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**Review of Matthew Johnson, *Ideas of Landscape*. Blackwell 2007. Pp. 242, 34 figures.
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Reviewed by Matt Edgeworth

Project Officer, Birmingham Archaeology

This book could have been titled – instead of ‘Ideas of Landscapes’ – ‘Landscapes of Ideas’. For landscapes and ideas are inextricably intermeshed. Nowhere is this more the case than in archaeology, where the development of landscape over time is the topic of so much thought and discussion, not to mention the focus of active intervention in the form of excavation, survey and other field techniques.

Matthew Johnson’s book is a reminder that landscape archaeology is, or should be, just as theoretical as any other part of the discipline. The fact that it has the vast material canvas of the landscape as its object of study does not make it any less to do with theories and ideas. Indeed, as Johnson points out, an explicit theorisation of landscape archaeology – especially the particular form it has taken in Britain – is long overdue. For while proponents of the art of interpreting landscape features have developed their skills and techniques to a high degree, they often seem unwilling to tackle associated theoretical issues or even to acknowledge that there are theoretical dimensions to what they do.

Here we should follow the author in drawing distinctions between different parts of the *academic* landscape. Nobody could accuse anthropological archaeologists like Barbara Bender, Bob Layton or the late Peter Ucko of not considering theoretical dimensions of the meaning and politics of landscape. The American tradition of landscape archaeology is also heavily theoretical, if much more ‘objective’ and ‘scientific’ in style. But such generalizing and comparative approaches can themselves be compared with the very particularistic, empirical approach of British landscape archaeology, rooted in local historical studies. These different worlds are, as Johnson puts it, hermetically sealed from each other, neither making reference to the major works of the other. Surely it cannot be right, the author asks, that there should be such different ways of looking at landscapes? How can such different perspectives arise? Bringing the perspectives together is identified at the start as one of the principal tasks of the book.

Johnson is the right person to bridge the chasm because he already has feet in both worlds. His writing on archaeological theory is well known. Here he also describes his fieldwork in Swaledale in the Yorkshire Dales in the north of England, which has influenced his thinking as much as readings of Martin Heidegger or Chris Tilley. Like most archaeologists, his ideas about the past are rooted in detailed investigation of particular local landscapes.

The founding father of British landscape archaeology was W.G. Hoskins, whose influential book *The Making of the English Landscape* (1955) forged landscape history as a field of study in its own right and had a huge impact on subsequent generations of archaeologists. Here the approach, perspectives and methods of Hoskins – formerly neglected by theoreticians – are given detailed consideration. But Johnson does not stop there. He goes on to argue that Hoskins is part of a wider Romantic tradition that stems back to William Wordsworth and beyond. Characteristics of this tradition include regarding the act of viewing landscape as a kind of aesthetic appreciation, looking at the landscape from above, experiencing the landscape through walking, emphasis on understanding landscape in a particular rather than a general way – with regard to the *genius loci* or spirit of place – and so on.

According to Johnson, the methods of British landscape archaeology derived via the work of Hoskins are a more or less direct transposition and expression of the central ideas of English Romanticism. The Romantic tradition gives rise to an empirical approach based on ‘a good pair of boots’ and an intuitive understanding of the landscape. While Johnson acknowledges the real strengths and tremendous achievements of the landscape archaeology influenced by Hoskins, he argues that it needs to widen the horizons set by Wordsworth and explore the connections with other forms of landscape archaeology developed in other parts of the world. It needs to engage with current discussions on practice and agency and other theoretical issues – to acknowledge that the landscape (and our act of viewing the landscape) inevitably has political dimensions. Meaning does not just emerge from the landscape by itself. It is created and shaped as much by ourselves in the present – through our own habitual practices and ways of seeing – as by the activities of people in the past. Crucially, he argues for a questioning of the assumption that there is only one way of looking at and responding to landscape.

In attempting to counterbalance an overly empirical approach, however, Johnson perhaps goes too far in stressing the power of ideas. As the title suggests, he considers ideas to shape the landscape more than the landscape shapes ideas. He acknowledges that “the landscape does affect archaeologists’ interpretations and does limit what archaeology can say about it”. But the extent to which archaeologists and their ideas are themselves created, shaped and modified by the landscapes in which they work is a theme – identified in the preface – which remains largely underdeveloped. For while it is true that Wordsworth’s poetry greatly influenced our understanding of the English landscape, it is also true that Wordsworth was himself a product of the very landscape his poetry was about. Much the same can be said about Hoskins and his version of landscape history.

Consideration of the power of landscape to shape ideas, as well as the other way round, might lead to an alternative answer to one of the central questions posed by the book. When Johnson asks “why do different communities of archaeologists and scholars habitually think about and do archaeology in the way that they do?”, he almost falls into the trap of relativism. He speaks of “a kind of sociological relativism between academic communities, embedded in the belief that different localities and intellectual communities have their own quite different way of doing things, each no better and no worse than the other”.

But here we can object that an archaeology that has emerged from and been honed against the closely knit fields and meadows and settlements of the English landscape could never be the same as an archaeology developed in relation to the vaster spaces of North American or Australian landscapes. The quintessentially English way of seeing landscapes cannot be so easily separated from the quintessentially English landscape itself - with its manorial estates, parish boundaries, moated enclosures and village greens (not to mention its motorway by-passes, quarries, shopping centres and power stations). The fact that our work is grounded in and shaped by our experience of local landscapes, giving rise to difference, is actually the very opposite of relativism. Relativism only rears its head if we see ideas as not being grounded in the material world. In this sense the book perhaps reproduces rather than overcomes the great divide between ideas and landscape (or between the viewer and the viewed) which is itself a part of the Romantic tradition.

The implicit understanding that ideas occupy one (intellectual) sphere inside the head or the realm of discourse, and that the landscape occupies another (material) sphere out there in the

world – rather than the two spheres being inseparably enmeshed together in practice – is not explicitly challenged by the book. Are ideas not embedded in the pattern of fields and the layout of towns or villages? Do these materially embedded ideas not provide a framework for our thinking and action? In that sense, to adapt Johnson’s engaging phrase of ‘England dreaming’, does the landscape not dream us as much as we dream the landscape? For me the central issue raised is not so much how we can combine different ideas about landscape, but rather how we can move beyond the ideas/landscape opposition altogether to explore further the dynamic entanglements that bind them together in our everyday lives and practices.

What comes through in *Ideas of Landscape* – as so brilliantly conveyed by the 1930s railway poster used for the cover - is the numinous quality of the landscapes which both Hoskins and Johnson have studied so well. There is an underlying sense of the richness of landscape, and the many and various layers of meaning which can be discerned there. The book is well-argued and a pleasure to read. Its great strength consists of the connections drawn between areas of study which have up to now systematically ignored each other, bringing out the best of both. All landscape archaeologists and all theoretical archaeologists should read this book.