

PREFACE

Landscape is a noun. First. It designates the surface of the earth people shaped and shape deliberately for permanent purposes. Oceans, polar ice, glaciers, rocky islets, and—even today—parts of steppes, deserts, tropical forest, and similar places seemingly untouched (or at least uninhabited, perhaps seldom if ever transited) are properly wilderness. A soda can tossed from an airplane mars the polar ice just as it mars the ocean, but the dropped can converts neither spot into landscape. As an adjective, “landscape” names a genre of painting and other representational art more or less centered on views of the solid surface of the earth. Now used loosely to include wilderness other than the deep sea (**seascape** exists for that), among art historians and amateur photographers the word raises the issue of proportion: overwhelming background converts portrait or still life into landscape image. As an adjective, “landscape” also designates types of architecture and building: landscape architecture and landscape gardening find core identities in ground

shaped for beauty rather than shelter and crops. As a verb, “landscape” means to install plants (chiefly sod but also bushy coniferous shrubs and scraggly trees) on raw land recently covered thinly with loam and more or less smoothed. This book offers a compact analysis of “landscape” as noun stripped of accessory and ornament, the word naming the skeleton and sinews of shaped land.

This book also offers mostly words, and mostly old ones, at first glance simple but on reflection nuanced and rich. Putting names to core components of landscape troubles at first and then empowers. **Meadow** names made openness, a different kind from **pasture**. One produces hay for winter feed, the other offers summer grazing: both differ from that favorite of landscape painters and landscape architects, the glade. Both figure prominently in preschool picture books depicting farms as nineteenth-century mixed-use, Old MacDonald places, but as background only, landing strips for sunlight. Toddlers learn the sounds made by cows and sheep, not the attributes of meadows and pastures, let alone the names of flat or rolling greensward. Any thoughtful explorer of landscape musing on landscape constituents muses mostly in words, if only to wonder silently at the names of things. A reader discovering in a novel or travelogue the term **oriel window** can look up the words in a good dictionary, especially an illustrated architectural dictionary, and can proceed somewhat reassured. Yet a walker noticing an elaborate sort of bay window that seems to have been built off-site finds researching the construct perplexing. Inquiring into what is noticed visually means getting the details into words, and often getting tired or lost in the

process. Finding that lexicographers rarely distinguish between **ditch** and **trench** (and thus ignore nuances implicit in **trench coat**) disappoints at first but then (sometimes) sparks self-driven determination. Most explorers, even the most casual ones improving their time by staying away from stores, coffee shops, and electronic devices, can name the essential components of landscape and begin to wonder at nameable nuance. They can look up terms in good dictionaries, especially old ones.

Dictionaries travel badly. Most are heavy and retard the explorer of landscape. But they reward homecoming. Secondhand unabridged ones are cheap to acquire. Atlases, gazetteers, and specialized maps remain expensive: while they shame electronic cartography, they can bankrupt. They travel badly too, especially in rain. Being lost, even being deliberately free of electronic location devices, sharpens one's senses and often eventually reassures. Making one's way often reveals paths distinct and well used or hard to discern, abandoned (perhaps for good reason), but all nonetheless instructive. Exploring, being lost for a while, looking around without distraction, or just going for a walk eventually raises questions of words, if only in the telling and retelling of short-term adventure. Almost anyone can afford an unabridged dictionary, even an older one (which often proves more insightful), and therefore can explore the origins of basic landscape terms and discover the wealth in root and period meaning implicit in terms so seemingly simple, so easy to spell, so fundamental to learning to speak and read English that they enter the mind as concept foundation stones buried and almost forgotten. Using an older unabridged dictionary

often leads to coveting new ones, even the most recent twenty-volume edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*—one of the chief sources of this little book—open volumes of which can be placed side by side for comparative analysis. But older dictionaries offer possibilities all their own. In them the inquirer finds definitions, even headwords, now gone from all but a few contemporary dictionaries. Serendipitous discovery leads to reading in etymological dictionaries and in dialect and other specialist lexicons, and in listening ever more carefully to people close to landscape constituents, people who distinguish **gut** from **gat** and both from **gutter** and **guzzle**.

British dictionaries typically focus on word history and even today emphasize the needs of well-educated, upper-class, often scholarly readers. The *Chambers Dictionary* still champions Scottish attitudes against the English *Oxford English Dictionary*: neither nods to blue-collar readers. American dictionaries have always emphasized correct current usage: they deemphasize class distinction while facilitating class mobility (hopefully upward) and the assimilation of immigrants learning English. American lexicographers have proven more open to valuing spoken English, but since the 1960s triumph of television, the news announcer and broadcast speech have dismissed many of the regionalisms, Africanisms (including those from the Bahamas), and ruralisms which shaped a century of Webster and Merriam-Webster unabridged dictionaries (all often available for a pittance at flea markets and in used-book shops) and which graced the now-forgotten twelve-volume *Century Dictionary* of 1914. At some point on a sandy beach or among commercial

fishermen, or even aground in a small boat, the careful inquirer may hear a word pronounced **swatch** but spelled otherwise in most English and American dictionaries. **Swash** is a hard word and abscondite. But asking a local commercial fisherman about a stretch of low-tide water snaking through sandbars often produces it, and once heard, it opens on mazy usage and lexicography.

Two keys unlock essential landscape. Looking around, walking and noticing and thinking, putting words to things, especially simple things, enables and empowers and pleases: discovering landscape is inexpensive, good exercise for body and mind, and leads to satisfying and often surprising discovery. Swedish has a term for the restorative, relaxing effect of being solitary and thoughtful, but not lonely: **ensamhet**. Asking generally, eschewing what seem generic terms, produces localisms, archaisms, and glimmering portals, especially from people intimate with a local place. "What is that?" asked in a polite, genuine way with a tentative gesture toward some landscape component often produces rich response: "Well, it's not really a slough, not really, it's a bayou, you can get through at the end there, in a canoe, at least some kids did a couple of years ago." In a nation using all too casually old spatial and structural words, the scattering of Dutch, French, and Spanish terms proves elusive until one points at scrub in southwest Colorado, asks, and hears **bosque** in response. Questing without generic landscape terms makes questioning almost magic. But first one must see something, must realize it, must make it real, then ask carefully and listen well, maybe ask again, and later on, feet up, look up words.

So here find a little book (with bibliographical ballast) about some words critical in naming the essence of landscape. Neither dictionary nor field guide, it is only an invitation to walk, to notice, to ask, sometimes to look up and around, sometimes to look up in a dictionary. It belongs at home. Pockets are for energy bars, apples, chocolate, and the smallest of notebooks. But where landscape flourishes in its most essential form, pockets prove few.