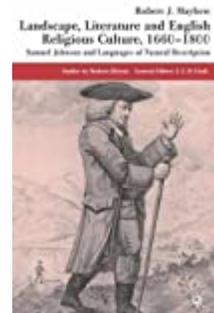


**Robert J. Mayhew.** *Landscape, Literature, and English Religious Culture, 1660-1800: Samuel Johnson and Languages of Natural Description.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. vi + 426pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-333-99308-8.



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**Published on** H-HistGeog (August, 2004)

### **A Valuable Book: But Too Many Books in a Book Can Spoil the Scholarly Broth**

The title of this work signals a broad study of a century and a half of English culture, whereas the subtitle focuses more specifically on the work of a particular author who lived from 1709 to 1784. What, one wonders, is the primary subject of this book? Perhaps the table of contents will help? It reveals that this work has three “parts.” The first part, “Historiography and Landscape Studies,” is twenty-six pages long; the second, “Landscape and Religion, 1600-1800; Preliminary Contexts,” is thirty-two pages long, and the third, on “Samuel Johnson, High Churchmanship and Landscape,” is one hundred and thirty-five pages long. The third part clearly forms the bulk of the work, and it also correlates with the book’s subtitle, “Samuel Johnson and Languages of Natural Description.” When one considers that this part also comes with its own separate bibliography, and that, J[onathan]. C. D. Clark, the editor of the Studies in Modern History series in which this has been published, is a Johnson specialist and advisor to the author, one has reason to suspect that it forms the body of the book, and this is borne out in the reading. The subtitle provides a reasonable conception of the primary content of this book, and I will therefore begin with part 3.

As a work about Samuel Johnson and languages of natural description, this book is not just about Johnson, but more broadly it is about the eighteenth-century development of “the language of natural description.” Though “geography” is not listed as a keyword for this book, the author is a geographer and the book appears to represent a continuation of his earlier interest in “Samuel Johnson and Eighteenth-Century English Conceptions of Geography.”[1] This is an important topic because Johnson was not only an influential travel writer, he was also a literary scholar, critic, and the author of a benchmark dictionary. He thus was a person who used his words and composed his texts with unusual deliberation, and his authorial persona helped shape the literate culture of a generation. Mayhew effectively shows that Johnson does not fit the usual molds with which his era is stereotyped. Johnson’s mode of argumentation was not particularly teleological and his travel writing was not picturesque or pre-romantic but sober and matter-of-fact in its concern for social and economic issues. There is thus something remarkably modern about Johnson, as a harbinger of the chorographic, scientific, geographical writing of the following century.

By approaching natural description via Johnson, Mayhew shows that it was highly varied and not amenable to the generalizations often made about the period. Thus, this language need be neither a source teleological speculation, a cover for thinly veiled economic and social interests, nor any other mono-causal characterization put forth by scholars interested in mining the period for evidence to prove a particular thesis. For this reason it seems contradictory that the part on Johnson and languages of natural description is prefixed by a part 2 which shows, according to the flyleaf, that “religion was the key force behind landscape descriptions and that denominational differences were at the heart of the differences between the descriptive practices of a range of canonical authors.” This hyperbole overstates an argument that is well worth putting forth, but which is difficult to prove with such finality. One can agree that religion has been largely overlooked in the recent literature on landscape and that it is a factor of great concern during the period covered by the book, but, as Mayhew himself makes clear, religion was deeply intertwined with politics (and hence also economics and class) and, for some, with science. Under such circumstances it can be difficult to make religion “the” key force.

Part 2 argues that the era’s tendency to use natural science to bolster teleological arguments concerning the existence of God was characteristic of lower church Anglican “Latitudinarian” Whigs who subscribed to “physico-theology.” This point is illustrated by a brief examination of a number of prominent Latitudinarians, such as Robert Boyle, William Burnet, William Gilpin and Joseph Addison. Latitudinarianism, though “notoriously hard to define” (p. 70), broadly speaking sought to avoid the religious dissensions that helped precipitate the English civil war by espousing a tolerant and moderate form of religion that gave wide “latitude” (hence the name “Latitudinarian”) to differing forms of belief. Natural science, in this context, provided a means of giving a rational basis for religion. This discussion, and the book in general, is thoroughly referenced, particularly with regard to British scholarship on British topics (one wonders, however, at the omission of a reference to Yi-Fu Tuan’s pioneering geographical study of the physico-theologists.[2]) This part is intended to set the stage for Johnson, a high church Anglican Tory, who, it is argued, was relatively moderate in his use of teleological forms of argumentation. This is because high church Anglicans emphasized the importance of Biblical text as the source of Christian truth, not the natural world, which, as the creation of the Godhead, was secondary to the creator

and the word of the creator. The distinctions between the Latitudinarians and the High-Churchmen are not hard and fast, however, but a question of degree. As Mayhew puts it, “the Latitudinarians were distinguished from other theologies in the Anglican Church not by their belief in the natural world as evidence for the existence of God, but by the emphasis they placed upon this form of evidence” (p. 72).

Part 2 provides an important perspective on a dimension of Johnson’s oeuvre. Mayhew’s argument that religious differences help explain the role of teleology, and hence the role of the natural world, in the writing of the Latitudinarians vis-à-vis its relative absence in the work of Johnson, is highly plausible. The argument, however, is hard to prove conclusively, particularly because we are dealing with questions of degree. Part 2 is also problematic, however, because, by preceding part 3, it gives the impression that the book is narrowly focused on religion as the key to understanding the period, which it is not. The relatively brief and specialized survey that makes up part 2, furthermore, does not live up to the expectations generated by the title’s implied promises of a broad study of “literature and English religious culture, 1600-1800.” Part 2, as its sub-title indicates, is “preliminary.” It would make sense to reverse the order of the book’s title and sub-title.

In light of the complex multi-threaded analysis of part 3, I found the narrow focus on landscape in part 1 to be quite problematic. It prefixes yet another theme to the central topic of the book, Samuel Johnson and natural description—a somewhat polemical discourse on the treatment of landscape by British scholars, particularly geographers writing in the 1980s.[3] Given that this is the first part of the book, this has the effect of getting the book off on a negative foot, suggesting that its importance lies primarily in its function as a critique of earlier writing on landscape. This impression is reinforced by the flyleaf, which begins: “*Landscape, Literature and English Religious culture, 1660-1880* offers a powerful revisionist account of the intellectual significance of landscape descriptions during the ‘long’ eighteenth century.” The reader is thus inclined to judge the book on the power of its negative revisionist force, rather than its positive contribution to our understanding of Johnson and natural description. This negativity is compounded by the fact that this is essentially an argument from absence. Just as Johnson was not particularly teleological, neither was he particularly concerned with “landscape *per se*” (p. 175). It is inherently difficult to mount, largely on the basis of a reading of an author who was not interested

in landscape per se, a critique of scholars who are interested in the work of landscape artists, landscape poets, and landscape architects who are intrinsically concerned with landscape per se. Mayhew refers to a “Johnsonian doctrine of landscape” (p. 211), but two pages later clarifies that “Johnson does not have a ‘theory of landscape’: what I discuss are Johnson’s opinions on these issues within the context of his approach to knowledge, seen in turn in the wider milieu of eighteenth-century thought.” This statement is made under the heading, “The position of the natural environment in Johnson’s theory of factual description,” and this heading gives a fair indication of where Mayhew’s focus lies (p.213). The “natural environment” is a key concept for Mayhew because the divergences between the differing Anglican factions turned, to an important extent, on the significance attributed to the natural environment as understood by the increasingly influential natural sciences. In order to integrate landscape into this argument, he therefore needs to equate it with the natural environment. The problem is that landscape per se, at this time, belonged rather more to the discourse of visual esthetics than to that of the sciences concerned with the natural environment, such as geology, hydrology, biology and physical geography. Its ties to science, if any, were thus not to the sciences concerned with the material phenomena of the natural environment, but to mathematical and spatial sciences such as geometry (cartography) and optics. This means that it is problematic to simply equate landscape with the natural environment, and then build a critique of present day writing on landscape on this equation, because the critic, and those criticized, are dealing with different concepts of landscape, weighted toward differing concepts of nature, natural science and, I might add, the Godhead.

Though Johnson may not have had a “theory of landscape,” he certainly had a definition. He was a lexicographer, someone Johnson himself defined as “a harmless drudge that busies himself in tracing the original, and detailing the signification of words.”<sup>[4]</sup> Landscape, according to Johnson, meant: 1) “A region; the prospect of a country” and 2) “A picture, representing an extent of space, with the various objects in it.”<sup>[5]</sup> For Mayhew, however, “the approach to the natural environment is the main focus of the present study” (p. 213). For him “the natural world,” by “extension” incorporates “landscape.” (p. 71) This “extension” is questionable because Johnson does not mention “nature” in his definition of “landscape,” and he does not refer to “landscape” in his definition of “nature.”<sup>[6]</sup> Since Mayhew argues that “the contextual historian must accept that the contem-

porary meanings of the language of landscape differed from what appears most significant to our own times,” he is obligated to take special cognizance of Johnson’s own definitions (p. 153). Mayhew must explain, in some depth, why he himself uses landscape almost synonymously with the natural environment, despite the fact that Johnson apparently does not link the two concepts in his dictionary. It seems unfair for Mayhew to criticize present day scholars who make the assumption “that landscape by being an exclusively visual way of organizing and understanding the landscape, denies non-visual, less pictorial experiences of nature” (p. 15), when Johnson himself defines landscape predominately in visual and pictorial terms, and does not define it as “nature.” Mayhew is no doubt right when he argues that the question of religion has been underplayed in the literature on landscape as visual scenery, and he provides useful evidence to the effect that this framing had both a religious and scientific cast (e.g. p. 72, pp. 142-146). It is unfortunate, however, that his largely negative approach to esthetic theories concerning the implications of the Renaissance rise of perspective for the perception of landscape hinders him from mobilizing this theory to help make an in-depth explanation of why particular approaches to the visualization of landscape might be connected to particular conceptions of religion or nature.

Rather than seek to make use of the considerable body of international theory on the relationship between the rise of perspective and landscape representation, Mayhew tends to dismiss it on a variety of grounds, displaying, in the process, a somewhat limited, British-focused and politically charged approach to this theory. A basic premise for his argument is that “The socio-economic contextualization of landscape studies has been primarily a Marxist-inspired project” (p. 16) and that this has led to a reductive, economic understanding of landscape as an expression of capitalist social relations. While it is true that, given the time, some of this writing reflects some variety of non-doctrinaire nominally Marxist influence, and that some of it displays this economic tendency, Mayhew overlooks the fact that this theory derives largely from art historians such as Erwin Panofsky, Ernst Gombrich, and Samuel Edgerton, as well as, in some cases, from philosophers as varied as Ernst Cassirer, Immanuel Kant, and Martin Heidegger, none of whom are normally treated as belonging to the Marxist canon.<sup>[7]</sup> Furthermore, much of the writing on the visualization of landscape, such as the work of Svetlana Alpers or Yi-Fu Tuan, is highly relevant to Mayhew’s own interest in the connection between nat-

ural science, landscape and the natural environment.[8] Mayhew's critique of general theories concerned with the role of perspective in structuring landscape perception is linked to empiricist historiographical arguments concerning the need to contextualize historical writing in terms of specific contemporary actors and agents living in a particular era, and hence their world views and modes of conceptualization. While Mayhew clearly has a point when criticizing the tendency by landscape theoreticians to downplay the specificity of the historical context when seeking to generalize about historical tendencies, it is also important to emphasize that the two approaches are not mutually exclusive. Contextual historiography and locally focused historical empiricism are only one strand in a larger process of historical understanding that also can learn from the theorization of, for example, the international art and literary theorists and philosophers who have paved the way for a lively multidisciplinary, and multi-national, debate concerning landscape as a visual phenomenon. One wishes that Mayhew were more of a latitudinarian in his approach to landscape theory, but this is perhaps a lot to expect from someone so steeped in the work of a High Churchman.

The taking on board of theories concerning the rise of perspective representation and the pictorial conceptualization of landscape does not mean, however, that one must accept the reduction of landscape to the spatial realm of visual scenery, which is the premise for much of the literature Mayhew criticizes. Johnson, thus, defined landscape not only in pictorial terms, but also as "a region" as well as "a country" perceived visually as a "prospect." In so far as regions and countries include natural phenomena it does make sense to expand the understanding of landscape to include the natural environment, as well as the social and economic geographical phenomena that also concerned Johnson in his travel writing. Mayhew's instinct, therefore, to broaden the discussion of landscape to include the natural environment more generally, is well justified. This valuable study of languages of natural description becomes bogged down in something of a theoretical quagmire, however, when it seeks to take on the difficult concept of landscape. The link between the concept of nature and that of landscape, which was then being forged, is too complex to be taken as given, or to be used to critique scholars who, following the lexicographical practice of the time, define landscape in more narrow pictorial terms.

A basic problem with part 1 of this book is that an adequate and judicious treatment of the enormous body of literature on landscape studies in relation both to the

natural environment and historiography would require a book in itself. Part 2 is more integral to the book's substance, but it also, to act as a general work on literature and English religious culture, would require a book-length treatment. Part 3, as noted, is a book in its own right. The end result is a book which is, or ought to be, three books, and this is too many books to encompass between the covers of a unified single volume work (a scholarly broth spoiled by too many books). Rather than having a part 1 that launches into "an intervention in eighteenth-century intellectual history," as the flyleaf puts it, this book would have benefited from a less polemical introductory section that presents Johnson and the Johnsonian era to readers who are not steeped, for example, in the mysteries of the Anglican Church and the complexities of eighteenth-century British politics. Read as a book on Samuel Johnson and natural and regional description this is a valuable work with important insights into the role of religion in natural description at this time, also beyond the shores of Britain. It does not need to be aggressively hyped as an "intervention" or a "revisionist account"—solid scholarship, such as this, speaks for itself.

It should be mentioned that portions of this book suffer from a problem that I have encountered in several recent publications. The problem is that quotations are printed in the body of the text, but the author of the quotation is only named in a footnote (e.g. p. 55, footnote 94, or p. 63, footnote 130). This annoyance is not a problem when the author's name can be found in a parenthesis at the end of the quotation, or at the bottom of the page, but when one is forced, as in this case, to first flip forward to see which chapter one is in, and then flip through the notes in the back of the book to find the correct chapter and note number, then one is dealing with a serious hindrance to the efficient reading. This problem comes about, I suspect, because modern computer programs favor footnote styles using parentheses, and older studies favored footnotes at the bottom of the page, whereas many present day publishers prefer a numbered system with footnotes located in the back of the book. Changes in footnote style between manuscript and printed work then lead to this confusion.

#### Notes

[1]. Robert J. Mayhew, *Geography and Literature in Historical Context: Samuel Johnson and Eighteenth-Century English Conceptions of Geography* (Oxford: n.p., 1997).

[2]. Yi-Fu Tuan, *The Hydrologic Cycle and the Wisdom of God. A Theme in Geoteleology* (Toronto: University of

Toronto Press, 1968).

[3]. For example, Stephen Daniels, "Marxism, Culture and the Duplicity of Landscape," in *New Models in Geography*, ed. Richard Peet and Nigel Thrift (Unwin and Hyman: London, 1989). pp. 196-220; John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place, 1730-1840: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972); John Barrell, *The Dark Side of The Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting 1730-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Denis Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (London: Croom Helm, 1984).

[4]. Merriam-Webster, *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged-Electronic Edition* (Springfield: Merriam-Webster, 2000), lexicographer.

[5]. Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* Facsimile, Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung,

Hildesheim, ed. Vol. II., (London: W. Strahan, [1755] 1968), landscape.

[6]. Ibid., nature.

[7]. See for example, Stephen Daniels and Denis Cosgrove, "Introduction: iconography and landscape," in *The Iconography of Landscape*, ed. Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge: 1988), pp. 1-10; Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion, 1976); Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (New York: Zone Books, 1991); E. H. Gombrich, "Renaissance Artistic Theory and the Development of Landscape Painting" *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 41 (6, January-June 1953): p. 335-360.

[8]. Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1974).

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**Citation:** Kenneth Olwig. Review of Mayhew, Robert J., *Landscape, Literature, and English Religious Culture, 1660-1800: Samuel Johnson and Languages of Natural Description*. H-HistGeog, H-Net Reviews. August, 2004.

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