That Kind of Beauty

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_Ireland and the Picturesque: Design, Landscape Painting, and Tourism, 1700–1840_, by Finola O’Kane, Yale University Press, 240 pp, £45.00, ISBN: 978-0300185386

Being a non-driver, I see a lot of the Irish countryside. This isn’t as oxymoronic as it might seem. The vagaries and detours of public transport in this country have meant that I’ve often seen more than originally intended. Some of it is incredibly beautiful. Sometimes beauty breaks through in strange ways – the great ball of the sun in a flaming sky sinking into the M7 as I watch, back to the road, flying in reverse. Or the darkening colours at dusk from the train between Templemore and Limerick Junction, the brown ditches marking out the fields, and the green fading to black under an indigo sky. One passes castles, mottes, town walls, ruined abbeys and squat tower houses along the way, curiosities now. They are sometimes surrounded by neat houses with driveways and trampolines, while the ruins stand awkwardly among them, like somebody crying at a party or a spread-eagled giant, in everybody’s way. Somewhere along these journeys, criss-crossing from place to place, all commuters come to understand how the experience of the same landscape can change – how tightly bound what we see out of the train or bus window is to what we feel within.

Finola O’Kane’s authoritative study of the picturesque in Ireland excavates layers of looking at and seeing beauty in the Irish landscape. _Ireland and the Picturesque_ is grounded in O’Kane’s extensive knowledge of the landscapes she writes about, as well as the theories, fashions and preoccupations of elite society in eighteenth century Ireland. Taking what might be considered self-evident – the beauty and popularity of certain parts of the countryside such as the Lakes of Killarney or Glendalough –she reveals the complex fabric of meaning which was woven around these locations, giving them the status of “beauty spots” and tourist attractions. This richly illustrated investigation into an ideal of beauty and aesthetic pleasure is inlaid within a nuanced understanding of the political, religious and social realities of the period. The book provides a detailed outline of the remarkably slippery theory of the picturesque itself – defined by theorist William Gilpin (1724-1804) as “that kind of beauty which will look well in a picture”. This deceptively simple maxim, however, led to convoluted debates on the desired “roughness” of the landscape to be depicted, and the preference for wheel-marked roads and tumble-down cottages over smooth, well-tended lands and rows of cabbages.

The importance of the printed word and image is stressed throughout. As well as contributing to a national visual identity, “books of views” prepared people for what they would see, but also how they should see it. O’Kane quotes Linda Colley’s words on the picturesque experience, that in order “to appreciate ‘the remotest parts of Britain’, one needed to […] have acquired a fashionable aesthetic education”. The words of writer and philanthropist Hannah More support this idea, her recollection of “sailing down the River Wye, looking at abbeys and castles, with Mr Gilpin in my hand to teach me to criticise, to talk of foregrounds and distances”. While there is an emphasis throughout on the orderly nature of viewing, and the adherence to texts for guidance and instruction, there is a converse to More’s adventure – a safer, less abandoned version of the romantic wanderer, the need for those remotest places, their solitude and freedom, yet tempered by a series of polite props in the form of aesthetic conventions and talking-points. The dark, intimate and possibly dangerous freedom from societal norms of these “remotest parts of Britain” also informed another facet of eighteenth and nineteenth century cultural experiences – the rise of the Gothic novel, the terrifying, absorbing figure of Matthew Lewis’s Monk or Mary Shelley’s tragic monster.
O’Kane’s research reveals the industry and ambition of Irish landowners throughout the eighteenth century. A chapter on the Western Baroque landscape which surveys the large-scale improvements in tree-planting, canal-building and the laying out of roads by Kerry landowning families draws attention to what may now be overlooked as commonplace landscape features. The unstable position of the ruin in the landscape is explored in detail; its potential to symbolise both the pre-Reformation Catholic past and the threat of resurgent Catholic power, as well as the ruin of that religion, placed firmly, and visibly, within the narrative of the past. O’Kane traces the ways in which landowners such as the Crosbie family at Ardfert utilised the extant ruins of a Franciscan friary on their land as a key part of their landscaping programme, but also of their construction of a contrived antique identity within Ireland. While the level of detail in the description of landscape improvements may render the text quite dense in parts for a general reader, this, together with the excellent illustrations and wide range of quotations from contemporary sources, will make it a valuable addition to future scholarship and for the preservation of historic landscapes.

One of the remarkable aspects of Ireland and the Picturesque is its attention to movement and progress around the country, and in particular, the impact of tourism in the experience and construction of a sense of place. She charts the careful negotiation between Kerry’s allure as “a kind of Terra Incognita to the greater part of Europe”, and the need to provide easy access to it. The landscape and its monuments were framed variously in the discourses of the sublime and the picturesque, packaged for the consumption of well-heeled visitors who came, for the most part, from overseas. The busy tourist scene at Killarney, promulgated by the visual tourist trails created by Jonathan Fisher, did not entirely suppress alternative uses of the monuments. Tourists frequently got more of a gothic thrill than expected when visiting Muckross Abbey, which remained a frequent, almost daily, site of Catholic burials. Picturesque and devotional interests also clashed at Glendalough, when, in 1714, the high sheriff and his men scattered the annual gathering in honour of St Kevin, pulling down pilgrims’ tents and destroying standing stones and wells. The promotion of one location as picturesque, according to O’Kane, depends on the suppression or demotion of others, as was the case with Killarney and Tralee – the ruined castle in Tralee town could not be seen as picturesque without its attendant instructive visual guides. While O’Kane does focus primarily on the dynamics of power relations within the construction of landscape, this emphasis on process and the inclusion of the first-hand testimonies of visitors also engages with what Tadhg O’Keefe has described as the “discourse around place, individual agency, and the fluidity of meaning and its construction” characteristic of contemporary dialogue on space, place and experience.

One of the most problematic aspects of the picturesque as explored by O’Kane is the extent to which the desire to create a “picture-like” view was imposed on the lives and livelihoods of those living on the land. In many cases, they were disenfranchised and disempowered through the legal and religious constraints around land ownerships. The pseudo-scientific language of husbandry used by the landowners about their tenants reveals a chilling sense of distance – O’Kane quotes late eighteenth century landlord Anthony Foster’s questionable achievement in creating “a new race of tenants” by “fix[ing] upon the most active and industrious labourers” who were then “nursed up in proportion to their industry”. As O’Kane writes, “the use of such animal and vegetable terms with respect to the indigenous population was not unusual for the period”. Similarly, while the “rough” and “picture-like” qualities of the picturesque landscape were a pleasurable diversion for those in the position to enjoy it, roughness was part of an aesthetic of transience and fear for Catholics under the penal laws, who were barred from holding leases for longer than twenty-one years. Catholics had to manage the land in such a way that reflected short-term aspirations in order to avoid drawing attention to themselves from “discoverers”, people who betrayed any illegality, often to their own advantage. The 1777 Map of the Roads of Ireland, commissioned by the Irish House of Commons, echoes this – it carefully delineated the roads, seats and demesnes, but the stretches between one landlord’s house and the next are depicted as empty spaces, devoid of people.
O’Kane builds on several landmark achievements in understanding early modern Ireland, drawing on the recent work of Toby Barnard and Alexandra Walsham, most notably her award-winning *The Reformation of the Landscape: Religion, Identity and Memory in Early Modern Britain and Ireland*. O’Kane’s book can, in many ways, be considered as a formal, primarily visual, study within an interdisciplinary context – it is based in large part on the methodologies of close reading, both of the landscapes and of the various kinds of written and visual texts which survive from the period. These include the “maps, paintings, letters, books, travel descriptions and the sites themselves”. Her aim in doing so is, in her own words, to articulate and preserve a sense of the “extraordinary artistic achievement of the Irish tours and their landscapes, roads, towns and prospects”. While O’Kane certainly achieves this aim, and chronicles in great detail the experience and desires of a certain group of people, her achievement makes the silence from the other side of the demesne wall or the driver’s seat of the jaunting car harder to ignore. It is important to note that experiences beyond those of the landed elite certainly do feature in this book, and also that this kind of broader narrative was, in many ways, outside the scope of this project. Nonetheless, it raises interesting questions for readers on where and how those voices may be heard. Walsham’s nuanced and revelatory work includes an important reminder that the maps, drawings and written accounts on which many of the histories of this period are based “allow us only indirect and imperfect access to how the landscape was interpreted and experienced by the illiterate and taciturn majority whose voices have not been captured in manuscript or print for posterity”.

One of the oblique narratives of this book is that of freedom of movement – Ireland, O’Kane writes, has never been short of transient eyes. The picturesque was, and is, a privileged phenomenon to be able to see – in fact, perhaps that is one of the strangest things about it – it may appear and disappear for different people, a mirage, a decision to see some things and not others. Perhaps it could be compared to an optical illusion, which can only be seen when held and squinted at in precisely the right way. To know the “right way” was to have access to libraries, polite society, travel and education. It is a curiously dispassionate way of seeing, based on the suppression of other views and alternative experiences. This book is also a story of how often and how far people could move – travel as luxury, or as necessity. It is striking how contemporary these issues feel – the absentee landlord returning from England to view his estate, can, perhaps, be compared to the tired CEO in the executive lounges of Doha and Calcutta. Long-distance travel was and is something to look forward to for the eighteenth century Grand Tourist, and the gap-year student, while the prospect of crossing land and sea could and can be very different for the Famine emigrant, or the Syrian refugee. Who knows what land looks like – what beauty is – in such homesick or newly-free circumstances? Aesthetics are never disembodied – “the eye”, so often referred to in both the discourses of eighteenth century landscaping or in that of the “tourist gaze”, cannot travel without a body, after all, a body with memories and experiences which entirely colour the view. As Elizabeth Bishop concluded in “Questions of Travel”:

Continent, city, country, society:  
the choice is never wide and never free  
And here, or there ... No. Should we have stayed at home,  
wherever that may be?

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