

# Seeing and Not Seeing: Landscape Art as a Historical Source

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During the years that I taught Canadian Studies courses at the University of Edinburgh, I sometimes asked my British students to complete the phrase, “As Canadian as . . .” The answers they gave were usually fairly predictable: “maple syrup,” “snow,” “a Mountie.” If I had to answer the question myself, I would probably finish the sentence with “landscape.” After all, as the second-largest country in the world, Canada has *a lot* of landscape. More importantly, the image Canadians project to themselves and others is often of rural or “wilderness” landscapes, even if they rarely visit them, and the human population of the country is crowded into the cities and towns that hug the American border. But the images of Canada iconic to Canadians and tourists alike are usually (apparently) pristine forests, lakes, mountains, and icebergs, not the cities, high-rises, and highways that more accurately define the day-to-day life of the vast majority of Canadians today.

Canadians are not unique in finding the essence of their country outside their urban settings. Many countries locate their self-image in the countryside or the wilderness: Scotland, for instance, markets its majestic lochs and craggy islands, even if most Scots live in the tamer cities and suburbs near the English border. In the Canadian case, landscapes are often refracted through particular aesthetic approaches. We see the world around us, in part, as we are trained to do. In Canada the Group of Seven painters and Emily Carr (the latter discussed in Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands’s chapter of this volume) assume a very important role. The Group of Seven painters were unabashed nationalists, attempting to capture the essence of the Canadian spirit by depicting the country’s wilderness landscape in the bright colours that infused it with meaning. The catalogue for the first Group exhibition in 1920 claimed in compelling and organic terms, “an Art must grow and flower in the land before the country will be a real home for its people.”<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this chapter is to examine how to interpret historical depictions of landscape. Art galleries and archives contain many examples of such paintings, and sketches were published in many of the travellers' accounts of the time. Here we will examine how those artists chose to depict the landscapes of the colony. Who painted? Why did they paint and for whom? What did they choose to see and to depict? Is there more to landscape art than its function as a document of natural forms?

## George Bulteel Fisher

At first glance, landscape paintings may appear to be transparent historical documents, showing us a clear image of the environments in which people lived in the past. Look at George Bulteel Fisher's ca. 1795 *View of Quebec City*, for instance (Figure 8.1). Here we see a distant view of the largest town and port in British North America; the streets and buildings are seen cresting over a

**Figure 8.1** GEORGE BULTEEL FISHER, VIEW OF QUEBEC CITY



Trained at Britain's Royal Military Academy at Woolwich, George Bulteel Fisher depicted Quebec City following the conventions of British military topographical painters of his day. Framed by trees, the city is located in the light middle ground, with bucolic figures and scenery in the foreground.

Source: Library and Archives Canada, Acc. No. 1989-593-1.

hill far away from where the painter is situated. It is summer. Ships lie peacefully at anchor in the St. Lawrence. Deciduous trees on either side of the painting force our eyes to look toward the lighter middle area, the location of the colony's capital city. Shaded in the foreground is an aboriginal family conversing with a hunter. On the left side of the image, another hunter is shooting at prey outside the frame, his dog already in pursuit of the game. The horizon in the distance is flat, and clearly of a higher elevation than Quebec City. Surely this painting serves the same purpose as a photograph might today—it is a reproduction of the landscape from a particular vantage point. Around 1795, we imagine, Quebec City *must* have looked like it does in this image.

But of the many places from which Fisher could have chosen to depict the city, why did he look at it from that distance? Would we not “see” Quebec City much better if we could view the steep hill separating the lower town from the upper town, the way in which the religious and military buildings dominated the streetscapes, the livestock that would have provided the pungent smells of a preindustrial city, or the jostling of French and British in the small trading and government town? Moreover, how do we account for the fact that innumerable cities in Europe and around the world appear with almost exactly the same artistic composition? (As with the study of written documents, it is essential to situate artistic evidence within a larger corpus of similar texts.) While certain buildings and the presence of an aboriginal family in the foreground may translate the specificity of the city at the historic moment of the painting, the painting seen in a broader context shows how Quebec looked very much like other cities. The aesthetic approach taken by topographical painters has been described thus: “In this format, the city lies in the lowered, middle and far distance, bathed in light which only allows major landmarks to stand out. An entirely separate foreground, if not actually rural, then certainly pastoral, is dotted with strolling fashionable couples, or game animals, in a rustic but regulated parkland.”<sup>2</sup> As art historian Didier Prioul notes, Fisher’s composition closely mimics a classical landscape painting by 17th-century French artist Claude Lorraine, *Paysage avec la métamorphose du berger d’Apulie*, an image widely available in print form in the late 18th century.<sup>3</sup> Such compositions were used for cities around the world. With only a few details, Quebec City could have been Lisbon, the subject of another painting by Fisher, or Montreal—compare this image with the Duncan painting reproduced in Michèle Dagenais’s chapter of this volume.

Quebec is located in the light of the middle ground, which makes the city appear approachable and entirely under control. But Quebec City was first and foremost a military location. Established in 1608 by Samuel de Champlain, Quebec stands at a point where the St. Lawrence River narrows dramatically. The imposing elevation was an excellent location for a fort that would guard any movement beyond the city. City views drawn by the French emphasize how the fort dominated the town, reassuring the king and French authorities that this small settlement could indeed withstand the assault of larger numbers of aboriginals and Anglo-Americans. French sketches were taken from a vantage point at the same level as the lower town, either in a boat on the St. Lawrence or just across the narrows in Lévis. The fort was significant both visually and practically. Until 1759, the fort fulfilled its purpose, and the sparsely populated French colony held its position through many decades of Iroquois and Anglo-American hostility.

However, Fisher did not emphasize Quebec City’s defensive capability; instead he assimilates the town into a standard pictorial approach common among military artists of his generation.

Fisher's military training was at the Woolwich Academy, the centre for military painting. Fisher had arrived in Quebec in 1791, a second lieutenant in the Royal Artillery and part of the retinue of Prince Edward Augustus, sent to British North America to shore up support for the British imperial authorities during the early years of the French Revolution and in the aftermath of the American Revolution settlement. Quebec had been a British colony since 1763, following the Treaty of Paris that ended the Seven Years' War. Therefore, only one generation had passed since the time of French control over the colony, and many members of the British colonial elite believed that they had reason to doubt the loyalty of the French Canadians who formed the vast majority of the local population.<sup>4</sup> The image Fisher produced of Quebec, likely made after his return to England in 1794, contained many similarities to other landscape paintings of the time. The painting showed a path that one could travel through to attain the city, and indeed, despite its fortress, the 1759 British victory on the Plains of Abraham had shown that it was not impregnable. Thus the Fisher painting demonstrated how the city was anchored in the British empire. At the same time, there was some recognition of local differences: the aboriginal family in the foreground, their presence a romantic reflection on the passing of the noble race, as conceived by the British in the time period.

Fisher's painting of Quebec City may tell us something about the city and the landscape around it. But it also tells us about him and more generally about British understandings of the former French colony. And in this way Fisher's art provides evidence, like more traditional forms of historical sources. Taking into account the formats and conventions of the source, art can help us see the worlds that the painters saw—or chose not to see.

## Elizabeth Hale

I was led to reflect on the meanings of landscape art during the course of my research for my doctoral dissertation. I had chosen to focus on two rural seigneuries in the St. Lawrence Valley, covering a long time period from the early French settlement in the 1660s to the early 19th century. In part, this choice reflected my interest in social history and the acknowledgment that in this period the vast majority of the French population lived in such scattered rural settlements. (I came to study this particular region for reasons that had nothing to do with the topic of this chapter, but rather from a desire to extend my analysis of a particularly lengthy and bawdy court case from the 1730s.<sup>5</sup>)

One of the two seigneuries was Sainte-Anne de la Pêrade, owned for most of its existence by the Lanouguère/Lanaudière family. In 1819, the seignury was purchased by a well-placed English family, the Hales. After a career in the army and a stint as the aide-de-camp to Prince Edward Augustus, John Hale had been appointed in 1799 the deputy paymaster general for the British army in the colony, in charge of the budget sent over from London to run military affairs. His wife Elizabeth (Amherst) Hale was from an even more prominent family. Her uncle, General Jeffrey Amherst, became the ranking British commander upon the death of General James Wolfe at the Battle of the Plains of Abraham. In 1760, General Amherst accepted the French capitulation in Montreal that secured British control over the colony. John and Elizabeth Hale were ambitious, hopeful that their time in the distant North American colony would allow them to return to an even more prestigious post in Britain. This was not to be the case. By the late 1810s, once the American threat had subsided after the War of 1812, they made a symbolic—and, they thought,

financially sensible—choice to establish roots in the colony by purchasing the seigneurie of Sainte-Anne de la Pérade.

Elizabeth Hale maintained a lengthy correspondence with her brother, the second Lord Amherst; these letters can be found in the University of Toronto's Fisher Rare Book Room and Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa.<sup>6</sup> She also left a series of sketches and paintings, many of which also found their way to Library and Archives Canada. Some of the paintings are her copies of other works—her painting of early York (Toronto) is well known as one of the first depictions of the town, even though she never visited it. In a small sketchbook, she also depicted her urban and rural homes. After 1820, the family spent a good deal of the summer at Sainte-Anne de la Pérade, escaping the oppressive summer heat of Quebec City, no doubt made more intolerable by the stench of livestock and the inadequate sewage facilities. The rural seigneurie was an idyllic refuge for the family, as well as the home to around 2,000 French Canadian farmers and merchants.

Elizabeth Hale was a talented amateur artist, and her interest in drawing was very much conditioned by the particular time period in which she lived. In the 18th and 19th centuries, art became an acceptable pastime for men and women of the British upper classes. It demonstrated their superior culture and emphasized the fact that they had the leisure time to develop their skills.<sup>7</sup> Hale clearly did not like to sketch people, and she was not very successful in doing so; her training had likely not included work with the human body. But she was more successful with her landscapes, and she had copied the work of other artists in honing her techniques. Some of her panoramic views may have benefited from the use of a *camera lucida*, by which means the view was projected onto the paper and she could sketch it directly onto the paper.<sup>8</sup> She may have had less geometric precision in her rural sketches, but her loving portrayal of trees compensated in creating a coherent image.

For me this was a problem. I initially found Hale's fixation on trees rather frustrating. As a social historian, I had wanted Hale to provide pictorial evidence of the French-Canadian community that I was studying—imagine, a talented artist living in the countryside I was researching, and recording images of the habitants and merchants who peopled the area. The social relations of the community would be rendered visible in a way that documents failed to do. What an archival treasure this could have been. Yet image after image did not capture what I was looking for. Hale clearly had other ideas than I did about what was noteworthy.

Instead, Elizabeth Hale chose to focus her artistic talents and her correspondence narrowly on her family's interests and possessions. She was effusive in her descriptions of the purchase. "Only consider," she declared to her aunt, "what an immense tract of land [is] 60 square miles!"<sup>9</sup> She praised its virtues to her brother, who incidentally resided in the English county of Kent at the country estate that the first Lord Amherst had named Montreal. For the Hale family, Sainte-Anne de la Pérade was, in Elizabeth's images, a place for leisure, where few worked, and fewer French Canadians were depicted. The family estate fronted on the St. Lawrence in one of the more desirable parts of the seigneurie, not far from the small village that had grown up around the Catholic Church. With only a couple of exceptions, Hale did not sketch the village. In Hale's hands, the scenery could be rendered according to picturesque criteria, combining a series of stock images (see Figures 8.2 to 8.4). In one sketch, the manor is framed by large deciduous trees. In a second, her sketch of a small stream in front on the manor comprises three planes, with trees on either side forcing the viewer to look into the distant light along the waterway. In a third image,

**Figure 8.2** ELIZABETH HALE, MANOR AT SAINTE-ANNE



An image from Elizabeth Hale's sketchbook, framing the seigneurial manor, the focal point of the artist's life while in the family-owned seigneurie of Sainte-Anne de la Pérade, as the focal point of the drawing.

Source: Library and Archives Canada, Acc. No. 1939-252-5R.

the St. Lawrence appears in the distance. Note the dead tree in the foreground, as we will return to the significance of this feature later.

Hale's letters to her brother conveyed many of the same ideas as her paintings. When the family was detained longer at Sainte-Anne because of the onset of winter weather, her daughter clearly became bored with the surroundings in the rural idyll: "Fanny began to be a little tired for you must recollect that we have not a single being above the capacity of a common farmer in the neighbourhood," Elizabeth complained.<sup>10</sup> In her correspondence with her brother, from Sainte-Anne de la Pérade or Quebec City, Hale hardly ever mentions the presence of French Canadians in a colony where the British formed only a tiny minority.

The vantage point of the artist is always worth considering, so I compared the sketches with the detailed maps of the seigneuries, and concluded that she sketched almost exclusively from land that belonged to her family: the seigneurial domain, or the islands that the family owned in the mouth of the Sainte-Anne River. The family's holdings were the central focus of the sketches, whether it was the manor house, the saw mill (named "Manitou") that they ran, or various parts of the domain. In every way, the sketches were a celebration of her family's ownership of the seigneurie—a complicated ownership, given the limitations on the seigneur's power in the French civil law that protected the habitants' (or censitaires') title to their land. In theory, the habitants

**Figure 8.3** ELIZABETH HALE, STREAM AT SAINTE-ANNE



This second Hale sketch depicts the stream near the manor using standard picturesque techniques: three compositional planes, trees framing the image, and the use of dark and light drawing the viewer's eye towards the distance.

*Source:* Library and Archives Canada, Acc. No. 1939-252-4V.

owed a number of obligations to their seigneur: a yearly rent (part of which might be paid in capons or chickens), mutation fees when the property was sold, part of their wheat harvest as a fee to the miller, every 12th fish they caught, and so on. More significantly for the Hales, there were large parts of the seigneurie that had not been conceded yet to settlers, and in those parts they could benefit from cutting and milling the trees and attracting new settlement. They could even dream of altering the ethnic balance. The Hales thought of establishing a Protestant village some six to eight miles back from the St. Lawrence. "We might perhaps be able to make a Protestant village of it from the many settlers who come here & then have a Protestant Church."<sup>11</sup> In practice, however, the settlers did not come in large numbers and the payments the Hales received from their French Canadian tenants never provided the return on investment that they had anticipated.

Unlike some other upper-class women of her generation in British North America, such as Elizabeth Simcoe or Anna Jameson, Elizabeth Hale was not adventurous. She spoke of interesting vistas further into the backwoods of the seigneurie, but she did not plan to visit them:

The Surveyors have been at work & about 5 Leagues from our house came to a beautiful little Lake covering about 6 acres of Land with large Trees & a very rapid river full of Trout—they found a very compleat Beaver dam which Mr Hale intends seeing but the road not being yet made I have no chance of getting there.<sup>12</sup>

**Figure 8.4** ELIZABETH HALE, RIVER IN DISTANCE



The presence of a dead tree, such as the one in the foreground of this Hale drawing of the St. Lawrence River, provides a stock opportunity to contrast mortality with life, offering a moral and spiritual lesson in the landscape.

Source: Library and Archives Canada, Acc. No. 1939-252-6V.

She stayed close to home and admired the natural surroundings. Hale loved trees most of all.

Although this fact should have been apparent to me, perhaps, I thought it worthwhile to ask a professional artist friend of mine, Lise Fradet, for her interpretation, and this was her conclusion. Hale drew her trees with care and feeling, almost always sketching deciduous trees, though it was an area where coniferous pines grew alongside the leafy trees. The deciduous trees reminded her, no doubt, of her native southern England, and she desired to remake her land in a British mould. Describing the local foliage, only deciduous trees were worthy of mention: “our trees consist of Walnut, Maple, Elm & Ash & Lime . . .” In particular, oaks were associated as a symbol of England and particularly of the aristocracy. “I am sorry to say,” Elizabeth told her brother, “there is not an Oak to be seen here or in the neighbourhood, but I intend trying some for the honor of my native country.”<sup>13</sup> Was this not the story of much of the early history of the European presence in North America, recreating the landscape so that it looked a lot more like home?

My point here is that the same process was taking place “on the ground” in Sainte-Anne de la Pérade and in the sketchbooks of Elizabeth Hale. Both tree planting and sketching fulfilled the same purpose for Hale: she wanted to make the landscape hers, and that meant making it appear more “British.” Moreover, she was following the tendency of other British immigrants in the



colonies. But what are the implications of this tendency? To examine this issue, we shall need to explore the meanings of aesthetic approaches, first in the British homeland and then in the North American context.

## The Picturesque and the Sublime

Despite the lengthy French imperial presence in northern North America, there are no real landscape paintings dating back to the French regime (with the possible exception of Frère Luc's *France Bringing the Faith to North America*). This point underscores the Britishness of the landscape aesthetic. Many cultures do not choose to dedicate their art to landscapes, but in the 18th and 19th centuries the British elevated these depictions to the top level of their art. It is true that they drew on Dutch, Italian, and even French artists for their inspiration—the word “landscape” comes from the Dutch “landschap”—but British, primarily English, artists brought the particular aesthetics of landscape painting to a new level.

The British take their landscape, like their weather, very seriously. Estate owners removed peasant villages that interfered with their view of the surrounding landscape in order to create more pleasing vistas, and they remodelled their grounds to design pleasing perspectives. Tourists undertook set itineraries in the Lake District in England, the Wye Valley in Wales, and the Scottish Highlands, in order to appreciate the varied landscapes that the island of Great Britain had to offer. Painters were hired to depict the manors of the wealthy, and gentlewomen and gentlemen took up easel and brush to undertake the same celebratory functions of the pleasures of ownership.

Historians of art have argued that this desire to depict the landscape occurred at a specific time in British history and in a specific sociopolitical context. In the first place, the enclosure movement of the 18th century removed many British peasants from the land they had tilled, forcing them into burgeoning industrial villages and cities. The landscapes that painters portrayed and that landlords created commemorated images of society that were rapidly changing. The bucolic scenes were created to decorate the homes of the wealthy at precisely the same time that they were disappearing. They were therefore more nostalgic than documentary. As John Barrell has pointed out, peasants appear in the paintings, but they are almost always located on the “dark side of the landscape.” They exist in the shade. Consequently, the picturesque paintings of peaceful, bucolic countryside were wistful celebrations of a disappearing society, and the impact of the images came from the emotions that they invoked. Hanging on the walls of the wealthy, either in countryside manors or urban villas, the paintings invoked a past that the owners of the works were themselves in the process of abolishing.<sup>14</sup>

In the 18th century, British theorists developed a new aesthetic language to understand the landscape. The “picturesque” and the “sublime” covered the two main approaches. The word “picturesque” had a more precise meaning than it does today, but it still covered the same sense of acknowledging that which can be depicted in a picture. However, the attributes of a pleasing image were fairly precise. Landscapes were deemed picturesque if they could be understood to convey movement, variability, and emotion. There were clear conventions. Framing devices (“repoussoirs” or “side-screens,” usually trees) forced the viewer’s gaze to the middle of the frame. Three planes (foreground, middle ground, and background) enticed the viewer’s eye toward the lighter vanishing

point in the distance. Moreover, these paintings often contained some intimation of mortality: a ruin or a broken tree. These picturesque landscapes were intended to inspire nostalgia, a reflection on the passage of time and life (Figure 8.5). They were also intended to celebrate the diversity of the phenomena depicted, at the same time that they emphasized the overall unity of the composition. As art historian Ann Bermingham argues, when considering the public discussions of the 1790s about the significance of the picturesque approach, it is necessary to keep in mind the larger political context within which this was occurring. The French Revolution had entered a bloody and expansionist

phase, and the English on the one hand feared a French invasion, and on the other celebrated the British acceptance of diversity over the uniform social and political theories that the French were imposing. The picturesque approach to landscape, with its calming depiction of social and natural variations, was one aspect of this assertion of the superiority of British culture.<sup>15</sup>

The sublime conveyed different connotations than the picturesque, although there were links between the two approaches. A sublime landscape inspired fear and awe, and showed the viewer how insignificant humans were in this landscape. Mountains, windswept shorelines, and waterfalls could inspire feelings of the sublime. Edmund Burke, the 18th-century Tory politician and conservative political theoretician, wrote a fundamental treatise on the ways to understand, appreciate, and fear landscape: *Notes on the Sublime* (1788). Like the picturesque sensibility, the sublime helped place the individual spectator in a deep and spiritual relationship with his or her landscape.

## Old and New World Landscapes

British painterly techniques were widely appreciated in the North American colonies, and not just by amateur artists like Hale. Joseph Légaré offers an interesting example. Légaré was a self-taught artist, the most prominent of French Canadian painters in the early 19th century. Closely allied to the Patriot rebels in the 1830s, he made his living through his art, and accepted many diverse commissions. For instance, he executed a painting of King George IV in 1834 for the Papineau family. In the 1830s, he also painted the country house of prominent French Canadian lawyer Philippe Panet, *Le Bocage* (*The Grove*) in a picturesque mode (Figure 8.6). Légaré combined bucolic images of working

**Figure 8.5** WILLIAM GILPIN, “PICTURESQUE MOUNTAIN LANDSCAPE,” 1792



One of the chief theorists of the picturesque, English artist William Gilpin provides an archetypical view of a landscape, showing natural variations amidst overall pictorial unity and attracting the viewer's gaze towards the horizon.

Source: Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

**Figure 8.6** JOSEPH LÉGARÉ, “LA MAISON DE CAMPAGNE DE L’AVOCAT PHILIPPE PANET À LA PETITE RIVIÈRE SAINT-CHARLES”



French Canadian painter Joseph Légaré’s depiction of lawyer Philippe Panet’s estate. Légaré illustrates Panet’s social standing by painting the house in light colours and having it dominate its pastoral setting, with the livestock and peasant labourers situated in the shade

Source: Musée de la civilisation, collection du Séminaire de Québec. *La maison de campagne de l’avocat Philippe Panet à la Petite rivière Saint-Charles*. Joseph Légaré. Vers 1835. N° 1993.36710.

peasants and their livestock with a celebration of the imposing house itself. The house is depicted in light colours, contrasting with the work of the peasants occurring in the shade. Here social class defines the image.

They were extraordinary, far beyond any similar natural phenomenon available in Great Britain. Early European artists sketched, painted, and etched images of Niagara Falls, and the Sainte-Anne River and Montmorency Falls, near Quebec City, for their own enjoyment and also for transmission of this aspect of the British North American landscape back home. Writer and post-master-general George Heriot described Niagara in his 1805 account of the colonies: “The falls of Niagara surpass in sublimity every description which the powers of language can afford of that celebrated scene, the most wonderful and awful which the habitable world presents. Nor can any drawing convey an adequate idea of the magnitude and depth of the precipitating waters.”<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, many drawings attempted to do just that. They tried to capture the rushing waters, the fear of falling, the frisson of danger that the falls invoked. But equally their images showed how peacefully one could approach the falls.

Elizabeth Simcoe, wife of the first British governor of Upper Canada, pictured Niagara Falls in harmonious terms. In fact, she arrived there herself after a pleasantly picturesque journey. She recorded her surprise at how alike the approach to Niagara was to picturesque scenery in Britain, commenting on “the similarity between these Hills & Banks & those of the Wye about Symond’s Gate & the lime Rock near Whitchurch in Herefordshire.”<sup>18</sup> Despite the awe that the falls inspired, Simcoe’s sketch (Figure 8.7) still emphasized the harmony in the landscape that the picturesque

The standard picturesque reliance on watercourses, vegetation, and pastoral imagery all contribute to the composition of a peaceful landscape. The leading French Canadian painter of his day thus used many of the usual conventions of the British approach to celebrate the property of this member of the French-Canadian elite.

The landscape of British North America not only was picturesque but also contained many sublime elements. Waterfalls were the best exam-

required, framing the perspective on both sides with trees, and remaining a safe distance away from the edge. As historian John Crowley concludes, scenes of majestic waterfalls confirmed the majesty of the British presence in British North America: “The sublime glory of British arms [in capturing New France] was reinforced by the picturesque landscape in which they had prevailed, and vice versa.”<sup>19</sup> Eastern British North America offered much to those influenced by the aesthetic of the sublime and the picturesque.

Overall, Europeans in what is now Eastern Canada had relatively little difficulty depicting the “new” landscapes. After all, much of eastern Canada is analogous geologically and biologically to parts of western Europe. In the Cretaceous period, eastern Canada had been joined to western Europe. The flora and fauna certainly have some differences, but overall they are fairly similar.<sup>20</sup> Canada, and specifically eastern Canada, was not as foreign in a visual sense as, for instance, Australia was to British eyes.<sup>21</sup>

Nonetheless, we should remember that some parts of eastern Canada inspired awe among some of the early European explorers, with Jacques Cartier typifying the north shore of the Gulf of St. Lawrence as “the land God gave to Cain.” This was no compliment, and Cartier, like subsequent explorers, preferred particular types of landscapes, ones that promised future agricultural development. Explorers saved their praise for flat lands with apparently good soil and places where the phalanxes of primeval forests opened onto clearings. Here farmers could establish an agrarian economy, just as in Europe and in contrast to the hunter-gatherer economies of many of the aboriginal peoples of northern North America. For Europeans, the future of North America was primarily agricultural, and those areas that were most likely to fit were most coveted for settlement.

The rugged coastlines of Atlantic Canada and the undulating plains of the St. Lawrence Valley and southern Ontario had their counterparts across the Atlantic, and they could easily be perceived according to British aesthetic principles. After a century and a half of French agriculture in the St. Lawrence Valley, a recognizable agrarian landscape had emerged, and the British looked forward to recreating a British landscape in the potentially rich farmlands of southern Ontario. Settlement implied a concentrated attack on the forests of southern Ontario. Although many welcomed the economic development that was occurring, cultural elites also reacted strongly against the aesthetic disturbances—just as in the late 20th century environmentalists protesting clear-cut logging were easily able to demonstrate that a clear-cut forest is extremely ugly. Pastoral images without tree stumps and slash were much more attractive, although some artists chose to capture images of

**Figure 8.7** ELIZABETH SIMCOE, “NIAGARA FALLS,”  
CA. 1795



Wife of the governor of Upper Canada, Elizabeth Simcoe here sketches the approach to Niagara Falls. She “tames” the sublime landscape of the falls by depicting it in a picturesque fashion, framing the perspective with trees and demonstrating an overall unity to the scene.

Source: Archives of Ontario, F 47-II-I-0-178, 10007030.

deforestation in order to emphasize the industriousness of the settlers.<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Hale was spared this phase because of the length of French Canadian settlement in Quebec. But in mid-19th century Ontario, as the writer William Smith worded it, “The new settler . . . looks upon trees as enemies.”<sup>23</sup>

When British travellers, explorers, settlers, and officials came to North America and other parts of their world in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, they brought their aesthetic principles. In particular, they applied sublime and picturesque criteria to eastern North America, at least as far as they could. Some landscapes did not fit easily into these categories, and Europeans felt uncomfortable in the western Prairies and the northern tundra, not only because of difficulties in traveling through these territories, but also because the landscape did not easily reflect the criteria they knew and had been taught to admire. Likewise, the tall, dark temperate rainforests of the West Coast restricted the perspectives to which they were accustomed.<sup>24</sup>

## Applying the Aesthetic Principles in a New World

It is only natural that one would apply one’s artistic training to whatever view one was regarding. But given the ideological bases of that aesthetic at home, how did that apply in a new geographical and social context? Unlike Britain, early 19th-century British North America was certainly not overcrowded, and it was not necessary or logical to dispossess the peasants in order to acquire land for large flocks of sheep or herds of cattle. On the contrary, government authorities and political elites in general projected an agrarian future for much of the northern part of North America. This was certainly true in the 19th century, when the image of the farming family was the basis of the Lower and Upper Canadian economies and politics. The trend continued into the 20th century. As late as the 1920s, provincial and federal governments encouraged the opening up of marginal and distant farmland in Palliser’s Triangle in Saskatchewan and Alberta, the Abitibi-Témiscamingue region of Quebec, and the Peace River district of British Columbia. If pastoral and agrarian landscapes were considered the ideal, what implications did this hold?

These landscapes excluded aboriginal peoples. Aboriginal families could themselves become farmers, of course, as long as they were allowed to compete fairly with their non-aboriginal neighbours. But as historian Sarah Carter has shown, where they did succeed in agriculture in the Prairies in the late 19th century, their non-aboriginal neighbours convinced the Canadian government to take away their machinery and allow them to farm only a single acre.<sup>25</sup> Euro-Canadians usually preferred to imagine that the aboriginal peoples were a noble, but dying, race.

But even while aboriginal peoples were, in fact, excluded from the land, they remained an important cultural presence. In Canada, there were no ruins of castles to supply the picturesque ruminations on mortality. Instead, the theme of progress, crushing under its heel the aboriginals—and French Canadians to some extent, too—allowed some English Canadians to reflect on the passage of time and the necessary disappearance of a romantic past, supplanted by visions of agricultural and industrial growth. In a “new” land, where was one to locate the nostalgia? The aboriginal presence offered one possibility, a sense of loss for the non-aboriginal viewer, who assumed that the First Nations were about to die out, the imputed losers of what would later in the century be interpreted as a social Darwinist race for survival of the fittest. French Canada similarly evoked a sense of time passing. A view of the Plains of Abraham at Quebec, site of the final battle between Wolfe

and Montcalm, could convey some sense of history. A crumbling mill, or even a fallen log, could inspire the same reflections. Look back at Figure 8.3, Elizabeth Hale's sketch of the stream near her manor, and notice the leaning log in the middle foreground. Or, in Figure 8.4 look at the dead tree in a left-centre position in the foreground of the sketch. Think even of the Group of Seven paintings that include a stump or a forlorn twisted pine tree in the foreground. As Patricia Jasen argues, Canadians came to adopt a form of romantic nationalism: "The romantic sensibility, especially when infused with landscape and history, encouraged an appreciation of those scenes in which landscape and history, especially in the form of ruins and graveyards, were blended together."<sup>26</sup> Just as ruins could intimate mortality in a pastoral image, in forest landscapes, dead or buffeted trees evoked humans' struggle with life and time.

Therefore, the meanings of picturesque landscapes were quite the opposite of what they became in Great Britain, even while they desired to capture the same imagery in the new land. In the mother country, paintings focused on the celebration of unity from variation, social as well as natural. In Great Britain, the hierarchical ordering of society could be portrayed in a landscape painting, showing implicitly where the different social classes fit into the larger coherent and peaceful world. In northern North America, artists celebrated sameness—the similarity to the Old World, and the regrettable disappearance of the distinctive features of the New World. Whereas the picturesque approach was intended to train people to see in Great Britain, in British North America it encouraged them to ignore or to suppress what they saw. In this way, the fact that Elizabeth Hale so steadfastly refused to depict the images that I wanted to see is the story itself.

## The Group of Seven

What of painters whose philosophy led them to embrace more fully the Canadian landscape? The Group of Seven painters, with their avowedly nationalist intent, wished to create new images of Canada. They believed in their revolutionary approach to the Canadian landscape. Yet their work betrays some of the limitations of the aesthetic approaches they used.

The work of the Group of Seven focused primarily on the Canadian Shield of northern Ontario, the huge plug of hardscrabble land that forms a stark barrier between the agricultural land of southern Ontario and Quebec and the prairie lands of the west. The Canadian Shield was inhabited, from time immemorial, by aboriginal peoples and more recently by non-aboriginal fur traders, miners, loggers, fishers, tourist guides, and summer cottage dwellers. But the Group of Seven's images of the landscape do not contain much clear evidence of that human presence. Even the painters, beset as they must have been by swarms of mosquitoes and blackflies, stake a distant pose from the trees and mountains they are depicting—they are not in the forest, but gazing at it from a safe distance. For the Group of Seven, natural phenomena take on human qualities. This is particularly true for the many images of pine trees bravely growing out of shallow soil and withstanding fierce winds. As with A. J. Casson's *White Pine* (Figure 8.8), trees become an image for and of Canada, a symbol of survival against the odds; these images of hardy trees *are* Canada.

In a surprising number of ways, the work of painters like the Group of Seven show similarities to landscape depictions from the previous two centuries, combining—in an original way, to be

**Figure 8.8** A. J. CASSON, “WHITE PINE”



A. J. Casson’s “White Pine,” like many Group of Seven landscape paintings, anthropomorphizes nature, ascribing human characteristics to the tree’s struggle to survive in a harsh wilderness. Here the pine tree grows out of the rocks and survives the strong winds that buffet it.

Source: A. J. Casson, *White Pine*, c. 1957, McMichael Canadian Art Collection. Gift of the Founders, Robert and Signe McMichael, 1966.16.119.

sure—picturesque framing techniques and reflections on mortality. The revolutionary approach that the Group of Seven adopted was perhaps not as dramatic as they claimed. The landscapes celebrated ownership of this land by Canadians. But which Canadians? Not the aboriginal peoples who had served as their guides into the wilderness areas.<sup>27</sup> Unlike the elite artists of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, who appropriated the landscape of British North America to validate the British empire and their social class, the Group of Seven had a larger democratic impulse. But that does not mean that their landscapes did not exclude—as indeed they must. Painting, like writing, means making choices about what to leave in and to leave out.

## Conclusion

Like the Group of Seven painters, 18th- and 19th-century British artists attempted to capture the North American landscape in ways that evoked a sense of ownership and belonging. The use of picturesque and sublime conventions served to tame the new landscape according to British

aesthetic criteria, as the same techniques attempted to do in many parts of the world. But the exclusion of human occupants of the landscape also served to deny the novelty of the landscape. North America had a different past, to be sure, that could be recognized by emphasizing an aboriginal presence—and very occasionally a French Canadian presence—but these were romantic nods and wistful smiles at what the painters viewed as peoples in decline. These peoples were destined to be supplanted, the painters implied, by a British future in which the North American landscape would be fully assimilated to Europe.

Perceptions of landscape stem from the emotions that humans project upon the surrounding environment as much as they reflect an objective view of the biota and geomorphology of the place. As historian Claire Elizabeth Campbell writes, “This almost schizophrenic dichotomy between celebrating progress and celebrating the primeval persists in Canadian attitudes toward the environment.”<sup>28</sup> Understanding landscape forces us to consider culture as well as biology, geology, and climate. To a certain but not unlimited extent, people create the environments in which they live. And they perceive their surroundings according to the aesthetic principles of their society. As Elizabeth Hale and other artists of her time period did, Canadians project their personalities and anxieties onto the land. In doing so, they perceive many things and fail to see others.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. Look at some Group of Seven paintings on the web. Analyze what is (and is not) represented in the images. What considerations may have governed the artists' choices?
2. Imagine an attractive country scene. What elements make the scene attractive to you?
3. What were the specific meanings of the words “picturesque” and “sublime” in the contexts that they were first used to describe landscapes? Do we still use these terms in the same way?
4. Why do some cultures not have traditions of landscape painting? Why have western European cultures, at certain times in their past, emphasized this genre?
5. Does it make a difference whether a British artist applied British aesthetic criteria to British landscapes or to landscapes in locations that the British had occupied by conquest?
6. Why does the Canadian Shield landscape form such a big part of (English) Canadian imagery?
7. Have photographic images of landscape supplanted the need for painted landscapes? Do photographs rely on some of the same framing techniques as landscape paintings?
8. Historically, few people painted. The materials alone imply that the painter either enjoyed leisure and wealth or depended on the patronage of richer people. How might these conditions have limited the range of images depicted?
9. Do you agree that Canadians perceive ideal landscapes as being “wilderness” or “agrarian”? What are some iconic images of Canadian urban centres?



## NOTES

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4. F. Murray Greenwood, *Legacies of Fear: Law and Politics in Quebec in the Era of the French Revolution* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).
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8. Gilbert Gignac, “Elizabeth Frances Hale,” Béland, ed., *La peinture au Québec*, p. 281.
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13. E. F. Hale to Lord Amherst, n.d. (July 20, 1820?), Hale Family Papers, reel A1085, LAC.
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19. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
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22. For instance, Susanna Moodie, “The First Iron Mine in Canada West, Marmora, Hastings County” Michael Bell, *Painters in a New Land: From Annapolis Royal to the Klondike* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973): p. 122.
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