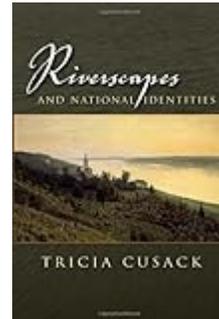




Tricia Cusack. *Riverscapes and National Identities*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2010. Illustrations. xii + 237 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8156-3211-5.



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River Imagery as National Iconography

Rivers and river valleys have long been recognized as key features in the study of cultures and the histories of civilizations. In *Riverscapes and National Identities*, Tricia Cusack focuses on how images of selected river landscapes, here given the title as riverscapes, helped create national identities. They are a visual text to the national imagination, she argues, as they constitute a form of understanding of how the abstract idea of a nation in the nineteenth century was idealized and realized through the artist's lens.

Many nineteenth- and early twentieth-century artists portrayed rivers and their natural and cultural landscapes as representations of national identity. For example, Thomas Cole and his followers in the Hudson River School of Art imagined the river and its surrounding wilderness as shaping a nation out of the New World. Similarly, Cusack finds other artists and their works codifying nationalism along four other European rivers: the Thames, the Seine, the Volga, and the Shannon. The paintings are placed in their historical, political, and social contexts, and examined with respect to style, visual

perspective, and the physical or cultural features that are included or left out.

Cusack is a lecturer at the Centre for European Languages and Cultures at the University of Birmingham. She has written on issues of nationalism, gender, and ethnicity with a multidisciplinary approach that incorporates political and critical theory as well as social and art history. Each chapter is well documented with scholarly bibliographical references for each of the five nation-states, artists, and art works examined, with the major paintings illustrated in black-and-white illustrations. A selected bibliography of works cited and index are equally informative.

An interdisciplinary humanistic review of the origins and construction of nationalism frames the work. A *âcivicâ* origin, based on a given territory and dependent on universalist political rights, is contrasted with an *âethnicâ/âethnoculturalâ* origin, *âthe* latter based upon shared cultural traditions and a common inheritance (p. 9). In a departure from more prosaic political treatises

associated with the former approach, Cusack writes convincingly that art and artists are central to the development of nationalist sentiment, all the while focusing on an individual river and its imagery at the core of a social construction of each nation-state.

Over space and time, artists have portrayed each river's varied cultural and topographic features to create separate national identities. Cusack is at her best when she describes the cultural and social landscapes through which her national rivers flow. She forcefully depicts the significance of painted images of St. Paul's Cathedral and the House of Parliament along the banks of the Thames as symbols of the power of the civil government and Anglican church in defining England by J. M. W. Turner, while impressionist paintings by Claude Monet and others of well-dressed women and boaters along the banks of the Seine indicate the importance of leisure and social class in the emergence of France's Third Republic. Religion, political history, and ethnicity also contribute to the formation of national identity as portrayed in paintings of the Volga and the Shannon where the latter divides a country between its Gaelic West and British East.

Regional differences, such as upriver or downriver, can play a part in the difficult task of creating national unity. Upriver along the Thames, the river runs through a picturesque pastoral landscape that is the very essence of "Englishness," while downriver it flows past the docks and public buildings of the City of London, global images that portray "Britishness." In considering that national identity may therefore change over time, Cusack suggests that such national rivers may be "Janus-faced" (pp. 9-10). Their ethno-cultural histories may face backward to a mythic or romanticized, usually rural, past, or forward toward a modern, usually urban, future. The conflict between such nationalist imaginations becomes explicit in the description of the River Shannon and the decision by the newly independent Irish Free State to build a hydroelectric power dam.

Cusack offers elements that constitute a "riverscape" and how they might be considered separately from "mere landscape" (p. 12). However, her case against using the term "landscape" remains problematic. The various meanings of the term are explored by the cultural

geographer Kenneth Olwig (*Landscape, Nature and the Body Politic: From Britain's Renaissance to America's New World* [2002]) in the historical development of nationalism and nationalist ideology in Great Britain and America, although he focuses on theater and stage sets rather than paintings.[1]

Withal, the argument for "riverscape" is persuasive as it more clearly defines the visual image as the mode of representation and analysis. Much like "seascape," used by art historians to describe a nineteenth- and twentieth-century painting of the ocean, seashore, or coastal environment, so, too, a riverscape should focus ultimately on the flowing river and its banks. On occasion, Cusack expands her spatial vision to include the wilderness of the Catskill Mountains where Cole sought the sublime in the cloves and deep dark woods, or she suspends the view of the river itself when noting artistic representations of gender or ethnic groups. Nevertheless, in all five case studies, the author impressively argues that paintings of rivers as specific landscape features can be read to symbolize national identity.

Cusack's writing is crisp and her theoretical framework concisely drawn. *Riverscapes and National Identity* is a model of interdisciplinary work in the arts, humanities, and social sciences. Historians and political scientists will find much to admire in the author's use of the fine arts to understand the development of the nation-state in the nineteenth century; art historians will discover how a critical theorist can reread well-known paintings; and cultural and historical geographers will recognize an original work in landscape studies and humanistic geography.

Note

[1]. Cusack does not cite Olwig nor the geographers Yi-fu Tuan and David Lowenthal, both of whom have examined landscape literature and art, although she does follow the geographer Stephen Daniels's declaration that paintings by Turner, John Constable, and Cole incorporate "the power of landscape as an idiom for representing national identity in England and the United States." Stephen Daniels, *Fields of Vision: Landscape Imagery & National Identity in England & the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 243.

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