

Book Review - The Invention of the Countryside by Donna Landry

To say that the countryside is at a turning point is to state the obvious, but what is not so obvious is why we are where we are today with the debate, and how those various viewpoints and arguments have evolved and polarized. In her recent book, 'The Invention of the Countryside' Donna Landry, a peripatetic resident of Chagford, not only offers some very plausible explanations but explores historical attitudes to landscape, hunting, walking and ecology. She writes objectively with a well-researched passion.

The Invention of the Countryside

Hunting, Walking and Ecology in English Literature, 1671 – 1831

By Donna Landry Published by Palgrave

ISBN : 0 333 96154 4 Price £45 hardback To say that the countryside is at a turning point is to state the obvious, but what is not so obvious is why we are where we are today with the debate, and how those various viewpoints and arguments have evolved and polarized. In her recent book, 'The Invention of the Countryside' Donna Landry, a peripatetic resident of Chagford, not only offers some very plausible explanations but explores historical attitudes to landscape, hunting, walking and ecology. She writes objectively with a well-researched passion.

She starts off quite rightly by exploring notions of 'country' and 'countryside'. The 16th and 17th Cent term 'country' implying the healthy rural reality, extolling the economy and skills of agriculture which produced food for the nation, albeit at the expense of the poorly paid rural English peasantry. The term 'countryside' however has evolved from urban sensitivities, the unconscious need to seek out and proclaim the countryside, as an idyllic unchanging, rolling landscape, a mythological sanitized rural beauty, an English neo-classical setting for painters, poets and pic-nickers. Both views strangely enough evoking feelings of national pride but for quite different reasons.

The dates of the book are no coincidence. 1671 is the date of the Game Act which sought to divide society into two types of person, the hunter and the hunted, the qualified sportsman and the poacher. 'Fifty times the property was required to kill a partridge than to vote' Which shows where the landed gentry's real concerns were. Rural franchise was obviously not top of their list. The Game Act was repealed in 1831 and Game Licences could be bought. It was only in 1880 that tenant farmers could shoot rabbits and hares on their own land.

Yes it is an old bone we are chewing upon. True it is not one of those books you would read from cover to cover at a single sitting, neither is it a stodgy reference book. Each chapter is well argued and within each chapter are many charming vignettes of country attitudes. Donna Landry explores such topics as 'The invention of modern fox hunting' and the class conscious notions of 'green pastoral landscapes'. She explores the 'Greenness of Hunting' as well as the 'Poetry of the Agrarian Movement'. She explores the 'Ideology of the Landscaped Park', the 'Politics of Game Legislation' and 'The Poacher in Art and Literature'. She looks at the 'Pleasures of the Chase', 'Hunting Women in the 18th Century' as well as the history of the side saddle. Then there is 'Poetry, Pets and the beginnings of animal rights', 'Men and Dogs', 'Romantic Walking as anti hunting', 'Botanising and Walking as Trespassing'.

John Clare of course turns up as well as Michael Drayton, Celia Fiennes, Virginia Woolf, AP Herbert, James Hawker, William Cobbett and William Wordsworth.

I craved for more illustrations but those that appeared were excellent : a delightful otter chewing on a salmon from the Bodelian, George Moorland of course, Gainsborough, Stubbs John Wootton and James Seymour as well as photographs from a recent Pro hunting rally at Wincanton racecourse. Yes it is an academic book and it is expensive, but the delights which it holds are well worth exploring.

Donna Landry finishes off with an excellent chapter on Dartmoor. Her last paragraph is laced with common sense. 'Modern hunting will have to change, of course, before it is worthy of not being banned. Let hunting be returned to its greener, naturalistic former self. Let it also be rethought in terms of ecology. Let walkers know themselves to be treading in the footsteps of hunters and poachers as well as natural historians.'

Heartily recommended. Ought to be published in paperback.