


Please cite the Published Version

Sewell, Michael  (2023) Book review: Peter Borsay with Rosemary Sweet, The Invention of the English Landscape 1700–1939. *Urban History*. pp. 1-2. ISSN 0963-9268

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0963926823000652>

Publisher: Cambridge University Press (CUP)

Version: Accepted Version

Downloaded from: <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/633770/>

Usage rights:  Creative Commons: Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0

Additional Information: This article has been published in a revised form in *Urban History*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/s0963926823000652>. This version is published under a Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND licence. No commercial re-distribution or re-use allowed. Derivative works cannot be distributed. © The Author(s), 2023.

Enquiries:

If you have questions about this document, contact openresearch@mmu.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in e-space. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our Take Down policy (available from <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/library/using-the-library/policies-and-guidelines>)

Peter Borsay and Rosemary Sweet, *The Invention of the English Landscape 1700-1939* (Bloomsbury, 2023) xi+289pp. 27 figures. Bibliography. £85.00 hbk. £76.50 ebk.

The English landscape was once treated as a passive backdrop to events. Now, partly thanks to the work of Peter Borsay, historians understand that the landscape is vital in forging our consciousness and our sense of self. How we use, control, and experience the environment are ways by which historical memory and identity are created, maintained, and challenged. The English landscape has been a place of recreation, a storehouse of romantic myth and tragedy; it has been used to shape political allegiance and used to attract tourists. It can be a place of friction or division and has been used to promote civic pride and commercial ambition. Studies of landscape, then can be highly revealing about the uses and meanings of history.

This book, written by Borsay before his death and edited by Rosemary Sweet, is a much-needed addition to historical scholarship. It is the latest and last of an influential run of books published by Borsay that include *The Image of Georgian Bath*, *The English Urban Renaissance: Culture and Society in the Provincial Town 1660-1770* and *A History of Leisure: The British Experience Since 1500* and Sweet's introduction is a fitting tribute. Borsay covers a variety of different themes — from the development of tourism in both the natural and the man-made world, to the impact of revolutions in transportation and mobility. He shows how landscape was used in the construction of identities, both local, national and colonial alongside race, gender, and class. His work on imagined spaces is crucial for our understanding of the tourist boom in an age where “place-making” and local pride are increasingly central to local and national policy.

The Invention of the English Landscape has an extraordinarily ambitious and wide-ranging chronology. The book moves deftly from the Reformation to the modern era, covering the Enlightenment and Romanticism along the way. All the while, Borsay shows the reader how these different epochs oversaw transformations in people's interaction with the landscape around them. It is an approach that is also thematically promiscuous, examining political, aesthetic, and scientific interpretations of the landscape, and how these were in turn transformed by technological and scientific changes. For example, Borsay traces the rise of a new kind of archaeology that was intertwined with mythology and folklore, noting the changing relationship that society had with the medieval past. Borsay argues that Stuart England was a watershed moment between the past and the contemporary period and the book shed's light on the longer-term impact of the Civil Wars on shaping understandings of landscape up to the present day. Borsay has opted for breadth rather than detail, and there are

a few places where more could have been said on topics such as the concept of “forgetting” — moments where historical memory is erased or suppressed in favour of local, national or political unity. Regardless, the book will lay foundations for future historians to examine and explore the imagination of the landscape throughout different periods.

Borsay has built on research undertaken by Alexandra Walsham and Paul Redman. In doing so, he focuses on the development of the landscape as a recreational and educational tool. He is interested in how landscape has changed from being “a store holder” of religious beliefs in the early modern period to becoming itself central to cementing English national identity in the Victorian period. In this sense, *The Invention of the English Landscape* shows threads of connection between vastly different periods of English history. Although there are still questions to be answered, this work should inspire the next generation of urban, social, and cultural historians in engaging with the questions about the landscape around us. It should also have an appeal to a wide range of interdisciplinary scholars, planners and practitioners who have an interest in the landscape, whether that be towns, cities, or the countryside. As debates rage about the state of our contemporary landscape, rural development, heritage, conservation, and policy initiatives such as “levelling up”, Borsay’s work will surely be beneficial.

The Invention of the English Landscape is, therefore, a welcome contribution and is extremely valuable to our understanding of the English landscape. It is truly fitting of such a prominent urban historian, whose work, ranging from the development of the seaside town to themes of modernity and memory within the landscape, has inspired historians over the last few decades. As our towns and landscapes are under constant reinvention, this book will be beneficial for a wide range of historians of different periods.

Dr. Michael Sewell

Manchester Metropolitan University