in the nineteenth century.[1] This insight was not immediately taken up, insofar as viewing nation-building through the optic of landscape implied a twofold culturalist diffraction, since it meant basing the nation – a cultural construct – on landscape, something exceedingly complex in itself. Landscape is complex because it is to a large extent fabricated by the person seeing it, as Serge Briffaut has noted: 'if we speak of "landscape" without evoking the spectator, who draws on his own sensibility and, more broadly, on his whole culture in order to objectify that landscape and endow it with significance, the very notion of landscape loses its specificity' (quoted in Walter, p. 301). This twofold diffraction is a difficult concept to manage and none of the works being reviewed here gives us more than a partial analysis of it.

Walter's book is by far the widest-ranging, encompassing four centuries and several European countries. We have become accustomed to the uncritical belief that a country can be identified with a particular form of landscape, an identification reinforced by mass communication and tourism. It is this belief that Walter sets out to demolish. His book is dense and exciting, but, it must be admitted, difficult to read. The four-century timescale, the multiple approaches, the superabundance of references to different countries not infrequently obscure the argument. The first part, substantial in itself, focuses on the idea of territory and the perception of differences; the second studies the links between landscape and identity, and is of more interest to us here because it engages with the idea of nation-building, the common thread that runs through all the works being reviewed. Walter insists that to identify a country – for simplicity's sake let us say a nation, although it would be more accurate to say 'monarchy', 'state', 'principality' or 'people', as and when appropriate – with a landscape was neither a natural nor an immediate step to take. He suggests that we have in fact moved away from what Foucault would call a discursive formation, the 'age of the territory' as one might say, dominated by an analogical mode of thought that goes right back to antiquity, and which links places with human characteristics by virtue of stereo- or ethno-types. Ever since Genesis landscapes have been defined according to the characteristics of the races that inhabit them; and classical and medieval authors

1 O. Löfgren, 'The Nationalization of Culture', *Ethnologia Europea*, 19, 1 (1989), 5–24.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777306003651 Published online by Cambridge University Press

regularly associated racial characteristics with the soils and climate of their homelands. A sixteenth-century Spanish doctor in the tradition of Hippocrates and Galen, Juan Harte (1530–92), wrote: 'The character of the mind depends on the temperament of the body in which it dwells; according to the heat, cold, humidity or dryness of the places men inhabit, and the air they breathe, some are foolish and others wise; some brave and others cowards; some cruel and others merciful.' Such differences, he continues, can also be detected within a single country, such as his own Spain, where he distinguishes between northerners, 'who are all slow of wit', and the inhabitants of the central regions, 'between the torrid and burning zone and the north, who are all wise and prudent' (Walter, pp. 38–9). This is a fine example of the analogical thinking described by Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, the kind of thinking which can describe the English metaphorically as suffering from excessive humidity of the brain, which makes them pale-faced and yellow-skinned! And by extension, such physical characteristics can be coupled with moral virtues and character traits.

Even in the early eighteenth century we find a number of descriptions of places in association with their inhabitants. Scotland, for example, being barren and wild, is inhabited by an intractable and cunning race whom Defoe equates with the cannibals and savages to be found in distant lands; the Scots are superior to such only by reason of their Christianity. In 1709 Paul Berckenmeyer published a work called *Curieuser Antiquarius* (of which several editions appeared up to 1729), which classifies nations according to a taxonomy that is indeed curious. First he names their favourite musical instrument: for Italy the guitar, for Spain the castanets, for France the lute, for Ireland the harp, for Germany the trumpet, and so on. He goes on to define and classify them according to their character, size, foods, marriage customs and women, and finally associates them with animals: the Spaniard is like a bird, the Genoese a fish, the Frenchman an eagle, the Italian a fox and so on. All these analogies finally boil down to the effect of climate. The real begetter of this theory was the sixteenth-century *savant* Jean Bodin in Book V, chapter 1 of his *Republic*, published in 1576 – though Bodin prudently stops short of arbitrary determinism. Montesquieu takes up the climate theory, but grafts on a scientific explanation and gives the whole thing a political slant.

The second great innovation of the eighteenth century was to associate national character with physical appearance: 'Individuals belonging to a certain nation have certain characteristics in common, which easily identify them as belonging to that nation.' Here, physiognomy joins the criteria for defining a nation. The idea had been around for a long time, allegedly since Aristotle; it came into its own at the turn of the seventeenth century, but was not then applied to the classification of nations.

The 'age of the territory' was succeeded by 'the age of landscape', culminating in the period between 1760 and 1850 and extending up to the Second World War. To Walter this represents a shift from 'the imposing of alterity to the shaping of identity'. This was when great national 'cycles' were forged, fashioning shared identities by exploiting their 'natural' environment: landscape became 'a function of ideology' within parameters that are still familiar to us today. Walter examines territoriality as an exercise in spatial identity, in other words, the way in which an

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777306003651 Published online by Cambridge University Press

actor takes root or attaches himself to a particular space of living or acting, thus reflecting back the self-image created by actors belonging to a particular territory. This concept of territoriality as a process of taking root has a long history, beginning in antiquity and continuing up to the present day. In the nineteenth century the binomial rooted/uprooted opposition (as in Maurice Barrès's 1897 novel *Les Déracinés*, 'The Uprooted') took on a strongly national, not to say nationalist, significance. Territory was the cradle of the nation, the original space containing all the qualities to be attributed to the future nation, complementing the origin myth which traced nations back to such fabulous ancestor figures as Aeneas or Noah. The point of this is always to relate the nation to a past which legitimates its existence. Here, Walter attempts to transcend constructivist approaches to nationhood (such as Gellner's or Anderson's) by treating landscape not just as a discursive process but also as a series of contexts for various social actors. A multiplicity of ideological contexts contribute to this symbolic investment of the landscape by elites who hold the monopoly over knowledge, the same elites appear in studies by Miroslav Hroch[2] as the architects of nation-building.

Walter gives some examples of this process, borrowing from recent work on Germany (a field that has been thoroughly ploughed),[3] Switzerland[4] and Italy. Landscape was an important factor in the creation of German national culture, although it presents substantial difficulties of 'application'. As a loose agglomeration of hundreds of tiny states, presenting a huge variety of landscapes, Germany took a long time to decide on an identifying landscape. Even as late as 1924 the historian Gerhard Ritter was rehashing the idea of the eighteenth-century geographer Friedrich Ratzel that the German landscape was essentially unfinished and that what distinguished it was precisely the great diversity of its landscapes, which mirrored its internal tensions. However, the Romantics took hold of symbols such as Cologne Cathedral (as studied by Thomas Nipperdey) and the statue of Arminius (Hermann), and also of certain landscapes which could be 'territorialised' and rendered symbolic. Advocates of this approach claimed that landscape, unlike monuments or historical events, had the great advantage of being comprehensible and accessible to, and able to inspire affection in, anybody and everybody whatever their social or cultural level. And yet landscape itself was intensely symbolic, indeed a construct. One of the most striking examples of this must be the early nineteenth-century painter Caspar David Friedrich, who portrayed fragmentary landscapes, or rather natural elements, with a heavy overlay of nascent national consciousness. Thus forests became a symbol of Germany, while the Teutoburg forest, where Arminius destroyed the legions of Varus, became a symbol of German resistance to foreign domination. The Rhine

2 M. Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe. A Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups among Smaller European Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

3 Alon Confino, *The Nation as a Local Metaphor* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Celia Applegate, *A Nation of Provincials* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Lekan, *Imagining the Nation*.

4 O. Zimmer, 'In Search of Natural Identity: Alpine Landscape and the Reconstruction of the Swiss Nation', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 40, 4 (October 1998), 637–65. Walter does not refer to Zimmer's work, though it offers some good illustrations of the process.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777306003651 Published online by Cambridge University Press

valley, lauded by poets and portrayed in innumerable paintings and engravings, was another nationalised 'territory'. The fact remained that it was hard to think of such landscapes as 'national'.

Confino's *The Nation as a Local Metaphor* successfully combines the theme of nationhood with landscape study, in an attempt to understand the particularity of Germany. He sees it as the outcome of a negotiation between local and national levels of national memory that continued throughout the nineteenth century. Confino sees the construction of national memory as an iconographic process of which landscape is an integral part: by combining the notions of national memory and imagined community, one can reach an understanding of how the people were able to visualise that impersonal thing, a nation, and of how the Germans created an iconographical stereotype of themselves and their landscape by putting the two sets of memories – local and national – together. This takes national feeling beyond the merely discursive and attaches it to concrete experience of which landscape is the vector. After 1871 the notion of *Heimat* was used to mediate between the local level – immediate, lived experience – and the more distant *Vaterland* at 'national' level. This symbolic, patriotic investment of local feeling is inseparable from its late-nineteenth-century context: it can be seen as a counterweight to the rapid transformation of the landscape and the ever-increasing pace of social change. People(s) all over the Western world were inventing traditions so as to strengthen national roots. Few nations were changing faster than Germany, where the industrial revolution was late but radical, and urbanisation rapid. The first wave of change struck in a climate of enthusiasm and confidence in progress; but by the end of the century, with a slowdown in economic growth, confidence seemed to falter and the cultural cost of industrialisation began to seem excessive. Criticism took many forms, not least the condemnation of damage to the environment. Here Confino locates what he calls the 'heimatising' of the German nation: its reconfiguration as a familiar, well-loved visual image. Landscape becomes a landscape of reference, a natural landscape which deserves protection owing to its beauty. Thus the notion of *Heimat*, incarnate in landscape, becomes the common denominator of community, whether that community is real or imagined, tangible or symbolic. Confino sees German national feeling as being grounded in a 'nation of *Heimats*' and an iconography that merges local, regional and national space in a series of interchangeable representations.

Celia Applegate has shown that although the *Heimat* idea appears to be politically conservative, it would be quite wrong to describe it as intrinsically reactionary. While expressions of German local patriotism may sometimes sound a potentially xenophobic, racial or *völkisch* note, such discourse existed alongside interpretations that were ruralist, pluralist or even democratic. 'Heimatising' could be both an adjunct to – or negotiation of – the establishment of a modern, liberal nation-state, and a reaction to the consequences of any such establishment. *Heimat* societies – the English equivalent might be a society of local historians or antiquarians – engaged in all kinds of research into folklore, dialect, vernacular architecture and natural resources. All this helped to give their native country a real, concrete existence, but also gave large sections of the German population, including white-collar workers, members of the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777306003651 Published online by Cambridge University Press

liberal professions and petty bourgeois, a civic consciousness and integrated them with the community. One such activity, which was peculiarly German, was the protection of the landscape. An interesting aspect of this approach, amply illustrated by Confino and Appelgate, is that it brokered the relationship between the local and the national. Local feeling – the *Heimat* – was not inimical to national feeling, but an integral part of it. In point of fact the French Republic also fostered this sense of local patriotism, although within different parameters, as a precursor of the feeling of belonging to a wider national space. Jean-François Chanet, for example, has shown that attachment to one's own locality, to the *terroir*, was thought to be an important item in the mental equipment of the Republic's trainee schoolteachers. Walter, referring to Italy, draws on recent work on the instrumentalisation of mountains by late nineteenth-century bourgeois elites, and the links that were made between the sense of identity and the sport of mountain-climbing, which persisted until the Fascist period. However, Walter lays insufficient stress on the extreme fragmentation of Italian identity and the multiplicity of possible landscapes available to it. If Italians took mountains as the markers of their national identity it was only in the north; it would scarcely occur to an inhabitant of Tuscany or Calabria. Walter can also be accused of failing to consider the importance of urban landscapes as a key element in Italian identity. During the unification the most widespread territorial symbol was in fact 'Italy of the hundred cities'.

Walter goes on to examine the individuals who contributed to this instrumentalisation of landscape for nationalist purposes, pointing out the perceptible shifts in appreciations of landscapes and their social and political connotations. In conclusion, he discusses the political exploitation of landscape analogies. Initially focused on the ideas of 'the fair country' or 'God's own country', such discourse began to shift after the French Revolution, whose leaders supplemented their passion for the language of organisation and administration with the theme of 'natural landscape'. Similarly, after the First World War territorial boundaries were settled by combining rules of ethnographic distribution with notions of natural boundaries that have 'always been there': Czechoslovakia, for example, was created on the basis of arguments such as 'Bohemia is a natural region clearly delineated by its surrounding mountains' (p. 141). Walter's final port of call is the 'totalitarian landscape' of Nazi Germany, which was more 'biological' than in any way aesthetic. Displaced populations, the extermination of the Jews and the colonisation of conquered territory all followed the logic of biological redistribution aimed at preserving the 'Germanness' of the relevant areas.

This question is also discussed by Thomas Lekan's book on landscape preservation in Germany. This excellent study, which began life as a dissertation prepared at the University of Wisconsin under the supervision of Rudy Koschar, looks at the conservation and preservation of nature in Germany from the late nineteenth century to the Nazi era. At the end of the nineteenth century, acceptance of the iconography of local patriotism nurtured a gathering sense of the urgent need to protect the natural environment – the landscape. A number of authors, of whom the best-known is the conservative theoretician Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl, argued that preserving nature and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777306003651 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the environment was the only way to preserve national character. What degree of continuity was there between this Wilhelmine environmentalism and the Nazis, who in 1935 passed one of the most advanced environmental protection laws of the time? Was the Nazi legislation a forerunner of the contemporary Green movement? What links the Wilhelmine 'preservationists' with Nazi *Blut und Boden*?

Historians have traditionally seen the 'back to the soil' movement of Wilhelm II's time, which continued under Weimar, as a kind of proto-fascism. They have seen the German bourgeoisie's aesthetic preference for an 'unchanging' landscape as the mark of a profoundly conservative, not to say feudal, social outlook favouring the reassertion of aristocratic privilege against the demands of the masses. This rather teleological approach has been disputed recently by authors who have shown that many leaders of *Heimatschutz* or *Naturschutz* (local or environmental protection) movements were urban dwellers who saw industrialisation as a necessary evil which could, however, be contained in a good aesthetic or environmental cause. The cultural historian William Rollins has revealed the eminently pragmatic, or even technical, nature of their proposals for environmental protection, far removed from any Romantic or 'ideological' discourse and often advocated by liberals, reformers or democrats. The approach was very like those then being advocated by the US Sierra Club or with Britain's National Trusts, both bourgeois, paternalist organisations. They did not reject modernity, but they wanted it in a different and improved form.

These historical revisions, however, leave one important question unanswered. If the preservation of landscape, including the local environment, was a creative endeavour, a well-informed and rational response to the crisis of modernisation, why is it that many of its protagonists were also committed and active Nazis, such as the minister for agriculture, Richard Walther Darré, and the forestry minister, Walter von Keudell, both of whom were out to 'racialise the landscape'?

According to Lekan, this strong rightward inclination was underlain by a number of factors which influenced the *Naturschutz* movement: the 'militarisation' of *Heimat* rhetoric during the First World War, during which pluralist concepts of the nation fell out of favour now that it was at war and under threat; the rapprochement between preservation organisations and government under Weimar; and the tendency of preservationists in the 1920s to reject modernism as they had not done in the decades before the war. Lekan also shows that despite the 1935 law, the Nazi attitude to environmental protection was in fact ambiguous: in the first place, its implementation was uneven and fragmentary owing to the effects of local and regional decision making; secondly, and surprisingly enough for a totalitarian state, it lacked co-ordination at national level. Moreover, the Reich made no bones about sacrificing environmental policies to economic or military interests.

This book is of interest not only to specialists in contemporary German history but also to environmental historians. It covers some of the same ground as Walter, particularly in its attention to actors, their careers and their ideologies: though their initial premises were poles apart, the attitudes of these actors tended to converge on a close engagement with the environment and the preservation of nature. Lekan,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777306003651 Published online by Cambridge University Press

however, focuses chiefly on the genealogy of environmentalism in Germany – with exciting results.

Nationalising the landscape, naturalising the nation

As long ago as 1986, Françoise Cachin published an interesting article in Pierre Nora's classic work *Les Lieux de mémoire*.[5] The article, 'The Painter's Landscape' ('Le paysage du peintre'), stressed the link between nature and national history. Over the long term a change is discernible from landscape-as-pretext to 'realist' landscape, which gradually evolves into a local or national stereotype. Each country, however, stages its landscape differently: in the age of nationhood, striking variations emerge among spatial representations of Russia, France, Switzerland and the United States. The French landscape, argues Cachin,

> had long ago been domesticated: its singularity was its capacity to offer a harmonious and inextricable interaction of culture and nature. Some of the most familiar 'natural' images were really nothing of the sort, not nature but culture: for example, the forest that constituted the 'blue line' of Barrès's Vosges had really been planted in the fifteenth century, and the cypresses, quintessential elements of the landscape around Arles immortalised by Van Gogh, were planted under the Second Empire.

The archetypal French landscape was modest, small-scale, village-scale, cultivated, planted, and echoed to the sound of bells and, in due course, the whistle of passing trains. François Mitterrand's 1981 election poster revived this image.

The other works reviewed in the present article all relate to this theme, applying it respectively to Tsarist Russia, England and Ireland; the artistic landscape discussed may be either pictorial or literary. Christopher Ely's study sets out to show how the Russian elites successfully transcended what they themselves saw as the 'meagreness' of the Russian landscape to make it a source of national pride and the emblem of a particular kind of beauty. He offers us a history of how educated Russians taught themselves to admire their natural environment (p. 5). Throughout the eighteenth century and up to the mid-nineteenth, landscape portrayal in Russia remained a Western import, and the aesthetic canons for determining the beauty of landscape were 'foreign' ones. It was not until a sense of national identity became an urgent cultural requirement that Russia broke away from Western aesthetic criteria and created alternatives that could embrace a single representation of the motherland (ibid.).

It had to be admitted that in comparison with Western models, the unending flatness of the Russian landscape, with its miserable villages, monotonous vegetation and harsh climate, constituted a handicap which took some time to overcome. What Ely describes is the invention of a specifically Russian *genius loci*. This 'cult of Russian space' developed between the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth as a vision of the countryside that converted all its faults to graces. The vast

5 F. Cachin, 'Le paysage du peintre', in P. Nora, ed., *Les Lieux de mémoire*, vol. 2, *La Nation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), 465.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777306003651 Published online by Cambridge University Press

emptiness of the steppes, the hostility of nature, the endless, deserted, uncultivated fields became something to celebrate: in other words the Russian landscape was a historical construct. This was the result of three factors: (i) European sensibilities with regard to landscape and the ensuing aesthetic; (ii) the peculiarities of Russian geography and society; and (iii) the desire of educated Russians to forge an inspired and inspiring national vision. While the first two of these factors may be better known, it is with regard to the third that Ely's book provides its most interesting insights, supplementing an article by Georges Nivat on Russian landscape as myth which looks at more recent history.[6]

Ely's approach is chronological, starting with the negative perception of the Russian landscape predominating in travellers' tales, poetry and painting at the end of the eighteenth century in order to show how its defining characteristics were established and how it was perceived ambiguously, as both beautiful and sinister. The last two chapters examine Russian realist landscape painting, which developed in the 1850s and reached its apogee at the turn of the century. By way of illustration the great Russian writers and artists are put under scrutiny and their works penetratingly analysed: Pushkin, Gogol, Tiutchev (who coined the phrase 'this meagre nature', subsequently borrowed by Dostoevsky) and A. N. Plescheev, whose poem *Native Land* (1862) is seen by Ely as expressing the quintessential approach to national landscape as developed over the previous twenty years (p. 155). Chapter 4 explains the various reading grids – sentimental, political, religious – used by authors to 'magnify' that meagre nature.

This is a fine book, but it lacks certain elements of interest to historians, such as the social positioning of those architects of the national landscape, and the way in which the results were conveyed to a population which was still largely illiterate, despite the emergence of a Russian middle class. Ely reminds us that the construction of national identity was not the prerogative solely of artists: it also recruited historians, geographers and ethnographers. Nonetheless, the discourse of nature was primarily artistic (p. 20). Now we can agree that most of the evidence comes from nineteenth-century Russian art; but it would have been well worth comparing the discourse of poets, novelists and painters with that of non-artists so as to see if any cross-contamination took place. In a country where, as Ely himself reminds us, the sense of identity drew strongly on attachment to the tsar, religion, imperial and military power and language, how did art and artists fit into this constellation? Why choose this particular category in preference to any other? To put it another way, why was landscape a sine qua non for characterising a nation which, when all is said and done, existed already? Was it essentially different from references to imperial power or to religion? Probably its dynamic is traceable to Russia's relationship with western Europe, which was far more conflictive than is sometimes imagined as a result of Napoleon's invasion and the outcome of the Congress of Vienna, which made Russia competitive and assertive of its alterity. There may well also be a connection with the familiar story of the birth of the Russian 'intelligentsia', with its mission to

6 Georges Nivat, 'Le paysage russe en tant que mythe', *Russiia/Russia*, 5 (1987), 7–20.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777306003651 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sing the praises of the nation while distancing itself from the existing socio-political configuration. This is not actually part of Ely's remit, but the references he makes to the work of Ernst Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm and Liah Greenfield at least entitle us to ask the above questions.

The Geographies of Englishness: Landscape and the National Past 1880–1940, edited by Corbett, Holt and Russell, and the catalogue *Eire/Land*, edited by Vera Kreilkamp, are both collections of articles on the history of art, including painting and poetry. *Eire/Land* looks at landscape readings from the medieval period onwards, seeking to relate episodes of Irish political, economic and social history with the ways that landscape was represented: for example, Claire Connolly, in 'The Turn to the Map: Cartographic Fictions in Irish Culture' (pp. 27–35), shows that cartography has been a privileged medium for the representation of Ireland since the twelfth century. The most interesting aspect of the book is the way in which it allows comparison of landscape representations over long periods. Kathleen Costello-Sullivan discusses two contemporary artists, Jane Proctor and Deirdre O'Mahony, and attempts to place their work within the long duration and twofold – aesthetic and political – dimension of the Irish landscape. However, historians will surely find that the most interesting articles in this catalogue are the first four (by Michelle P. Brown, Robin Fleming, Claire Connolly and Nancy Netzer), which examine how the Irish landscape was constructed through the context of illuminations, archaeological digs and maps.

Our second collection, *The Geographies of Englishness: Landscape and the National Past (1880–1940)*, unquestioningly assumes the primacy as a vector of art – here, landscape painting – and the aim is to explore modernisation, landscape and national identity through pictorial representation. Discussion of the concept of 'Englishness' is organised around two questions: is there such a thing as a specifically English landscape, and is there a specifically English way of representing it? Landscape is set in relation to modernity, or rather the rejection of modernity which hit England earlier than most other places. In the 1880s the impact of industrialisation, and its social consequences, were associated with a sense that Englishness was ineluctably losing its very heart – the countryside. To put it another way, the theme of this book is how the English landscape was reified through invented tradition between the end of the nineteenth century and the 1930s; this period is of particular interest because the reinterpretation of national landscape went hand in hand with the internationalisation of modern art. The evidence presented leaves no doubt that national art was an important constituent of aesthetic and political discussion during those years. Moreover, the abundant illustrations give direct access to the works themselves, which vary from realistic depictions of rural scenes – people, seascapes, landscapes – to futuristic works such as Edward Wadsworth's *Mytholmroyd* (1914, plate 51) and works of a rather high-flown type such as Sir Frank Dicksee's *Two Crowns* (1900, plate 64); and this perusal strongly relativises the way concrete representations of Englishness are used as expressions of English national character. The notion of 'Merrie England' may have retained its content and helped to foster a sense of national identity, but it seems that English art was quite heavily influenced by international movements and never succeeded in creating a clearly identifiable English school.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777306003651 Published online by Cambridge University Press

All these works on the theme of nation and landscape go to show the richness and dynamism of the field, but also the obstacles awaiting the historian who ventures into it. Several of the authors refer to constructivist approaches to nationhood, citing Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*,[7] or works by Ernst Gellner and Eric Hobsbawm; less frequently they allude to the essentialist approach of Anthony Smith. However, many of these references are merely formal and do not relate strongly to the very varied approaches preferred by our authors. This does not apply to Walter, whose primary task is to define the moment when landscape became a figure of nationhood, to reveal the intellectual and philosophical interplay involved in that process, detail the actors who contributed to it and describe the strategies they enacted. Nor does it apply to Lekan, for whom the problem of nationhood is frankly secondary, his main interest being the evolution of ideas of nature and the environment in Germany, and how they related to political forces, from the late nineteenth-century liberals to the Nazi leadership. On the other hand, the books devoted to Russia, England and Ireland focus on the relation between artistic production and the creation of national identity, and as such they are somewhat problematic. Their approach leads to an 'internal' reading of the relevant art works which – despite a few nods in that direction – seldom relate them to the political, economic or intellectual life of the countries concerned. Particularly unfortunate is the relegation to the background of such matters as the actors involved (painters, financiers, etc.), the diffusion of the works and their contribution to the shaping of national identities, and the place of art in the modernising societies which underlie the nations we know today. Such questions must be kept in mind, because they are vital to one element in the formation of modern identities, that is, the role of intellectuals as political, social and cultural actors. This is in fact my main criticism of these approaches: they see art as the passive reflection of a strong social demand without really asking how it was enacted or diffused. But that is perhaps a little unfair on works which raise their questions primarily in the realm of art history, and only secondarily of history itself. In the process they provide much that may be of value to the historian.

7 2nd edn (London: Verso, 1991).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777306003651 Published online by Cambridge University Press