

# FOREWORD

## *The Many Joys of Landscape Reading*

William Cronon

I SHOULD CONFESS HERE AT THE BEGINNING OF WILLIAM WYCKOFF'S wonderful new book that I share with its author a passion for landscape reading—a passion that those who have never experienced this particular pleasure may find eccentric. My students will tell you that I am fond of announcing in class that there is no richer, more complex, more subtly suggestive or revealing historical document in all the world than a landscape. In my large lecture courses, I always include one day when discussion sections leave their classrooms behind and wander across campus to puzzle together over such questions as how the age of buildings can be found in their appearance and the materials from which they are made; why lawns and trees are planted and laid out as they are; and how ideas of nature are expressed in the geographical arrangements of human structures. In smaller classes, one of my greatest delights (which I hope my students wind up sharing) is the full day we spend driving around southern Wisconsin to view everything from roads to houses to parking lots, from quarries to prairies to orchards, from farms to forests to parks, from malls to fast-food restaurants to abandoned industrial sites, and so on and on. Viewed in this multifaceted way, places that we pass every day without much thought suddenly become fascinating and mysterious. Each landscape has endless stories to tell if only we understand the codes that render their details, their surfaces and depths, their peculiarities and contradictions legible.

This fascination for landscape reading is shared among many academic disciplines, though each approaches the exercise with radically different goals. A geologist is perennially on the lookout for places where rocks, usually obscured by vegetation, reveal the underlying stories of deep time. An ecologist focuses on plants and animals to discover the biogeographical relationships that sustain forests, grasslands, marshes, and deserts. A landscape architect or architectural historian looks at human structures, seeing in their layout and design echoes of stylistic and engineering traditions that shape the built environment. I myself leap at the opportunity to accompany these and other specialists who can teach me ways of looking that wouldn't otherwise occur to me, and I urge everyone else to do the same. But if I had to pick one group of colleagues with whom to wander the landscapes of my native land (or any other place, for that matter), I would probably choose geographers more often than not. No one approaches places with more voracious curiosity than they, and no one is more skilled at borrowing from disciplines

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ranging across the sciences and humanities to understand the myriad forces that have shaped a landscape and the stories it has to tell.

Bill Wyckoff, one of the preeminent historical geographers of his generation, is among the best landscape readers I know. Bill combines his disciplinary expertise with a love of travel—almost an obligatory trait among geographers—and a passion for photography, so that his wide-ranging journeys across the American West have given him a deep sense of the best places to illustrate different geographical phenomena. In 2006, he contributed a volume to our Weyerhaeuser Environmental Books series entitled *On the Road Again: Montana's Changing Landscape*, in which he compared old and new photographs to interpret the twentieth-century environmental history of Montana. When that book was finished and we began to talk about whether he might have another project for the series, Bill suggested a photographic field guide to the landscapes of the American West. We could not have been more delighted, and the book you now hold in your hands is the result of those early conversations. *How to Read the American West* combines Bill's knowledge and photographs—all of which he shot afresh for this volume—with the work of editors and designers at the University of Washington Press, with the additional bonus that new printing technologies have made it possible for the first time to illustrate a book in this series entirely in color.

No single volume could ever provide a comprehensive or encyclopedic guide to any landscape, let alone to a region as vast and variegated as the Trans-Mississippi West. Instead, *How to Read the American West* offers something that is arguably better: what Wyckoff calls an “invitation” to join him in visiting some of the most diverse but characteristic landscapes that travelers will likely encounter while exploring the region today. Better still, Bill has designed the book so that his eclectic images are combined with equally eclectic texts that instruct readers not just about particular landscapes but also about the craft of landscape reading itself. As a result, you can enjoy and profit from this guidebook whether you carry it in your glove compartment to consult along the way or read it at your leisure in an easy chair back home. I myself will make sure there is a copy in any vehicle I drive west in the future!

Among the most important lessons this book teaches is that you never want to look at a landscape in just one way. Peruse the chapters and images in chapter 1, on “Nature's Fundament,” and you'll learn to recognize the many natural processes and foundations that shape all other landscape features in the West. You'll learn the distinguishing features of everything from lava flows and ash deposits to ancient ocean beds and the tracks of glaciers. Each of these generates characteristic soils, which influence the vegetation that ranges across climate and elevation gradients from deserts to forests. The soils in turn provide the biological contexts for everything from wildfires to wildlife, with natives and exotics jostling each other hither and yon. Above them all is the sky, and Wyckoff encourages us to lift up our eyes to ponder its many meanings as well.

That's just chapter 1. It is followed by chapters on landscapes that reflect different ways of making a living in the West, whether on farms and ranches, in mines and industrial forests—or, for that matter, in tourist resorts and playgrounds. To reach such places, people must travel by foot or car or train or plane, each of which leaves its own distinctive marks on the landscape.

This book will help you understand those as well. Although the West has always been predominantly wild or rural in our national mythology, the vast majority of westerners since far back in the nineteenth century have lived in urban settings, so Wyckoff devotes considerable space to western cityscapes. He also helps us see the many footprints of the federal government, without which the American West would be very different from what it is today. And finally, he shows how groups from different ethnic and religious backgrounds have inscribed their identities on the western terrain.

If it all feels a little scattered and jumbled, that's the way it is with landscapes, especially in the modern era. Opening your mind to the full complexities of a landscape can feel overwhelming, as the seeming cacophony of objects and influences and processes can be hard to untangle. That is precisely why it's so helpful to have a guide like Bill Wyckoff, who knows the ground, has a practiced eye, and can offer suggestions to hold confusion at bay. Take him along as a companion in your western rambles, and there's no telling where you might go or what you might see that you otherwise might have missed.

If you want to get the most out of *How to Read the American West*, I'd encourage you to wander its pages in a spirit of play, much as you would a landscape itself. It's a good idea to spend some time with the table of contents to get a general sense of the book's organization, but from there you can go pretty much anywhere you wish. Read it from cover to cover or dip in and wander around as your fancy takes you. The more familiar you become with its contents, the more easily you'll find your way in the field to the images and interpretations that will remind you how best to understand the places you visit. Once you can identify the features that William Wyckoff puts before you in these pages, you'll be well on your way to reading the western landscape for yourself, with endless stories waiting to be discovered wherever you look. ✱