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# Environmental History and the Construction of Nature and Landscape: The Case of the ‘Landscaping’ of the Jutland heath

KENNETH R. OLWIG

*Man & Nature, Humanities Research Center  
Odense University  
Hollufgaard, Hestehaven 201  
DK 5220 Odense SØ, Denmark*

## SUMMARY

It is my thesis that the discipline we now know as environmental history owes a great deal of its impetus to the emergence at the beginning of the 19th century of a socially engaged and environmentally committed interdisciplinary ‘proto-discipline’.<sup>1</sup> A material conception of nature was of key importance to this environmental history, and thereby to the historically conscious conservation movement which it set in motion. This concept of nature as thing could, however, be (mis)construed to represent a reification which separates humanity from nature. This reification, as will be seen, was problematic because it bore concealed within it older normative concepts of nature, which came to imply environmental determinism as a natural ideal and the alienation from nature of any form of humanity which violated this ideal. This meant that humanity tended to be counterpoised to nature. There is a consequent need today to ‘deconstruct’<sup>2</sup> this concept of nature in order to ‘re-invent’, as it were, a conception of nature which maintains the conservation imperative, but which shifts its focus from things to the dynamics of a society-environment relation in which humanity can take a positive and active role. I exemplify my argument by drawing upon a classic case of the intertwining of environmental transformations and changing conceptions of nature: that of the ‘landscaping’ of the Jutland heath.<sup>3</sup> Even though this analysis is not about Transylvania, a key factor in it proves to be an arcane bond between bats, vampires and the concept of landscape.

## THE ‘NATURE’ OF THE NATION STATE

It can be argued that environmental history was born, in its modern form, as a child of national romanticism. If the Enlightenment was a cosmopolitan age which idealised the universal, the romantic era was more concerned with the

particular. The unit of government was not to be based upon a hierarchy of rational knowledge descending from a geometrically perfect heavenly order, but was rather to be the expression of the will of a specific people from a specific area. Thus, whereas the absolute monarchies saw themselves as the highest earthly link in a chain of being descending from the cosmos, the nation state was to be an expression of the place in which the language and culture of its folk developed. According to Arthur O. Lovejoy, the emphasis upon diversity and particularity is the one common factor in the otherwise diverse tendencies which have been termed 'romantic':

the quest for local color; the endeavor to reconstruct in imagination the distinctive inner life of peoples remote in time or space or in cultural condition; the *étalage du moi*; the demand for particularized fidelity in landscape-description,... the cultivation of individual national, and racial peculiarities. (Lovejoy 1973: 292-93)

It was in this intellectual loam that the notion of national democracy could grow and develop. It also provided fertile soil for the idea that the condition of the nation and the condition of the environment were interrelated. This idea, however, represented something of a Pandora's box, containing both the seeds of the worst type of nationalism, and the blessings of a progressive environmental consciousness. A key to understanding the Jekyll and Hyde nature of this phenomenon lies in an understanding of the double character of the concept of nature which developed at this time.

#### THE BIRTH OF MODERN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY: THE DANISH CONTEXT

Because of its size, Denmark provides a useful social microcosm in which to study the interlinkages between various areas of endeavour which may be more difficult to perceive in larger and more complex societies. In Denmark, one person may be a prominent figure in various fields which, in larger societies, would involve several persons. Furthermore, the links between this person and other people generating changes in other fields are often easily established, not only because of the size of the society, but also because of the intensity of the Danes' penchant for recording and storing their national history. This means that we can work not only on the large scale of ideas and movements, but also on the micro-scale of the individuals who create such movements, and carry them out. It then becomes possible to re-examine developments in larger societies in the light of insights thus gained on a smaller scale. In some cases, furthermore, it might be that the small scale of Danish society has enabled certain individuals to see a 'larger', interconnected, picture which would be more difficult to grasp in bigger societies. This, in turn has enabled them to exert an influence on an international scale which would not otherwise be expected, given only the

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statistical odds of someone from such a small place being recognised. One such person was Joachim Frederik Schouw (1789-1852), who, I would argue, was one of the Protean fathers of modern environmental history.<sup>4</sup>

*J.F. Schouw*

Joachim Frederik Schouw combines, in a fascinating way, the emerging ideals of modern, objective, natural science and enormous political and environmental commitment. As a botanist he was a leading figure, helping to create, through his research and his theoretical work, the modern discipline of plant geography. He was also an important organisational figure, helping to create an international scientific community committed to comparative science. His geography of Europe was used, in translation, throughout the continent. At the same time, however, he was also politically active on a scale warranting comparison with Thomas Jefferson. He was a key figure in the peaceful Danish transition from absolutism to democracy which occurred in the 1830s and '40s, not only as a leader of the transitional proto-democratic assemblies, but also as an author of the new constitution. Part of his political work was his engagement in the movement for freedom of speech, and his use of this movement to enlighten the general public about scientific and environmental issues through publications, lectures and educational reform. It is for this reason that he co-initiated, in 1833, The Danish Natural History Society, becoming the editor of its journal. The essays he produced for this forum were published in book form in a number of languages, in the English translation, under the title *The Earth, Plants and Man*. In the preface the publisher, Bohn (who also published Alexander von Humboldt's *Cosmos*) wrote:

The author of 'The Earth, Plants and Man' is so well known to all who made any acquaintance with Physical Geography, that no apology seems necessary in presenting a work of his to English readers – the less when it is one so entertaining and instructive as the present. (Schouw 1852: preface)

Though Schouw is here identified as a physical geographer, the book is in many respects a cultural geography, with a strong historical dimension, on the general theme of man and nature. It influenced readers as varied as Karl Marx and George Perkins Marsh. Marsh, the author of *Man and Nature: or, Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action* (1864), was also, of course, a force in the foundation of modern environmental history, as well as of the environmental conservation movement. Like Schouw, he was deeply committed both to science and to the importance of democratic social engagement (Marsh 1967; Lowenthal 1958; K.R. Olwig 1980).

Denmark at this time was in the throes of an economic and political crisis which threatened the very existence of the country. For Schouw, the solution to this crisis was not only political, it was also environmental. The Danish

environment, its forests and fields, had become seriously depleted because of excessive exploitation, which Schouw blamed ultimately on the social conditions fostered by the absolute monarchy. For Schouw, this meant that a national revival depended not only on political reform, but also on an environmental reform which would engage the entire populace. As a natural scientist, Schouw had the ability to analyse and engage in this process on the level of the practitioner as well as that of the publicist. For him, dissemination of scientific knowledge about the environment was critical to this endeavour. The following statement shows just how the ideas of science, democracy and environmental improvement were linked in Schouw's mind:

It is one of the advantages of more recent times that the sciences are no longer the property of a certain class, but are increasingly distributed amongst the people. This is because the flow of the sciences is not only increased by the reception of new sources, it also must be led, in endlessly divided canals, over the country so as to make it fruitful. (Schouw 1832: 221)

Schouw's choice of metaphor is no doubt influenced by the observations of environmental degradation which he made in the Mediterranean area, and his conclusion that the cause was fundamentally social:

Sicily, formerly the granary of Italy, certainly produces much less corn now; many tracts of land lie desert, but this is to be ascribed to the deficiencies of social circumstances, not to the climate .... If the social conditions of Algeria could be reduced to order, the fertility there would certainly not be inferior to what it was in antiquity. (Schouw 1852: 238)

## NATURE AND NATION

It was the notion of the unity of identity between a people and their environment that made possible the environmental awareness of a person such as Schouw. However, as he himself recognised, this idea was somehow also the root of its greatest weakness. To understand this weakness we must look to the links between nature, landscape and the environment. The interaction of these concepts engenders the Achilles' heel of the kind of environmental understanding, and history, which Schouw and like minded thinkers elsewhere sought to promulgate – an Achilles' heel which, I believe, still hobbles us today.

Schouw regarded the nation as a product of the interaction between a people and its environment through time. However, he recognised the danger of this view being co-opted by a much more simple interaction in which the nation is seen to be the direct product of a given environment. His membership of a society with a dual national identity, both Danish and Scandinavian, was particularly helpful in providing an intellectual antidote to such forms of nationalism. The

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battle against the absolutist state had fostered an awareness of the common cultural roots of the Scandinavian people, leading to a growing pan-Scandinavian form of nationalism which ran against the grain of nationalisms more narrowly focused on the nation state. In a lecture to the Scandinavian Society on 'Scandinavia's nature and people' he was thus moved to criticise those who argued for the determination of national character by the physical environment. The importance of this critique was acknowledged by George Perkins Marsh who proposed to translate a version of it under the title 'Nature and nations', because it combated 'the common notion that national character is influenced by physical causes'. In this essay Schouw wrote:

Denmark's nature is therefore not Scandinavian in the narrow sense, it is more similar to the German than to the Norwegian or Swedish. But then one should also conclude that the Danish people are more German than Scandinavian? This would be so if it were the case that it were true that a people's character is determined by or is significantly dependent upon the nature of that land which the people inhabit. But even though this view is very widespread and continually taken as given by philosophers, historians, natural scientists and poets, it is nevertheless a misconception which has only become so common because the relationship between nature and man is still in need of scientific treatment. With regard to this subject conclusions have been drawn with a superficiality which would not be tolerated in any other science. (Schouw 1845: 8)<sup>5</sup>

Schouw polemicised against the idea that social man was determined by nature, arguing that, quite to the contrary, different nationalities can share similar environments (as in Switzerland) and similar nationalities can share divergent environments (as in Scandinavia). For Schouw, the character of such societies:

...has its soil, its intellectual soil in *History*, out of which it springs, – has its intellectual climate in *Language*, in which it lives and moves (Schouw 1845: 15).

It is not the laws of physical nature that determine their character, but the laws governing the 'soil' and 'climate' of a social environment. If the reverse were seen to be true, Schouw's entire project for social and environmental transformation would be threatened. The argument that nations were, and ought to be, 'natural' reflections of their environment, was fundamentally conservative, leaving no room for Schouw's coupling of social reform and environmental restoration.

The problem for Schouw, I suggest, is that various, ideologically potent, meanings had become attached to the word 'nature'. This had the effect of derailing discourse, so that apparently sensible individuals and disciplines expressed views which, though easily demolished by Schouw's form of argument, nevertheless defied the sort of scientific logic which he applied to them. Environmental determinism, in various guises, became a leading current of geographic thought in the course of the 19th century, and even though the

excesses of German '*Blut und Boden*' ideology helped pave the way for its disgrace in the post WWII era, it nevertheless survives in various guises to this day (K.R. Olwig 1993).

## NATURE, NATION AND LANDSCAPE

The primary reason why discussions of the relationship between society and nature became so volatile is that the somewhat parallel concepts of nature and landscape tended to merge at this time, thus reifying and camouflaging meanings of nature which had hitherto been the object of much more conscious discourse. This process of reification was, in many respects the end result of a long series of social, material, and ideological transformations beginning in the Renaissance, which lay the groundwork for the development of the modern national state.

The term *land* was originally applied in the Germanic languages to a unit of territory which often was identified with a people or quasi ethnic group – Östergötland, in Sweden, was thus the *land* of the Eastern 'Goths.' These areas were often of some legal importance in the Middle Ages as areas covered by a given body of a law which was generated by the operation of the so-called *ting*, a representative body which met periodically, and which was rooted in unwritten customary law. The location of the *land's ting* became a de facto capital – e.g. Viborg was the locus of the *ting* for the land of the Northern Jutlanders. Modern Danish law thus begins with the writing down of the laws of various *lands* at the close of the 12th century. The writing down of these laws, however, at the same time marked their end as a judicial unit which was dependent upon oral tradition – and hence some form of organic cultural continuity. The writing down of law made it possible for a central power to appropriate the law to itself. The nascent state initially consisted of a sort of conglomerate of *lands* to which the regent regularly paid a visit in order to manifest state power.

The salience of the *lands* in subsequent national discourse was that while they disappeared as a functional political unit at an early date, they retained importance as a locus of place as opposed to state identity. The name which was eventually applied to these areas of felt identity was 'landscape'. The term *landskap/landskab/landschaft*, which is found throughout the Germanic speaking nations, is virtually synonymous with the term *land*, except that it is usually applied to areas which are smaller than, or sub-units of, a nation state.<sup>6</sup> State authority in Scandinavia replaced the *land* as regional sub-unit of the state with the *Amt* in Danish and *Län* in Swedish, a territory directly under the control of the king, possibly with different boundaries from the *land*. This occurred in Sweden, for example, in 1634. The early date of the disappearance of the *land(skap)* as a viable political unit of the state reflecting antiquated, community based, notions of law and governance contributed to its perpetuation, particu-

larly in Sweden, as a 'felt' region. The more ancient and obscure the origins of an institution, the more 'natural' and inviolable it appears to be. *Lands* thus became a locus of quasi-ethnic, regional identities, which counterpoised to state identity. When a Swede, for example, is asked where he is from, he will invariably tell you the name of the *landskap* – and *not* the *Län* – from which he originates. At the university of Uppsala the students belong to fraternity-like clubs, called 'nations', in which membership is based upon *landskap* of origin. This distinction between the *landskap* as a locus of felt, cultural, identity and the state as a political unit is particularly clear in the context of the last remaining *landskap* which still functions as a unit of governance, the Aaland Islands. Though they officially belong to the Finnish state, they are culturally Swedish, and because of their strong ethnic identity they have been allowed to exercise considerable rights to self-government under the official title of *Landskap* – the world's last functioning 'landscape' in the territorial sense!

The suffix 'scape' is cognate to the suffix 'ship' and it can be assumed that, like most such affixes, its particular meaning has normally been as neutral as the 'ship' in 'township' is for most people today. The suffix occurs in a variety of similar contexts, such as the Danish *Grevskab* – meaning an area which is the domain of a count (County). This does not, however, preclude the term being used with a certain poetic license to refer to the landscape as a felt locus of identity, the domain of a people. The suffix 'scape' thus means shape, which in the Germanic languages means create, as well as shape in the more ordinary English sense of the word. It is a word which has organic, biological – and thereby also reproductive – connotations, and it is often applied to the activity of the supreme creator, God. The connotations of the prefix 'land' – for example as a synonym for country or nation – are, of course, familiar to English readers. The term landscape thus bears with it connotations which can give it a meaning along the lines of 'area shaped or created by a people'.

The earliest 'landscape' paintings, *per se*, were those of the Dutch, who began to gain European prominence for their homely, detailed, depictions of their native provinces in the 17th century. They, quite naturally, applied the Dutch equivalent of the word *landskap*, *landschap*, to paintings of particular areas of territory within their country. It has been argued by Simon Schama that these paintings reflected the peculiar character of the emerging bourgeois Dutch sense of national identity, which defied the feudal states which sought to bring Holland under their control (Schama 1987). These paintings were characteristically of rather humble places, often reflecting the special way the Dutch had managed literally to shape 'lands' from the sea bottom. If Schama is right, that these paintings reflect a nascent form of nationalism, then it is not improbable that the notion of landscape, even then, carried important connotations as a place shaped by a people.

The Dutch landscape paintings subsequently became popular in 17th century England where they were, characteristically, imported at a time when Dutch



hydrologists and engineers were engaged in a somewhat more material ‘land shaping’ in the Fens and other wetlands. Along with the paintings, the English also imported, or rather re-imported, the term landscape – which had long since become obsolete in English. Since the English no longer attached the original territorial meaning to the term it was natural that they would interpret it to mean: ‘a picture representing a view of natural inland scenery’. A landscape was something you hung on the wall. In this context the suffix ‘scape’ simply came to mean ‘a view or picture of a (specific) type of scene’. When re-defined in this way it became equally natural to apply the term landscape to paintings of scenes that were the product of other artistic traditions than that of the Dutch (Webster 1963: ‘landscape’).

#### OF BATS, MICE AND BIRDS

In Renaissance Florence a tradition for painting rural scenes emerged, parallel to the Dutch tradition, which was much more fundamentally symbolic and ideal in its thrust. In this tradition both subject and form are marshalled in the expression of an ideal vision of the natural. The subject could be a scene inspired by Virgil’s vision of the natural life in Arcadia, while the form could be that of a framed perspective drawing in which the form itself – the ‘perspective’ of the world as being fundamentally a scene – was seen to be an expression of natural principles. Such principles are embodied in expressions such as ‘all the world is a stage’ or ‘theatre of war’. Even though paintings in this tradition – e.g. paintings by Claude Lorraine (1600-1682) – might appear to be reasonably realistic representations of a particular place, they were normally essentially figments of the painter’s imagination (K.R. Olwig 1993). Since the status of art tended to be gauged by the status of its subject matter this tradition tended to be given a higher status by English art critics than the Dutch, which because of its plain, humble, subjects, tended to be derided as being unimaginative and overly slavish to detail. This Mediterranean tradition, furthermore, laid the groundwork for the profession of landscape architecture. Put bluntly, what a landscape architect did was to take an actual place, which might look like the plain subject matter of a Dutch painting, and turn the place into something which might look like one of Claude’s ideal visions – particularly when seen (and framed) from a particular location. Through the act of landscaping, the architect literally created ‘landscape’ out of topography by exploiting its ‘capabilities’ as artistic material, as the architect Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown was wont to say. In this way, the landscape architect helped facilitate the transition in meaning, which occurred in the English language, from the sense of landscape as ‘a picture representing a view of natural inland scenery’, to the meaning ‘a portion of land that the eye can comprehend in a single view’ and, eventually, ‘vista, prospect’ (Webster 1963: *landscape*). The meaning of landscape was transferred from the signifying

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medium, the painting, to the material subject to which the painting referred through depiction in order to signify some form of meaning. Landscape thereby became a segment of the world seen as if it were in a painting. In this way the meaning of the word landscape was restored to something approaching its original sense, but now it is no longer an area or territory, bounded and shaped by a collectivity, but a scene perceived, as in a theatre, from a particular point by an individual: 'a portion of land that the eye can comprehend in a single view' (Webster 1963: *landscape*).



FIGURE 1. The landscape gardens at Stourhead, England

The popularity of things English, not the least English landscape gardening and landscape art on the continent, at the time of Joachim Frederik Schouw, no doubt facilitated the transferral of the English concept back to the continent from which it had come. By this time it had superseded, and, in fact, all but obliterated, the original meaning of the term in both the German and the Dutch language. When, under the influence of German nationalism, German scholars revived the term in the course of the 19th century as a concept applied to a unit of territory, it continued to retain the English idea of landscape as a *natural* scene, with all the normative connotations born by this word (Hard 1970). It thus became a 'bat-like' term, at once a mouse (an actual territory) and a bird (a scene, perceived from a particular perspective, like a theatre scene). In this way, it also tended to conflate the character of actual places with esthetic ideas of the ideal and natural, tied to particular modes of viewing (i.e. from particular vantage points) and ideal notions of the natural which western society had learned to identify with certain kinds of scenery (e.g. the Arcadian).

The same fate that befell the term landscape also, quite logically, befell the term nature. Paintings in the ideal tradition represented a vision of the natural gestalted in the form of framed perspective representations of ideal scenes. When this tradition merged with more realistic artistic traditions of the sort identified with the Dutch, nature increasingly became identified with the scenes of actual places represented in art. The meaning of the word nature shifted from its primary meaning, as 'inherent character' or creative force, and became reified and concreticised as that which has been created. Nature as 'scenery' became virtually synonymous with landscape as 'vista/prospect'. This process by which the meanings of the words nature and landscape were conflated was facilitated by the fact that they have similar connotations. The word nature derived from the Latin *nascere* meaning birth. It referred to the same sort of creative birthing process as the Germanic *scape*, and, in fact, the two terms are closely identified in the examples given in dictionaries in these languages – eg. 'organic growth' 'determined by nature' (*Ordbog over det Danske Sprog* 1931: 'skab', 'skabe'), or 'the creative power of nature' (Collins-Klett 1983: 'schaffen') or 'to create, fashion, form ...(said of God or Nature)' (*Oxford English Dictionary* 1971: 'shape').

The problem with the conflation and reification of the meanings of landscape and nature within the bat-like figure of a something which is both territory and view, much as a bat is both mouse and bird, is that it tends to have a disjunctive effect on discourse. One person, in a given context – e.g. Schouw writing as a physical scientist – may thus discourse on nature in a way that represents it in much the same matter of fact way as a Dutch painter – e.g. as a bat. Here we are dealing with a nature which reflects the creative (or destructive) efforts of a given people *vis-à-vis* their material environment. In this discourse, there will necessarily be symbolic overtones, related, for example, to the nature of the society involved, but we will essentially be dealing with a nature which is amenable to scientific analysis. Another person, perhaps a poet, may look at the same place as nature, or landscape, and see a 'bird', an ideal Arcadian unity between man and environment, or the expression, sanctioned by God or Nature, of manifest destiny. It is this sort of language which, in turn, surfaces in the discourse of an historian such as Oswald Spengler in his reference to 'cultures that grow with original vigour out of the lap of a maternal natural landscape, to which each is bound in the whole course of its existence' (quoted in Sauer 1969: 325). This language amply illustrates the metaphorical, and ideological, potency of the term landscape when linked to that of nature and culture in this way. The culture which refuses to conform to its apparent determination by a given maternal landscape is *ipso facto* unnatural.

The problem, of course, is that it is one thing to read the discourse of a poet in the text of a poet, and it is another to read it when it is presented in the quasi-scientific text of an historian. It is now very difficult to know whether we are dealing with a mouse (an actual relationship between a people and their

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environment), or a bird (a more aesthetic representation, taken from the more narrow perspective of an ideal vision). It is this mouse/bird problem, I believe, which led to the situation which caused Schouw to exclaim that: 'with regard to this subject conclusions have been drawn with a superficiality which would not be tolerated in any other science'.

## THE HEATH



FIGURE 2. An artist's rendition of the heaths as they appeared in 1855

The problematic character of the conflation of meaning which occurred with the concepts of nature and landscape can be exemplified in relation to the characteristic northern European environment termed heathland. Because the heathlands were thinly populated with a poor transport infrastructure, and only extensively grazed and cultivated, they were perceived as wild nature. To the rational mindset of the Age of Reason, the unproductive heaths were an eyesore, and the people who lived there were perceived to be as useless as the environment they inhabited, and responsible for its condition. The romantic mindset turned this idea on end. Suddenly the people of the heathlands came to be seen as natural Arcadian shepherds who expressed, in their culture, the nature of the unspoiled landscapes which they inhabited, and, hence the unspoiled ideal nature of the

nation to which they belonged. The perception of this group's relation to its environment thereby moved from one extreme to the other, from the degenerate producers of a degenerate environment, to the natural expression of the natural people of a natural environment. The corollary of the latter view, however, is that it would be 'unnatural' for these people to defile themselves, and their environment, by changing this relationship.

One of the earliest Danish expressions of 'heath romanticism'<sup>7</sup> is to be found in the writing of the author Jens Baggesen (who identified with German culture and wrote extensively in German). In 1792-93, he wrote the following about the Lüneburger Heide, in present day Germany:

The further I penetrated into my desert/wilderness,<sup>8</sup> the more delightful and interesting it became. It is true that my external eye discovered nothing but heather and, here and there, single stunted pine trees – everything about me lay spread out in one inexpressible gray-black naked flat surface. But despite this, all the more beautiful rare sights floated past my inner eye in a thousand undisturbed phantasies. Soon came a long bearded hermit, soon an honorable old Dervish with water in the palm of his hand, soon a Chinese prince who had gone astray, soon a fleeing princess of Tiflis, soon a pilgrim who, for every two steps forward, took one backwards, soon a wandering knight, soon three disheveled prophets, soon twenty-four fearsome rovers, soon a whole caravan with dromedaries.

The women here are described as 'courteous heather nymphs, whose cheeks' roses and neck's lilies more than sufficed to replace the lack of flowers in this district '...they were herders; and truly! they were the most Arcadian I have hitherto seen' (Baggesen 1973: 104-108).

Even though such expressions seem overwrought and a bit ridiculous – and there may have been an element of self-satire in this text – it has been shown that the perception of the heath as Arcadia permeated even the most respected natural scientific work at this time, such as that of the geographer Alexander von Humboldt (Hard 1965). It found, however, its most characteristic expression, as might be expected, in the work of poets and artists; and, as I will show, it also required a poet to capture its problematic character.

#### STEEN STEENSEN BLICHER AND FAUST

Unlike Jens Baggesen, the Danish poet Steen Steensen Blicher, his contemporary, was born and raised on heathlands (in Jutland) resembling those described in the passage described by Baggesen. He appears to have recognised that an essential element of Baggesen's perception of the heaths was its egocentricity. The heaths maintain their idyllic character only so long as it suits the phantasy of the romantic wanderer. Thus as soon as Baggesen begins to feel lonely the heath changes color, and becomes every bit as dreary as it was romantic earlier:

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Nothing except heather, and heather and more heather! All that was elevated had disappeared – and even though I attempted to call back the living phenomena of my phantasy – everything was empty, uniform, dry, cold, dead, unimportant, unendurable. (Baggesen 1973: 104-108)

It is a similar transformation in a passage in a short story by Steen Steensen Blicher (which appears to be a literary paraphrase of Baggesen's) that provides a key to understanding Blicher's ambivalence toward this kind of romantic idealisation of the landscape. It begins with the following description of the narrator's confrontation with the Jutland heath:

Sometimes when I have wandered across the great heaths with nothing but brown heather about me and a blue sky above me; when I have strolled far from human beings and the marks of their pattering here below – mere molehills that time or some restless Tamburlaine will level to the ground; when I have flitted, light of heart, proud of my freedom like the Bedouin whom no house, no narrowly bounded field ties to one spot, who possesses all that he sees, who lives nowhere, but roams as he pleases; when in such a mood my roving eye has caught sight of a house on the horizon unpleasantly arresting its airy flight, then I have wished – God forgive men the passing thought, for it was nothing more – would that this human dwelling were not there!

The narrator's protest that he didn't really desire to wipe out the human population of the heaths is suspect, however, because he clearly 'doth protest too much', and the frightful wish is soon repeated:

A forester has proposed that the entire colony of settlers on the heath should be wiped out, and that trees be planted in the fields and on the site of the razed hamlets. I have sometimes been seized by a far more inhuman idea. What if we still had the heather-grown heath, the same that existed thousands of years ago, undisturbed, its sod untouched by human hands! But, I repeat. I did not mean it seriously. For, when exhausted, weary, languishing with heat and thirst, I have longed intensely for the Arab's hut and his coffee-pot, then I have thanked God for a heather-thatched cottage – though miles distant – promising me shade and refreshment. (quoted in K.R. Olwig 1984: 29-31)

The point, it would seem, is that when an area is viewed aesthetically as landscape scenery the people of the area become reduced to just another expression of that landscape scene – just so much ornament to be blotted out with the flick of a brush, so much stage scenery, to be changed at the close of a scene. Blicher also includes the same sort of fanciful mirages as Baggesen described, but the problem, as he suggests, is that this type of commanding view is not just limited to aesthetes. As he notes, a forester has proposed to wipe out human habitation in the area in order to plant trees. The problem, furthermore, is double edged because, in the end, the romantic aesthete imaginatively destroys the very environment upon which he himself depends for mental and physical sustenance.



Blicher was not alone in perceiving that this viewing of an area as landscape had a hidden, dæmonic dimension. In a famous passage from *Faust*, Goethe depicts Faust, together with the dæmon of dæmons, Mephistopheles, taking in a view in which the elements of the landscape spread out below become so much stage scenery, to be manipulated at will; its dwellers destroyed, should they spoil the scene:

This drives me near to desperate distress!  
 Such elemental power unharnessed, purposeless!  
 There dares my spirit soar past all it knew;  
 Here I would fight, this I would subdue!  
 ... 'And it is possible! ... Fast in my mind, plan upon plan unfolds.'

Suddenly the landscape around him metamorphoses into a site. He outlines great reclamation projects to harness the sea for human purposes: man-made harbors and canals that can move ships full of goods and men.

The only thing which stands between Faust and his dream is an old couple who live in pastoral harmony with their surroundings, and who are a model of community virtue. He desires to replace a self-generated natural idyll with a new designed idyllic scene of his own creation. Faust becomes obsessed with this old couple and their little piece of land:

That aged couple should have yielded,  
 I want their lindens in my grip,  
 Since these few trees that are denied me  
 Undo my world-wide ownership...

They must go, to make room for what Faust comes to see as the culmination of his work: an observation tower from which he and his public can 'gaze out into the infinite' at the new world they have made (quoted in Berman 1982: 60-7).

This passage plays a central role in Marshall Berman's classic study of the modern temperament, which takes its title *All that is Solid Melts into Air*, from a statement in Karl Marx's *Communist manifesto* about the exigencies of modern life.<sup>9</sup> It is rooted, I would argue, in the fundamental way of seeing which is represented here, in which nature flicks between being a material relationship, to a mode of seeing which dissolves as soon as the eye's focus is changed.

Blicher was engaged in a critique of the perception of the nature of the world as landscape scenery. His critique was rooted in fundamental transformations in western cosmology beginning in the Renaissance which, in effect, transformed it literally into a world *view*. He was concerned, I would argue, with the same fundamental bat-like problem as Schouw. At the one moment the heath is a 'mouse', the humble abode of a poor marginal peasantry, the next it is a 'bird', an Arcadian fairyland in which the people are a romantic expression of the scene. So long, however, as we are only dealing with the visions of a romantic wanderer these transformations are as reversible as a magician's spell, but when we are

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dealing with the physical transformations of the forester, or of the Faustian developer, then they become more permanent, and destructive.

## ALL THAT IS HEATHER MELTS INTO AIR

In retrospect, Blicher's passage has taken on a prophetic quality.

Enrico Dalgas (1828-94), nephew of Joachim Frederik Schouw, sought to realise the visions of Blicher and his uncle not as romantic phantasy, but in terms of social and environmental transformations which restore both economic and cultural life. He was a road engineer who became the charismatic leader of a national movement to transform the heathlands into forest and farm as a means of compensating for the loss of Schleswig-Holstein in 1866. What is fascinating



FIGURE 3. Enrico Dalgas

about his project, seen from the perspective of this discussion, is that environmental history was at the centre of his agenda. Thus his first priority, when launching the Heath Society in 1866, was to publish a pamphlet called *Geographical Pictures from the Heath*, which was essentially a popular environmental history of the heathlands. This work, which Dalgas, through the years, supplemented with lengthy geographical studies, was a pioneering attempt to use the topography of the heath as historical source material, the interpretation of which provided an understanding not only of the historical development of the heathland environment, but also of the steps which would be necessary to restore it to its original fertility. To tell this story Dalgas pioneered the development of methods which characterise environmental history writing to this day. We thus find him correlating, for example, place name evidence concerning the presence of prehistoric barrows and forest with choropleth maps in order to show the effect of human settlement.



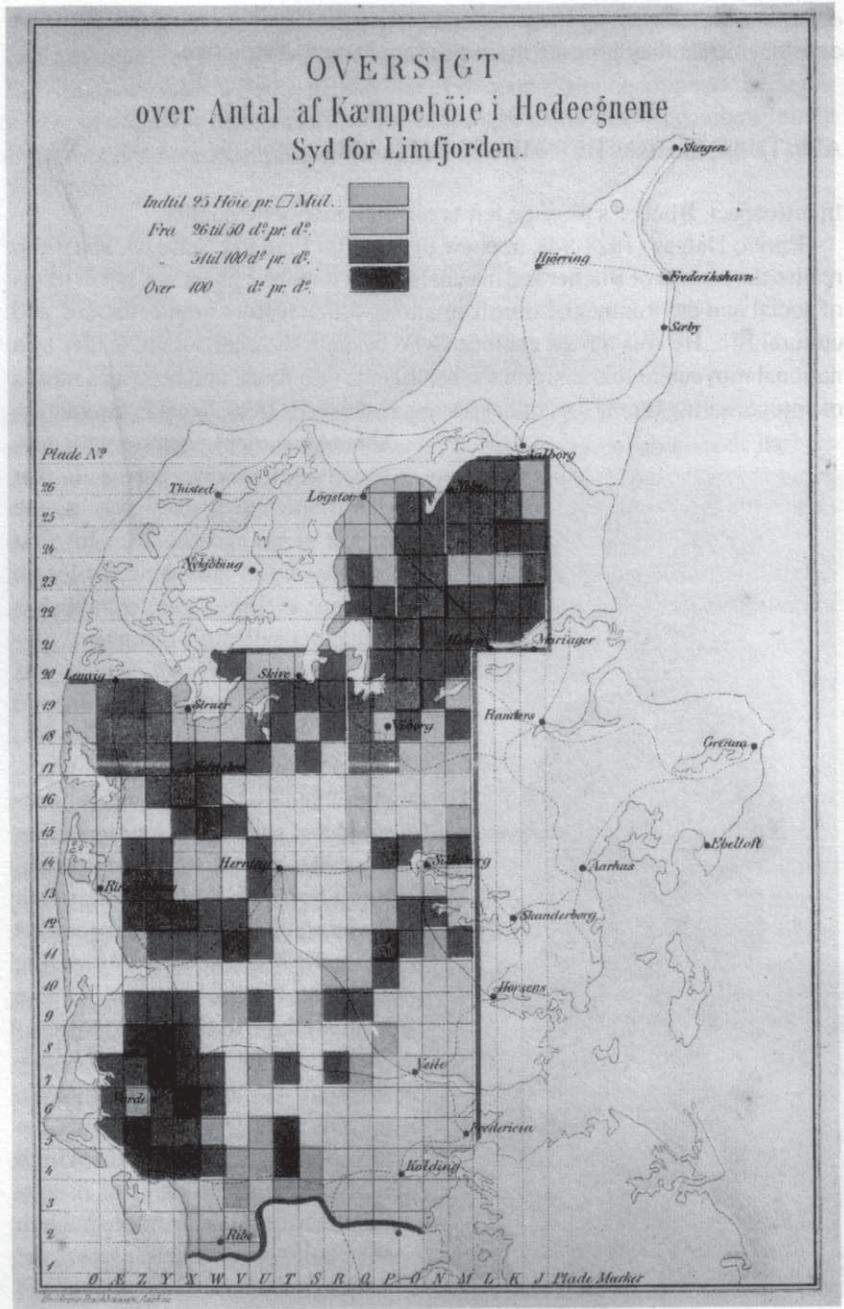


FIGURE 4. A choropleth map by Enrico Dalgas showing the number of barrows per square mile. The barrows are an indication of early human settlement.

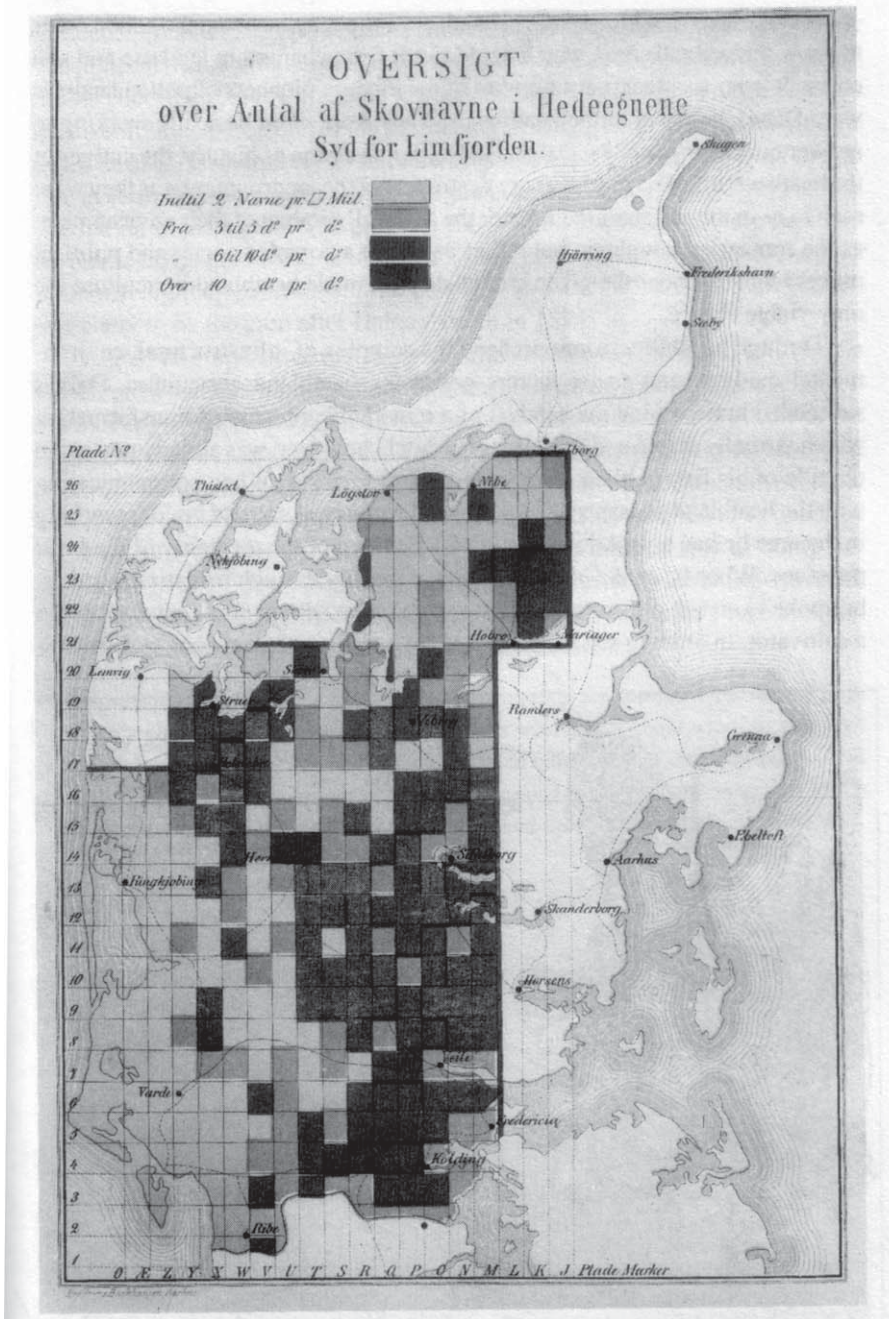


FIGURE 5. A choropleth map by Enrico Dalgas showing the number of place names per square mile indicating the presence of forests at the time of settlement.<sup>10</sup>



We likewise find him, spade in hand, cutting segments from the soil in order to show the podzolisation which could result from changes in land use and soil cover. It is no accident that a number of the modern pioneers of pollen analysis were Danes, working in the heathlands. They were often basically working to answer questions raised by Dalgas. In Dalgas's version of history, the natives of the heath were neither the desultory destroyers of the environment – as they were seen to be in the enlightenment – nor the 'natural' product of their environment, as the romantics saw them, but rather pawns in a complex social and political process which, under the given circumstances, made heathland agriculture the only viable choice.

Through his ability to comprehend the complex of infrastructural, environmental cultural, and social factors governing heathland agriculture, Dalgas succeeded in becoming the catalyst of a remarkable process of transformation which virtually eradicated the heath. The hitch, however, was already present in the title of his first publication, *Geographical Pictures*. When communicating with the heathland peasantry he didn't need pictures. As a road builder working in the area he had a well developed understanding of the mentality of the local populace. When he spoke of increasing soil fertility through irrigation systems, he spoke to an age old concept of nature which had direct non-visual appeal to a cultivator. In order to sell his project to the burghers of Copenhagen, however

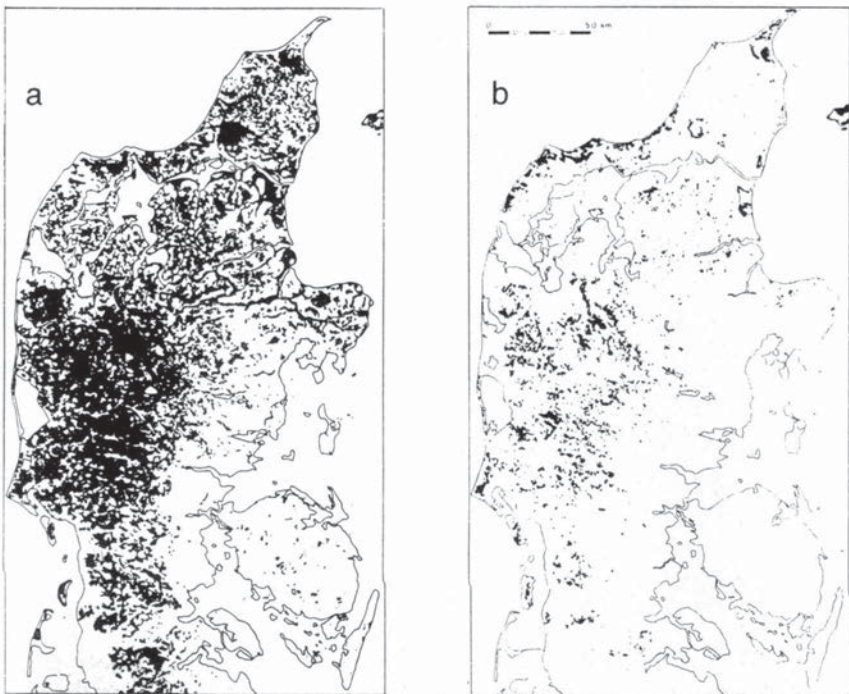


FIGURE 6. The extent of the Jutland Heaths (a) c.1800, and (b) c. 1950. Maps prepared by the University of Copenhagen Geographical Unit.

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he needed pictures: he had to transform the heathlands into a landscape scene which needed changing. Initially, his strategy worked, too. He managed to get the burghers to provide the capital to plant the trees which provided the coulisse which enframed the efforts of the heathland farmers to restore the fertility of the soil. The trees, furthermore, served a useful purpose both in terms of wind shelter and in terms of the capital which the planting effort, indirectly, gave to the population of the region. The problem was that the landscape picture captured the public imagination to the extent that it came to supersede the original purpose of improving the conditions of the people who lived in the area. This proved especially to be the case after Dalgas' death in 1894.

Dalgas had emphasised that the heath movement was concerned with people in their environment, not with the environment for its own sake, as he exclaimed at a meeting of the Royal Agricultural Society: 'It is not only for the sake of the dead earth that we have come here, but also for the living people, who also have a claim to make' (quoted in K.R. Olwig 1984:85). After his death, however, the scene became the focus of the national movement. This resulted in a concerted effort to cultivate and afforest areas which Dalgas himself saw as being uncultivable. In 1916, out of disgust with the way poor cottars were enticed to break their lives and backs on fundamentally infertile soils, the poet Jeppe Aakjær, himself a native of the region, wrote of the Heath Society:

Those who describe the Heath Society as a conqueror are correct. West Jutland is, in my eyes, a conquered country. Any Jutlander who thinks about what has occurred must regard the Heath Society and its so-called cultivation of our forefathers' land with the same eyes as a conquered people looks upon the monuments to victory which the enemy raises upon the land of the conquered (quoted in K.R. Olwig 1984: 86).



FIGURE 7. Dalgas and friend, spying out over a reclaimed heath

Aakjær became a pivotal figure in mobilising a heath preservation movement which eventually was to eclipse Dalgas' cultivation movement. This movement was, furthermore, vital to the generation of the then nascent nature preservation movement. The irony was that in order to combat the Heath Society Aakjær found it necessary to use the rhetorical weaponry of his enemy, with the result that the living environment of the Jutland farmer, whose cause Aakjær otherwise championed, became subsumed to the cause of a nature reified as heathscape scene:

...no conquering horde could have gone more ruthlessly to work against a province's original aesthetic values. It is a Society which threatens all that we hold holy ...the landscape, the view, the mile vaulted horizons (quoted in K.R. Olwig 1984: 87).

The pendulum has swung so far today that we now find the Ministry of the Environment, in response to public demand, buying up farmland and, in the name of 'nature restoration', transforming that farmland into forest and heath – much to the consternation of a local population once feted as heroes of the nation because of their efforts to cultivate these same areas. Even this goal is a will-o'-the-wisp, because the heathland environment was the product of a historical process of human interaction. It therefore cannot be managed back, in the name of nature, to some hypothetical 'original' state as if it were so much stage scenery. All the king's horses, and all the king's men, cannot put this landscape back together again. While the public stands hypnotised, distracted by a vision of landscape as scene, the landscape, in its original sense as an expression of the creative activities of its natives, is destroyed. Nature, as a generative physical force, is transformed into a scenic illusion, reflecting the eco-architectural state of the art of today's environmental planners.

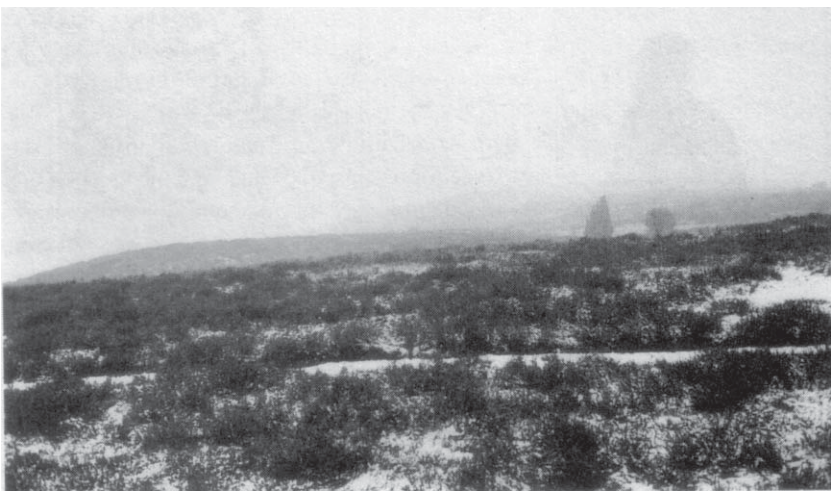


FIGURE 8. A carefully tended, preserved heath

## CONCLUSION

The case of the 'landscaping' of the Danish heathlands exemplifies the way the conflation of the concepts of landscape and nature result in the sort of 'bat-like' transformations which allow the perception of the environment to undergo a sudden and disjunctive shift in meaning. Both Baggesen and Blicher, in their own ways, exploited and elucidated the poetic effect of this shift. Schouw, on the other hand, taking his point of departure in the language and logic of science, could not comprehend how otherwise rational thinkers, against all evidence, could not understand the argument against environmental determinism. He did not understand that this determinism was not seen to be an act of nature, in the scientific sense, but an act of the *nature* of the nation conceived as an all encompassing landscape scene which, like the designs of the scenographer and playwright, determine the plot to be acted out by the players. The plot was that of a national drama, acted out by the people, and it was just such a plot that Dalgas was able to stage.

The Danish case is hardly unique. In the United States of America, for example, vast areas are set aside, in the name of nature, as virgin wilderness parks. There is nothing, in and of itself, that is questionable about setting aside land for parks. Quite the opposite, this is an activity which humans have engaged in to the benefit of flora, fauna, and themselves, for centuries. One should not overlook, however, that these parks too, are scenery in a national drama, preserving the memory of an era, as Everhart writes, when the 'exemplary virtues of rugged individualism and free enterprise were the foremost commandments of Manifest Destiny' (Everhart 1972: 6; see also K.F. Olwig 1980). I think it is to the U.S. Park Service's credit that it appears to be taking more and more consideration of the fact that the American landscape is not only the scene of the national drama of Manifest Destiny, but also the place of dwelling of, among others, indigenous people for whom the blessings of this destiny were not particularly apparent. The problem here is less a recognition of the symbolic importance of landscape, but rather, the unraveling of the strands which bind 'mouse' and 'bird' together in our conception of the natural environment. The fact that certain landscapes are of enormous visual beauty, and the fact that their preservation thereby takes on considerable symbolic and emotional importance – which can be vital to the conservation movement as a whole – does not mean that they are actually of particular significance to the health of the environment as biosphere. Flat, fetid, dank, and visually unaesthetic swamps can have considerably more ecological importance than, for example, the environment of the Grand Canyon.

The issue, as I see it, is that both causes are good on their own terrain of discourse. The one is related to vital cultural, and hence abstract, issues concerning ideals and norms for the relations within society and between society and its environment, whereas the other involves more concrete issues concerning the health of the biosphere. The problem is that the first tends to overshadow the

second. This happens, for example, when apparently neutral scientific terms such as environment, milieu and ecology take on a dual identity, like the dual identity of 'nature'. We thus find that words like environment and ecology become virtually synonymous with 'nature' in many of the contexts – such as advertising – where the value laden connotations of words and concepts are important.

Perhaps our 'bat' has a tendency to turn into a vampire, but if so, unfortunately there is no wooden stake which can put it to permanent rest. The solution, rather, lies in developing an historical understanding of the way in which the fabric of our present day conception of nature, and the values which we attach to it, have been woven together. It is only then that we can begin to weave a new fabric better suited to a world in which the nation state is no longer the measure of all things. Though it is difficult to predetermine what will be the stuff of such a new conception of nature, my guess is that it will have to be less visual, and more keyed to the totality of our senses, and the organic needs to which they are tied. Ecologically speaking, the environmental ideal will probably be less the barren mountaintop, and more the fertile meadow. This, in some respects, would be a return to the original concept of landscape, conceived of as a locus of dwelling.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> On the importance of social engagement in modern environmental history see Cronon 1990; Worster 1990.

<sup>2</sup> On the concept of deconstruction as applied to nature see Olwig 1989.

<sup>3</sup> This article represents a new theoretical approach to material treated in depth in Olwig 1984.

<sup>4</sup> For a more in depth presentation of Schouw see Olwig 1980.

<sup>5</sup> A version of this lecture is found in English translation in Schouw 1852: 240-46, under the title 'Nature and Nations.'

<sup>6</sup> The importance of the addition of the suffix 'scape' might derive from the necessity to distinguish between ancient territorial units identified with ancient peoples, called *lands*, and the larger states which encompassed several of these *lands*, and which, themselves, accrued the name *land*. Though these *lands* have lost their independent status, they still have the 'shape' of a *land*. On the Scandinavian use of the term *land* and *landskap*, see Rona 1965: *Landskap, Landskabslove, landskapsnäm.*

<sup>7</sup> The correct literary term for authors of this period, who characteristically swooned for wild sublime landscapes, is actually 'pre-romantic', but most lay people, I would venture, would apply the term 'romantic' to this sort of writing. Romanticism, *per se*, as a conscious literary movement, identified with people like William Wordsworth, comes later.

<sup>8</sup> The Danish word *ørken* meant both desert and wilderness at this time. The author plays with this double meaning, thereby also playing upon the fact that the heath bore some physical resemblance to the Arabian desert due to its sandy flatness, and the occurrence



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of mirages. It also bore a literary resemblance stemming from the tradition of viewing the Arabians as happy pastoralists.

<sup>9</sup>The phrase 'all that is solid melts into air', as I have argued elsewhere, appears to derive from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (Olwig 1990). It is not impossible that both Baggesen and Blicher had this passage, which reflects on the relationship between theatre scenery and the real life world, in mind when they described their ephemeral visions on the heath.

...be cheerful, sir.

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,  
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and  
Are melted into air, into thin air;  
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,  
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,  
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,  
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,  
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,  
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on, and our little life

Is rounded with a sleep (Shakespeare 1954: 103-4).

<sup>10</sup> From an article of 1884-5, entitled 'The past and future forests of the Jutland Heaths'.

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