Landscape as Distinctively “British”
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No doubt there exist men who are incapable of love of the country, just as there are men incapable of love itself but they are not the best men, at any rate (they) are not normal men, and they are in any case in an infinitesimal minority.”

Landscapes depicted in nineteenth-century watercolor paintings featured bucolic, well-ordered scenes of the English countryside. Often they incorporated a highly detailed likeness of the natural world, including weather. Victorian sensibilities and interests, as well as political and social constraints, limited what was portrayed. Scenes showing women and children, farm animals, happy agricultural laborers and classical ruins were deemed appropriate by the predominantly wealthy, middle class, educated audience who were the primary patrons of these works.

While one function of landscape paintings was the evocation of a mood they also illustrated what it meant to be ‘English’. The British nation, having been newly formed in 1707 when Scotland joined England and Wales, began to establish a sense of national identity that was expressed in both art and culture. A succession of wars against France as well as the adoption of Protestantism as the empire’s religion helped formulate an idea British national character as unique from any other. Distinguishing themselves, in opposition to others, whether culturally, religiously or politically, further illustrated what it meant to be British and English as well. The outcome of which was that “a sense of British national identity was forged, and the manner in which it was forged has shaped
the quality of this particular sense of nationhood and belonging ever since, both in terms of its remarkable strengths and resilience, and in terms of its considerable and increasing evident weakness.”3 The watercolor Exhibition I will be leading clearly exemplify these very notions.

Victorian England in large part was defined by the far-reaching consequences of the Industrial Revolution. For one, the influx of money into the economy created a wealthy middle class that had unprecedented purchasing power, not to mention opportunities for education and travel. The beginning of the nineteenth century also saw advancements in the sciences that included discoveries in geology and meteorology. In addition, developments in the field of optics altered the way in which light and vision were understood, 4 the result of which was that the visual arts were forever transformed in terms of both style and meaning. At the same time, the construction of railroads and polluting factories permanently transformed the English landscape.

Helen Paterson Allingham, born in 1848, was a British watercolor artist and illustrator. Prior to her death in 1926 she became the first female member of the Royal Society of Watercolors Society. Spending a great deal of her adult life in the small, rural village of Sandhills in Surrey England influenced the subject matters Allingham incorporated into her work. In particular Cottage Near Pinner, 1845 (Fig 1), can be viewed as a reaction to the dramatic social changes occurring during the nineteenth century. As such, Allingham’s watercolors represented the sentimental close of the picturesque movement, with its nostalgia for a supposedly happier rural past. She saw country life as an idyllic refuge from the squalor and ugliness of an increasingly urbanized and industrialized society. She felt, with some reason, that her watercolors
might be seen as a record of a disappearing way of life that included quaint country cottages and farms, women with children, cheerful peasants, domesticated animals, and native flora.\(^5\) Renato Rosaldo, in “Culture and Truth, the Remaking of Social Analysis” suggests that this reflects “a particular kind of nostalgia, often found under imperialism, where people mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed”\(^6\). This is evident in the demand by art patrons of the time for works that captured picturesque rural village scenes such as Samuel Palmer’s 1845 watercolor entitled *A Farmyard near Princes Risborough* (Fig 3)

While not strictly Landscape paintings, two excellent illustrations of subject matter, as emblematic of British character, are Helen Allingham’s *Cottage Near Pinner, 1845* (Fig 1) and *Cottage Near Shottermill, 1891* (Fig 2). Both works include an old cottage, located within a rural landscape, surrounded by indigenous trees and flowers; rounding out the scenes are the figures of an elderly woman and children. In each, Allingham synthesizes requisite elements that form an idyllic vision rather than a faithful account of a particular location in time. This was perhaps the case as over the course of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, landscape painting rose in popularity in response to the spread of industrialization and urbanism and the concomitant feared disappearance of rural life. Artists such as Allingham were able to exploit this market by producing landscape watercolors representing common tropes of rural life appealing to urban art buyers.\(^7\)

In 1881 Helen Allingham, along with her husband and children, moved from London to the small hamlet of Sandhills in Surrey, approximately 40 miles southwest of London.\(^8\) Within the vicinity of Sandhills were the villages of Haslemere, Witley and
Hartley, each of which Allingham depicted in her work. With the establishment of a railway system at the beginning of the nineteenth century both passengers, and a new, more modern way of life, made their way to towns on the outskirts of London. With its close proximity to the “firing line” of urbanization and modernity, Allingham’s portrayal of Pinner, a small rural community located just 17 miles northwest of London, was very likely a reaction to the rapidly vanishing countryside.

The manifestation of the prevailing view of an endangered rural way of life was not limited to the visual arts. One of the great British novelists of the nineteenth-century, George Eliot, had a cottage in Shottermill where she wrote the novel, *Middlemarch: A Study of a Provincial Life.* The plot covers numerous contemporary subjects involving politics and romantic love but it is the underlying theme of a deeply reactionary mindset (within a settled community, facing the prospect of unwelcome change) that pervaded both the visual and literary arts at the time. Like Allingham’s watercolors, Georg Eliot’s work was a reaction to the contemporary issue of urbanization taking over rural life.

Perhaps no artistic discipline was as well suited to capturing these transformations as watercolor. In addition, over time, the subject of landscape, more specifically, came to define English character. In other words, scenes of the generic activities that take place in largely agricultural landscapes are as much the focus as the land itself. Elizabeth Helsinger, in *Rural Scenes and National Representation,* gets to the heart of the matter when she says, “English is identified with the rural and domestic, and the rural and domestic with the common and daily.”

Samuel Palmer’s 1845 watercolor entitled *A Farmyard near Princes Risborough* (Fig 3), exemplifies this idea and, similar to Helen Allingham’s *Cottage Near Pinner,* also contains many of the same motifs considered
appropriate in a portrayal of the British Landscape. In both subject matter and technique, Palmer conveys a sense of calm. The shepherd and child seem to be in no rush to herd their cattle back to the somewhat rundown, yet picturesque farm. The absence of strong lines and sharp angles combined with light brushstrokes, give the scene a timeless, dream-like quality. In essence, both of these works are saturated with collective nostalgia and an association with the idea of what is fundamentally “Englishness.”¹³

Depictions of landscapes, as related to British temperament, were not limited to the visual arts. Various English poets made connections, within their work, between the rural, English countryside and British character. For example, Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s 1850 poem, *In Memoriam*¹⁴ was praised as a work of common landscape and of daily life.¹⁵ In section eighty-nine of the poem, Tennyson describes, in the utmost detail, the sights, sounds and even climate of a day spent in the English countryside. At the same time, he uses the poem as an opportunity to rail against urban life. The nineteenth-century British dramatist and poet, Henry Taylor, suggests that Tennyson’s achievement in this central Victorian poem was to convince his readers that his lyrics were what one critic called ‘heart utterances’, that could speak for a whole nation.¹⁶

The appeal of the British countryside, as described in numerous literary sources, had its basis in scientific discoveries as well as the prevailing religious ideology of the time. Often, the two went hand-in-hand. One of the foremost watercolorists and art critics of the nineteenth century, John Ruskin, believed that by naturalistically depicting nature the mysteries of God would be revealed. In short, Ruskin equated the natural world with moral and spiritual veracity. He felt that beyond the ability to see nature, one had to capture it precisely and with the sharpest detail in order to know divine truth. So strong
were his convictions that he demanded that artists, for instance, examine nature in order to see the nuances, imperfections, and changes in a single wave of water, a fluttering leaf, or the expanse of sky. He insisted that an artist must capture these details so that the painting may come together as truth. In his seminal tome, “Modern Painters”, Ruskin describes hue as “a beautiful auxiliary in working out the great impression to be conveyed, but it is not the source or the essence of that impression; it is little more than a visible melody, given to raise and assist the mind in the reception of honorable ideas — as sacred passages of sweet sound, to prepare the feelings for the reading of the mysteries of God.” An excellent illustration of this belief is Joseph Noel Paton’s, *Study from Nature, Inveruglas, 1857* (Scotland) (Fig 4), in which we see a man pausing by the side of a stream. Paton’s attention to the minutest detail is nothing short of astounding. He gives each rock and leaf his fullest attention (Fig 5). In addition, his execution of the stream is so naturalistic one feels they can hear the babbling of the brook as it calmly flows through the ravine. And while initially we presume the figure in the painting is merely out for a walk in the woods, the binoculars shown in the lower, right-hand corner (Fig 4) indicate that he is probably an amateur naturalist and, if we follow Ruskin’s logic, on a noble mission to explore nature and ultimately know God. Because they are not bound with oil, the translucent quality of watercolor paints necessitates the method of building up color-upon-color and, therefore, relates directly to what Ruskin saw in his own work as layers of meaning and truth in nature - the process of which is the principle role of any worthy artist.

Shifting societal dynamics also played a part in the evolution of a particular narrative style of landscape watercolor paintings. In particular, the development of a
wealthy, middle-class created a new social hierarchy in Victorian England whereby those in the upper echelon had authority, and therefore held power, over those in the lower social strata. Examples of these new class distinctions were found throughout British society especially in the visual arts. As a case in point, landscape watercolor paintings embodied the class distinctions not only of English agricultural production but also of a national political life rooted in it. “Those who owned and those who produced were assigned different roles by the landscape.”¹⁹ And because “artists were obliged to make some attempt to fashion drawings that were acceptable in their client’s eyes”²⁰ they relied on a set of formulaic landscape features. These included, among other things, images of contented, rural peasants, at ease within a well-ordered rural landscape. Often they are depicted near a water feature tending to farm animals. Such common themes in Victorian watercolor paintings served to reinforce the rightful place of the wealthy at the top of the social order. It was not uncommon therefore for artists at the time, despite their political views, to create watercolors that appealed to their wealthy patrons. The result was watercolors, such as Joseph Mallord William Turner’s *Lancaster, from the Aqueduct Bridge, 1825* (Fig 6) that omitted disagreeable subjects. Furthermore, the mere fact of Turner portraying peasants engaged in non-work related activities (in *Lancaster, from the Aqueduct Bridge*), such as fishing and relaxing by a riverbank, reinforced the notion held by the upper classes of the poor as content in their role within a divinely sanctioned, well ordered society. Just as importantly, it served to emphasize the social status of the well to do. Samuel Palmer, a younger contemporary of Turner’s, in his watercolor entitled *Waterfall North Wales, 1836* (Fig 7), was clearly influenced by these trends as well. In the scene, a shepherd takes a break from tending his cattle and reclines in the shade under
a tree while gazing out over a peaceful glen, on the other side of which is a cascading waterfall. Similarly, George Price Boyce’s Landscape Godestow Nunnery, Oxfordshire, 1862 (Fig 8), while conveying a feeling of repose and rural calm, more importantly, through its subject matter, reflects the collective national ethics of Great Britain that included a well ordered society, loyalty, patriotism, hard work and perseverance. The cultural significance of Victorian watercolors cannot be underestimated as their depictions of rural landscapes were highly valued as metaphors for Englishness.22

The unique climate of the British Isles, prone to severe and shifting changes in weather, was considered a close approximation of the typical British character as tough and resilient. This had special meaning following the Napoleonic Wars as the English took great pains to define themselves in opposition to anything French, including their climate.23 The uniqueness of the English environment served this purpose and is often represented in British watercolor scenes as stormy and/or turbulent conditions. As seen in Turner’s Conway Castle, North Wales, 1800 (Fig 9). The Brits defined themselves in relation to their weather and topography: both resistant and enduring. Furthermore, the translucent properties of watercolor paints, necessitating, as noted earlier, the use of multiple layers, allowed for the depiction of subtle changes in atmosphere that conveyed both the ephemeral nature of the English countryside and the typical British temperament.

Not surprisingly water features prominently in Victorian British landscapes as it does in the inimitable, damp clime of the British Isles, which, as found nowhere else on earth, defines not only the climate of England but, again, ‘Englishness’ as well. While the presence of water and meteorological conditions in landscape paintings helped locate a
scene within English borders, they were also meant to evoke mood and sentiment whether in the form of rain, stormy seas, rivers, streams or mountain springs. Many landscape watercolorists continued to include typical motifs that geographically and atmospherically identified Victorian Britain with one important addition: that of an unsettled, ever changing climate. Turner’s treatment of weather in *Conway Castle, North Wales*, 1800 (Fig 9) illustrates this. The castle itself, which is dwarfed by a vast sky filled with ominous grey clouds, is set upon a high bluff above a bay whose rough seas are being buffeted by strong winds. And despite the absence of traditional landscape subject matter the painting, by combining architectural, geographical and meteorological features, still evokes an authentic, historic British location that would have been understood by viewers and patrons alike as distinctly British in quality and disposition.

Likewise, David Cox’s watercolors are notably evocative of mood and atmosphere. In particular, *Sun, Wind, Rain, 1845* (Fig.10), while it includes the customary landscape imagery of a wide, expansive agricultural field with peasants working the land; a simple, country road winding its way towards a village in the distance, on which a family travels by horseback, it also incorporates the novel addition of turbulent storm clouds and driving rain. By the end of the nineteenth century landscape watercolors included an array of compositional narrative devices synonymous with British spirit, values and principles. Albert Goodwin’s *Hasting’s at Sunset, 1885* (Fig 10), for instance, integrates important themes in Victorian British watercolors which were developed by his predecessors over several decades. The title itself locates the scene on the south coast of England, lending credibility to the narrative. From the vantage point of the spectator atop a hill in the countryside there is an unimpeded view of grazing sheep as
well as the town of Hastings. A road bisects the scene and we can see two figures making their way into the village. The overall use of muted tones further conveys a serene, pastoral setting. In contrast however, the dark clouds, rolling across the sky in the distance, lend an unsettled, transient feeling to the piece. It is this combination of rural tranquility and atmospheric unrest that, in pictorial form, defines ‘Britishness’.

The birth of the British nation led to the need for self-definition that was established by synthesizing the societal components of politics, religion and nationalism, as well as recent discoveries in the natural sciences and geography, into a cohesive expression of English character. Fittingly, Victorian watercolors in form, content and technique, were understood by artists and viewers alike as exemplifying the unique qualities of the British character, as no other art form could. The result of which was that watercolor, as a medium, was integrated into the definition of the “English self” as well.

End Notes


Helen Allingham Bibliography: http://www.helenallingham.com/Helen_Biography.htm

Google Maps.


Helsinger, Rural Scenes, p. 65.

Helsinger, Rural Scenes, p. 1.


Ruskin, Modern Painters, Volume 1, p 170.

Helsinger, Rural Scenes, p. 25.


Helsinger, Rural Scenes, p.5.

Helsinger, Rural Scenes, p. 5.