

John Warfield Simpson, *Visions of Paradise: Glimpses of Our Landscape's Legacy*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1999. xiv + 387 pp., 7 line drawings; ISBN: 0 520 21364 5; £25 cloth.

This book is difficult to characterize with total accuracy. It does not pose as an original contribution to landscape studies; in fact, it readily acknowledges that it follows in the wake of John Brinckerhoff Jackson, Donald Meinig, William Cronon, and others. It has elements of the popularization, but its length, its scholarly apparatus, and, in the best sense, its earnestness, prohibit such an easy designation. One of its more unusual features, presumably as a kind of homage to the (exceptional?) tradition of self-conscious ecological meditation in America, from Thoreau onwards, is the inclusion of five interludes of personal reflection, each one surmounted by a fine engraving contributed by Abigail Rorer. Whether site-specific (a Douglas fir forest in the Cascades, the demolished Union Railroad Depot in Columbus, Ohio) or more general (the way interstate highways homogenize travel experience, for example), these tackle interesting issues and they are far from banal, but – to this reader – there is something predictable about them. In the quality of their writing they fall too obviously short of the heights achieved by the figures Simpson emulates.

The book as a whole constitutes an overview – Simpson himself uses the metaphor of a ‘giant lens’ – partly of the material and ideological forces that have shaped actual American landscapes since European conquest and partly of previous thought about the making of those landscapes. It covers the history of land legislation and management from Colonial times to the present, and I think it is particularly informative about such key episodes as the controversy over the Hetch-Hetchy Reservoir, the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, and the ever-accelerating growth of the suburbs. It includes interesting evocations of several of the bestriding figures of environmental thought in the United States, from Jefferson onwards: Thoreau, John Wesley Powell, John Muir, Frederick Law Olmsted, and Aldo Leopold. *Visions of Paradise* engages with ideas – such as wilderness or pastoral, as treated by Roderick Nash or Leo Marx, respectively – but not exclusively. It

is broader in its geographical coverage than the West alone – as most famously analyzed by Henry Nash Smith – and historically even more varied than the periods evoked by John Stilgoe. At the same time, as its subtitle indicates, it is an overview of ‘glimpses’ rather than a sustained gaze.

Also, it is written from an ultimately limited perspective: when the title speaks of ‘our’ landscape’s legacy it may initially seem expansive, embracing all kinds and conditions of people in the United States – and the book does include respectful attention to Native American notions of the land and communal responsibility for it – but it is nevertheless exclusive. First, its notion of ‘legacy’ places an undue emphasis on those who have claimed the dominant inheritance, white Americans; there is virtually no mention of African Americans or Hispanics, for example, either as figures in the landscape or as viewers of it. Second, while Simpson adverts profitably to W. G. Hoskins and others who have written about the making of non-American landscapes, and while he effectively proselytizes for more ecological awareness generally, the determined stress on ‘us’ and what ‘we’ believe inhibits any deep acknowledgment there may be *other* perspectives, indeed other possible responses, that might eventuate in different policies. This is the nub of my underlying irritation with this book: throughout there is an emphasis on ‘values’ that I find commendable, but it is also curiously a-political, in that Simpson advocates no specific *actions*. Instead we are left with a vaguely liberal warm glow.