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Reading Signs

The Landscape as Text

CHRISTOPHER W. WELLS

I can pinpoint the moment, and the text, that changed everything. I was, according to my well-laid plans, at least, following a long path through graduate school toward becoming an intellectual and cultural historian of the United States. According to the journal that I kept at the time, I had spent the summer barely looking up from my books, too immersed in the work of various turn-of-the-century intellectual giants to pay attention to much else. Henry Adams and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, John Dewey and William James, Jane Addams and Lester Ward dominated my days and even—according to my journal—my dreams. I enrolled in a seminar on American environmental history, not because I thought it would be my calling, but because everyone I knew kept saying, insistently, “You must take this class.” And so I did, despite a long-standing aloofness toward environmentalism that I had cultivated during my teen years as an inner-city public school kid, at a point in my life when I was inclined to see environmental problems as a distraction from—rather than an integral component of—issues of social and racial inequity.

And so I found myself, away from my books and blinking in the sunlight of a clear mid-September day, standing atop the text that changed my life: a smallish hill overlooking a classically pastoral Wisconsin landscape. Waiting for the rest of my seminar to gather around, I overheard a snippet of conversation and suddenly realized that the tall grasses I had just waded through were actually native long-stemmed prairie grasses rather than the transplanted European variety that dominate most of America today. I scolded myself for failing to recognize

them, since the purpose of the day's excursion was to learn how to "read" landscapes. I had assumed we were climbing an overgrown hill just to get a better view, so I had made a beeline for the top. But looking down the hill, I saw the back of a large wooden sign that I had failed to notice before. It sat facing the road at the bottom of the hill, taunting me for failing to pay close enough attention, informing those who bothered to look its way that the area was preserved and actively maintained by a local group as an example of intact prairie.

"Because of the steep incline of this hill and the interesting way the property boundaries intersect with the road system," our professor began, "this prairie has been preserved from encroaching development, first by accident and then by design, for probably two hundred years. See how the road jogs around that farmhouse there? That means the farm was probably already established before the road came through, so the road builders had to accommodate its fields in their layout. This hill was too steep for the road and too steep to plow—you would be nuts to try it with either a horse or a tractor. Because no one could figure out how to make it useful for agriculture by changing it, it just remained here, a little odd-shaped wedge of hillside prairie right in the middle of all the flatter surrounding fields. Luckily, it remained intact until a conservation group bought it in order to protect it. In its way, it is as rich a historical document as any you can find in an archive."

As he spoke, and afterward as he answered our questions, it became increasingly clear that this particular place, interpreted as a text, could speak volumes about changes in the larger landscapes of Wisconsin and the Midwest. Before that day, my tendency had always been to regard landscapes as relatively fixed. Landscapes have nothing if not an imposing physical presence, after all. They at least *seemed* to my untrained eye to possess a rather impressive permanence. True, I had seen a local horse farm razed because its owners could profit more from condominiums than from kids celebrating their birthdays with horse rides, and once I got to see developers create a new lake where none had existed before in a small subdivision outside the city where I grew up. "I get flustered every time I visit home and my parents have rearranged the living room furniture," I noted that night in my journal, reflecting on the day. "When it comes to the layout of the physical world, I tend to assume that things are more fixed, more permanent, than in fact they are. This is a fault I should try to overcome."

Back on the hillside prairie, with the help of my eager companions and our knowledgeable professor, we began to catalog the strategies available to help us see the changes in a landscape as they have occurred in time. The simplest exercise? Imagine the changes that follow the wheel of the seasons. Across the main highway, a field of corn looked close to being ready for harvest. Nearby, a second crop looked about a month behind. Their different ages told a story about the patterns of labor on this farm; in a few more months they would be gone, to be replaced again in the spring, possibly with alfalfa. Off to the left, we noted the vegetation around the farmhouse. “The big oaks on its east and west provide natural air-conditioning during the summer,” our professor pointed out. “Come winter, though, the leaves fall off and allow sunlight to reach the house, helping to keep it warmer and well lit even when the days are short and cold. But notice that they planted evergreens to the north. Since they do not ever lose their leaves, they protect the house from the full brunt of Wisconsin’s harsh winter storms and cold north wind.”

Another exercise was to ask how (and when) things were likely to have gotten where they were. How did trees get on other nearby hillsides? Were they not also too steep to plow? Why did ours have prairie grasses, where the others had trees? Perhaps, one of the more ecologically literate members of our group surmised, the other hill had served as a pasture, since heavy grazing would have cleared away the prairie grasses and opened room for European plants better adapted to heavy grazing, transported to the scene by cows in their droppings. Later, when farmers abandoned livestock in favor of more extensive monocropping—a response to new technologies, changing market conditions, and evolving calculations of profit—the hillsides would have begun to sprout trees since no animals were there to eat the tender saplings. Hence the forested hillsides surrounding us. But what of our hillside prairie? Possibly the animals could not get to it—was there once a fence around it? Or possibly animals grazed here, too, and the native grasses somehow held their own. Either way, a conservation group stepped in to preserve it—at about the same time the trees on the surrounding hillsides began to grow, judging from their girth—providing the most important element in its survival over the last half century. In this case, human intention and careful management played a key role: the same conservation organization that bought the land also set controlled annual fires to this little patch of hillside prairie, supplying

a crucial element in the prairie's "natural" process of reproducing itself that lightning and Native Americans once provided.

The same question—how did that get here?—applies to more than just prairies and wooded hills, however. In places like the one this little hillside prairie occupies, sitting within sight of the terminal moraine of the last ice age, geologists are particularly fond of stories that contrast the shaping force of glaciers with the force of water seeking the path of least resistance toward the sea. Historians, on the other hand, are quick to note that Native Americans interacted with the land differently than did immigrant farmers from Europe, the former preferring to burn the prairies annually to stimulate their growth, the latter preferring to plow them up in favor of an evolving mix of agricultural crops. Along with the farm fields and those who made them came frame houses, fences, plows, and new plants and animals that together remade local ecosystems. Later still came railroads, silos, asphalt, electricity, tractors, telephones, insecticides, new economic conditions, and evolving ideas about how people ought to treat the land. All of these changed the landscape in ways both small and significant, and our little tour group took stock of their more concrete effects, as they remained etched onto the land, as we surveyed the area.

A final exercise included taking a bird's-eye perspective. From the air, the relationship between this farm and the larger urban market it serves suddenly takes a specific shape. At some point in the future, we realized, if commuters to Madison continued to push farther and farther into the countryside, the likelihood would increase that this farm might become a refuge for a salaried worker seeking escape into pastoral surroundings, finding, as our professor put it, "a room with a view." Later, if exurban development were to continue to encroach and if real estate prices were to continue to rise, it might become the site of an entire subdivision, since housing lots these days can be a more immediately and reliably profitable crop for a farmer than corn or alfalfa. Just as the demand created by urban markets has encouraged people both in the past and the present to shape this landscape as a zone of agricultural production, it might also one day encourage people to transform local land uses—and thus the local landscape—in ways resulting in as thorough a shift as the one it has already undergone from prairie grasses to cornfields.

In my memory, the day stands out as a turning point: a prairie fire

that burned hot and quick, consuming everything in its path but also stimulating new growth in its wake. In my journal, on the other hand, the process appears slower, more halting, full of twists and turns. It took a lot of practice and new knowledge to become comfortable with the techniques involved and even more time and knowledge to become confident in the integrity of my interpretations. Apparently, too, even the idea that landscapes are texts—replete with stories waiting for those who have learned how to read them—took a lot of reinforcement. My journal reminds me that it took all the persuasive powers of my professor, William Cronon, together with significant time spent wrestling with the likes of May Theilgaard Watts and Raymond Williams, J. B. Jackson and John Stilgoe, Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson, John McPhee and Michael Pollan, Richard White and Nancy Langston, before the lessons fully took hold and the conversion became complete.

In my memory, on the other hand, the moment remains one of vivid transformation. The earth shifted beneath my feet; my mind caught ablaze. In my memory, as the others made their way down to the vans, I stood silently near the top of the hill, still blinking in the sun but now surveying the vista with new eyes. After a last long look around I followed my group, careful to make a different way than the others through the tall grass to avoid damaging the prairie remnant, and climbed into the van. I remember sitting there, with my thoughts turned inward, ruminating on the ways geology, cultural values, market forces, technological systems, ecological processes, and time had all left their marks on the land. Only after we had pulled away did I remember that I had not yet read the big wooden marker, by then too far behind us to see clearly. I have made peace with the fact that I will always miss reading some of the signs. As we drove away, though, I took some comfort knowing that I would forever thereafter see signs in places where I had never before realized they existed. And this, without doubt, is a memory that time has borne true.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christopher W. Wells is the author of *Car Country: An Environmental History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012), which focuses on the proliferation of car-dependent landscapes in the United States before 1956. He is an associate professor of environmental history at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota.