




BOOK REVIEW

## Jeremy Burchardt. *Lifescapes. The Experience of Landscape in Britain, 1870–1960*

Modern British Histories. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Pp. 518. £30.00 (cloth).

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Jeremy Burchardt's *Lifescapes: The Experience of Landscape in Britain, 1870–1960* is primarily about the relationship that people had with landscape and rurality in Britain in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. However, the book is also about much more than this. Burchardt draws on the diaries and ancillary writing of eight individuals, and the stories that unfold encompass almost all aspects of their life trajectories, including material that extends well beyond their direct engagement with rurality. The diary sources used are all very detailed and extend for most of each diarist's life. Quite apart from the focus on rurality, the book provides important insights into the nature of diary writing by eight very different people. A long preface announces the key aim of the book: to provide an analytical framework for understanding the relevance of landscape to individual lives. The preface also enumerates what the book is not attempting to do, and briefly situates the work within a broader tradition of British landscape history. An introductory chapter then identifies four types of relationship with landscape which Burchardt argues emerge from his close reading of the eight diaries. These are adherers who relate to landscape to find continuity with the past; withdrawers, who escape into the countryside to escape external pressures; restorers, who use landscape as a catalyst for personal and ethical restoration; and explorers, who search for new impressions and ideas in the rural environment. These ideas are supported by a wider review of the history of British ruralism and approaches to landscape studies. A final introductory chapter introduces the diaries and discusses some problems of diary use. I felt this section could have said much more about historians' engagement with diary writing, and could have provided more assessment of other forms of life writing, some of which are used in the analysis.

Eight substantive chapters then provide detailed accounts of the lives of the eight diarists, and of their engagement with the rural landscape. They are a diverse group: four men and four women who lived in different parts of the country (though with a southern bias), and at different periods during the span of the book from 1870 to 1960. The first two, Beatrix Cresswell, a woman of independent means, born in 1862 in Devon, and William Hallam, a factory worker born in 1868 in Berkshire, are both identified as adherers; Katherine Spear Smith, an artist born in 1884 in India but who as an adult lived in Hampshire, and Violet Dickenson, a craftswoman born in 1883 who lived in various locations but latterly in Somerset, are used as examples of withdrawers; the two restorers are John Johnston, a doctor born 1852 in Scotland but who lived most of his life in Lancashire, and Bert Bissell who was born in 1902 in Goole (East Riding of Yorkshire), but who as an adult worked as a probation officer in Dudley in the West Midlands; and finally Sadie Barnes, who was born in 1907 and worked as a clerk in London, and Fred Catley, a Bristol bookseller born in 1911, are both

labeled explorers. Each chapter uses the extant life writing to relate in some detail the life trajectories of the eight selected diarists, focusing not only on their relationships with the natural world, but also on most other aspects of their lives, including their work, family life, spirituality, and political persuasions. Together, they form a fascinating and valuable set of individual life histories.

All good books should raise questions and queries in the mind of their readers, and this volume was no exception. I was never completely convinced that the categorization of connections with rurality worked, as I felt that elements of all four categories could be deduced from each of the diaries. At times the framework seemed a somewhat artificial structure, imposed on eight complex and varied lives, and there are of course other possible relationships with landscape, including both fear and rejection. I also felt that at times Burchardt tended to overinterpret the material. For the most part the diary entries that are quoted seem unexceptional, and are similar in form and content to those found in many diaries I have read. What appear to me to be simply factual diary entries, such as taking a path home over a meadow, are interpreted as showing engagement with rurality, whereas they could just as easily be a factual description of the most convenient route home for the diarist. I also felt that there was an unexplained structural oddity because while four chapters (all the male diarists) were divided into subheadings, the chapters dealing with female diarists were not. Unsurprisingly, many of the diary entries refer to movement through the countryside, especially walking, and I was surprised that the volume did not engage more directly with the extensive literature on mobilities both past and present, and which frequently focuses on walking and the environment.

To be fair, some of these questions are in part addressed in the final two chapters, a conclusion and afterword, in which Burchardt first recapitulates his main arguments, but then begins to tease out some of the uncertainties around them, including the recognition that elements of all four categories may be found in most diaries, and that there are other ways of engaging with the environment in addition to those focused on in this book. He also admits that initially he wanted to impose a quantitative analysis on the material, but quickly recognized that it was far too complex, encompassing multiple meanings and significances, for this to be a sensible exercise. Overall, this is a well-researched and detailed book that presents eight detailed life histories which reveal not only aspects of the writers' engagement with the rural environment, but also many other aspects of their lives.