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## Phillip H. Round

### LIFE AND LAND (IN WORDS AND PICTURES)

“The soul,” Wallace Stevens once said, “is composed / Of the external world.” But what is the nature of a life lived in historical relation to the external world, and what is the landed world that life explores? The following essays, delivered as part of “Writing Life and Land,” a symposium sponsored by the University of Iowa’s Department of English in April 1999, take up these questions and sharpen their focus.

“Land” and “landscape” are evasive tradition-laden words. “Land,” in English, is etymologically linked in its Indo European base to concepts of unoccupied space, as in the French *lande*, “moor,” but also to *llan* in Welsh for an “enclosure” or “yard,” and thus to private property. Landscape is likewise burdened, and since the seventeenth century has implied the picturesque, the minutely arranged and aesthetically enjoyed out-of-doors.

Dissatisfied with terms like land and landscape, the following essayists explore instead “landforms”—the more-than-visual, less-than-ownable layered and historical shapes taken by Stevens’s external world. Moving chronologically from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries, and thematically from narrative to image, they take us deeper into lives and land, to the intersections of life writing and landforms that have transformed space into place.

We begin our journey in the 1830s with William Howarth’s “Earth Islands: Darwin and Melville in the Galapagos.” Showing how two quite different careers trace back to formative experiences on the Galapagos Islands, Howarth explores the ways in which Darwin and Melville’s divergent lives create of these “earth islands” very different lands.

Arriving on the *Beagle* in 1835, Darwin was full of hope that his study of natural history in the Galapagos would give his life both personal and professional direction. Melville, landing in 1841 as a seaman on the New Bedford whaler, the *Acushnet*, was much less sanguine about the islands. To his eyes they appeared a cinder heap, a vacant city lot of a place.

But these landscapes would remain very much a part of both men’s imagination, becoming in fact so much a fabric of their being that each would collect his thoughts about the islands many years later and publish works based on those experiences—Darwin, *The Origin of Species* (1859) and Melville,

“The Encantadas” (1854).

Darwin thought back on the Galapagos while at his farm in Kent. There, while pacing a sand walk known as the “thinking path,” he formed his ideas about descent with modification, and the path has since become, in the interpretive literature surrounding Darwin’s life, a “common metaphor for his ideas about natural selection and evolution.”

Melville’s literary failures and desultory life on a farm in Pittsfield, Massachusetts shaped his memory. Lacking a thinking path to mold his thoughts, and a family pension to support his musing, Melville’s “enchanted isles” breathe sulfur, cinder, and silence into the writer’s final thirty-five years, most of which were consumed with the duties of a customs inspector.

For each, the Galapagos memories remained vivid and disturbing, challenging religious and social ideals. “Rather than risk censure from religious authorities,” Howarth reports, “both men turn to secret writing” to contain the landforms that so haunted their imaginations. Drawn through the alembic of their creative minds, the land becomes hieroglyph and symbol, allegory and theory.

In “The Landscape of Capitalism,” Robert F. Sayre takes a different, autobiographical approach to the question of how life and land meet and transform each other in the Iowa prairie. Instead of a “thinking path,” Sayre finds in the Midwest grasslands an investment curve. After making mental plans to buy an old farm, fix it up, build tennis courts, and sell off ten-acre parcels, Sayre comes to the realization that Iowa is no untrammelled paradise to be disposed with as one wills—beautiful and inviting though it may be. Its box elders, soft maples, cottonwoods, and rolling acreage are the products of more than a century of human intervention.

Digging deeper into the Iowa landscape, Sayre uncovers a long history of capitalist manipulation, a history that very nearly parallels his own landowning dreams. Iowa’s past features men like the English gentleman, William B. Close, who in 1876 began to speculate in western American lands, founding Close Colony in the western part of the state. Close and others left an indelible mark on Iowa’s landforms, draining large segments of the wetlands that at one time made up approximately 28% of the area. Dividing the land for farms meant draining it, and draining the wetlands required so much capital that speculators were from the beginning the strange bedfellows of the farmers and ranchers.

In his discovery of Iowa's capitalist landscape, Sayre cannot help but admire the entrepreneurs, for they "were the flywheels and governors of the great steam engine of American society that was transforming the landscape" (21). Nature, however, does not follow an infinitely progressive investment curve, and "the land has its limits," as Sayre observes. "It cannot be made constantly more productive, without damage elsewhere and to it directly."

Joni L. Kinsey's discussion of Terry Evans's prairie photographs, which have been featured on the *Review's* covers all this year, "Ending Up and Landing Out in the Prairie," extends and enlarges on Sayre's realization that the landscape we see before us is forever changing, and forever shaped by humankind. Noting that many outside the Midwest have little love for the prairie landscape, Kinsey traces their lack of appreciation to their ignorance of the complexity of the prairie's changing ecosystem. "The problem is not that prairies have too little to offer," notes Kinsey, "it's that we have only begun to appreciate their richness." In Terry Evans's photographs, Kinsey finds not only that richness, but perhaps more importantly, an evocative "tension between natural and human environments."

Kinsey suggests that Evans's long-standing interest in the grasslands has allowed her to explore three unique perspectives at length—close-ups, horizons, and aerial views. From these very different points of view, Evans allows us to explore the "inhabited prairie," the prairie teeming with animal and plant diversity, atmospheric and climatic mutability, and "gravel pits, bomb targets, salvage yards . . . and suburbs." As in the essays of Howarth and Sayre, the intersection of human life and natural landforms, when seen through Evans's eyes, open up into layers of history, use, abuse, and abundance. Evans's photographs "invite us to delve into the mysteries" of the prairie without turning away from the signs of human intervention and misuse.

The final essay in this gathering, Hertha Dawn Sweet Wong's, "Native American Visual Autobiography: Figuring Place, Subjectivity, and History," asks perhaps the ultimate question about life, land, and history in America: "Who is at home in what is now the United States?"

Examining the works of Native artists and writers ranging from Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds to N. Scott Momaday and Leslie Silko, Wong finds that the answer to this question is complicated, demanding that we "re-envision what we thought we knew" about landscape, history, and autobiography.

Even more directly than in the previous essays, Wong's discussion shows

how Native Americans' stories of community and place have traditionally been woven directly from local materials, from specific places and things within a region. Throughout the United States, rock art and geoglyphs once oriented people to the land around them. Plains Indian ledger books, detailing the history and movements of the people, were made of earth paints and animal hide, oriented to the four directions, circling out in spiral narratives of time.

With the genocidal fury of the Anglo-American conquest, these performances of what Wong calls auto-geography ("acts of personal and cultural geography that construct 'a place seen from within'") were put under intense pressure—the Plains ledger books were soon painted or drawn with commercial paints and pencils on commercial ledger paper for white readers—and it has become the goal of "contemporary Native American writers and artists . . . to articulate their distinctive, contemporary, transcultural subjectivities." In order to do so, "they must tell the stories of place . . . the stories of home, homeland, or homelessness."

Heap of Birds's giant lightboard installations, Silko's collections of writing and photography—these bring together life and land, artistic subjectivity and communal awareness within a "precise geography" of "coded little stories." But unlike the secret writing of Darwin and Melville that Howarth describes, Heap of Birds's Cheyenne language word pictures help him reclaim that language and that nation, and in so doing, Wong argues, "construct a contemporary Cheyenne subjectivity capacious enough for all the contradictions and cultural crossings of a postmodern world."

Placing oneself in the landscape—pacing a sandy path in the Kentish Downs, thinking of tennis courts on an Iowa prairie, snapping pictures of American grasslands from the air, planting signposts along a busy New York through-way—these disparate activities, the subjects of the following essays, all reflect in one way or another, the writing, inscribing, and representing that is the complex and contradictory work we humans do in order to make this world our own. All share the conviction that life and land are layered, historical things, and that a right seeing of how they come together, a way of seeing that does not shrink from signs of dispossession, misuse, and despair, will allow us to join with N. Scott Momaday in saying, "The first truth is that I *love* the land; I see that it is beautiful; I delight in it; I am alive in it."