

THE PICTURESQUE IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY HEREFORDSHIRE

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In the eighteenth century, the lower Wye in Herefordshire became the first tourist honey-pot in Britain and a detailed assessment of its virtues was published in 1782 by the Rev. William Gilpin. This prompted two Herefordshire gentlemen, Uvedale Price and Richard Payne Knight, to define more closely the character of the shire as a whole. From this emerged the picturesque: a comprehensive system for evaluating the aesthetic value of the countryside, which remains relevant today.



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An illustration of the picturesque countryside that epitomised Arcadia. *A River Gorge at Downton, Salop* by Thomas Hearne, 1785.

Perhaps uniquely among the West Midland shires, Herefordshire writers in the eighteenth century developed an aesthetic theory, which defined its distinct landscape character. With its broken topography of hills and hollows – ‘hopes’ and ‘combes’ – and ancient enclosures, it was owned and farmed by an indigenous gentry who had emerged in the late Middle Ages with the passing of the warlike Marcher lordships.

Its special qualities were first noticed in the late seventeenth century by an Anglican divine, John Beale (1608–83), who tried to persuade the writer, John Evelyn, that his idealised *Elysium*

Britannicum – the epitome of the best of British gardening – really did exist at the confluence of the Rivers Wye and Lugg, a few miles to the south of the city of Hereford. Beale also published a eulogy of the Herefordshire orchards (1653) in which he believed a ‘true paradise’ could be found. Orchards, he proclaimed, not only nourished the poor and benefited the rich but also transcended utility with their blossom, provided an ‘aviary of sweet singers’ and ‘purified the ambient air’.

The Garden of England

The shire continued to be eulogised in poems such as John Philip’s

Cider (1706) and John Dyer's *Fleece* (1757), which celebrated other aspects of Herefordshire's legendary fecundity. As John Barrell has recently suggested, it was the home of an idealised English rural society, with landowners and tenants living in productive harmony in pre-lapsarian innocence.

For John Clarke from the Board of Agriculture (1794), Herefordshire was 'unequalled by few spots in the island of Great Britain for the production of every article that can contribute to the comfort and happiness, and in some degree, the luxury of society. Here a verdure almost perpetually reigns.' It was deservedly 'The Garden of England' and, unlike lowland England, which stretched south and eastwards beyond the Malvern Hills, this was a country untainted by Parliamentary enclosure, deserted villages and belted estates.

As the century progressed it was also a landscape that attracted artists such as Gainsborough, Paul Sandby, Thomas Hearne and a little later, David Cox who reinforced the view from outside that Herefordshire was Arcadia, with a countryside 'left to itself' and unspoiled by exploitation.

In this period the well-read visitor and native began to refer to Herefordshire as 'Old Siluria', after the Iron Age tribe that resisted the Romans, embraced druidism and were famed for their agrarian skills. Welsh scholars resented this association but it defined the county as a borderland, detached from Midland England.

However, this isolation was very fragile and in c.1790 two Silurian gentlemen, Uvedale Price (1747-1829) of Foxley and Richard Payne Knight (1751-1824) of Downton began to sense that the ploughshares of Herefordshire might once again need to be re-forged as swords to repel an invader, every bit as insidious as the Romans. Apart from being out of step with the agrarian trends of lowland England, there were other forces at large, which threatened the distinct character of the shire.

The Wye Tour

Among these were the tourists, led by the Rev. William Gilpin (1724-1804), whose *Observations on the River Wye* (1782) suddenly became a best-seller and a tour of the lower Wye either became a supplement to, or a substitute for, the Grand Tour, which soon became impossible because of the war with France. Gilpin instructed his readers on how to get pleasure out of unproductive places, either by sketching or making notes in a journal, from a static position in a pleasure boat.

For the Herefordshire *literati* this exclusive interest in the lower Wye invalidated the bountiful pastoral landscapes of the middle



Richard Payne Knight by Thomas Lawrence, 1794.

Richard Payne Knight (0.1.175-2), Thomas Lawrence Courtesy of the Whitworth

Wye, which Gilpin ignored. He also invented a hybrid term 'picturesque beauty', which, for those thinking more deeply about the landscape, was a mongrel mixture of two distinct sensations. Price and Knight set out to rescue the picturesque and reinstate its agrarian context, leaving barren and deserted countryside marooned in the philosopher Edmund Burke's original landscape categorisation – the sublime.

Gilpin also had difficulty in integrating the lower

classes into his view of the picturesque, railing against the beggars who spoil Tintern Abbey. Price, however, a friend of Gainsborough and an admirer of his 'cottage door' paintings, was able to combine picturesque aesthetics with the moral responsibility expected from the land-owning classes. He felt that there was no reason why a labourer and his family, housed beneath a sound thatch, or a little boy guarding the sheep-fold or a milkmaid in the meadow could not share in rural prosperity and at the same time be regarded as picturesque.

Price and Knight

Price's *Essay on the Picturesque* (1794) defined the picturesque as a figure of speech for landscape placed between the sublime and beautiful, which could be found in the intricacy and variety of managed countryside. It was, however, an elitist activity induced by looking at Old Masters, principally landscapes of Italian or Dutch origin of the seventeenth century. With an eye trained in the picturesque, agriculture could still be profitable but organised to provide an aesthetic increment. Price's *Essay* was by its very nature preservationist, but it was also prescriptive, and this made it much read during the next half century.

Price's collaborator, Richard Payne Knight, lived at Downton Castle, which was an imaginative exercise in contemplating the sort of dwelling a Greek hero may have lived in and, much to the chagrin of its creator, was often mistakenly viewed as an early example of the Gothic Revival. It was perched above the Teme Gorge and its immediate surroundings were wild and wooded, quite unlike the pastoral setting of Foxley. Indeed, it had much in common with the lower Wye valley.

Knight's picturesque manifesto – *The Landscape: a Didactic Poem* – was published in 1794 as a prelude to Price's *Essay* and dedicated to its author. It was also much more polemical and woven through with radical politics, implying sympathy for the French Revolution. Unfortunately, this undermined Price's more serious approach to the picturesque. *The Landscape* stimulated a barrage of critical



Illustration by Thomas Hearne of a 'natural landscape' and the same scene passing through the hands of the 'mechanic improvers'.
Taken from Richard Payne Knight, *The Landscape, A Didactic Poem in Three Books*, 1794.

opinion and the agrarian picturesque was forgotten, giving the movement a bad name, as Knight seemed to be recommending the destruction of the private land ownership and replacing it with a landscape 'fit only for the *banditti*'.

The 'Mechanic Improvers'

One of the threats to Old Siluria identified by Price and taken up strenuously by Knight was the arrival on the scene of the 'mechanic improvers', that is, a new breed of professional landscapers, often associated with Lancelot 'Capability' Brown. With minimal skill and little familiarity with the countryside they came to improve, they applied stilted solutions to beautify nature, which disregarded local distinctiveness. Thus –

*'With charts, pedometers and rules in hand,
Advance triumphant, and alike lay waste
The forms of nature and works of taste!
To improve, adorn, and polish, they profess:
But shave the goddess, whom they come to dress.'*

Brown had died a decade earlier and had never secured much of a foothold in the county, but his disciples, William Emes of Derbyshire and John Davenport of Wem in Shropshire, were active in the locality. Moreover, a recent upstart, who called himself a 'landscape gardener', Humphry Repton arrived in 1789 on Knight's doorstep, at Ferney Hall, only three miles from Downton.

Price was prepared to give Repton a chance. He invited him to view some of the Wye scenery, perhaps to improve his taste, but was disillusioned by his lack of knowledge of the great masters. Knight, however, took one look at Repton's scheme for Ferney, which involved removing an earlier formal garden, and rejected it out of hand. Similarly, Knight had frustrated Emes at Powis Castle where he intended to blow up the late seventeenth-century terraces. Ancient formality was regarded as highly picturesque.

Notwithstanding this setback, Repton went on to be employed on six Herefordshire estates, generally by busy clients, who had a need for 'ready-made taste' and rejected the fastidious hands-on approach to improvement recommended by Price and Knight.

One of these clients, Dr. John Matthews of Belmont – an author of many 'fugitive pieces' – wrote in defence of 'mechanic improvers' in *A Sketch from the Landscape – a didactic poem addressed to R.P. Knight Esq. to which is added a word to Uvedale Price*.

All the same, over much of Herefordshire, Price and Knight held sway. When in 1798 the owner of The Mynde estate, Thomas Symons, employed a nurseryman from Gloucester, Edward Wheeler, to improve his pleasure grounds, his agent warned Wheeler that 'in the country where Mr. U. Price and Mr. R.d. Payne Knight (the first Gentlemen Professors) reside, he must be particularly correct in his Taste and Execution'.

The legacy of Knight and Price

Knight's preoccupation with the picturesque was quickly subsumed by his broader cultural interests. These included the publication of *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste* (1805) – which incidentally undermined Price's view of the picturesque – and his celebrity status on claiming that the Elgin Marbles were Roman copies.

Price, however, extended his *Essays* to fill three volumes (1810), producing a valuable handbook for landscape enhancement in the picturesque style. It was reprinted on several occasions and underpinned the extensive gardening of the Victorian era and remains an important sourcebook for the modern conservation movement. For Herefordshire Price groomed his own gardener, James Cranston, as a picturesque improver and recommended him to his neighbours as a cheap and more sensitive alternative to Repton. ●

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Further Reading

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Stephen Daniels & Charles Watkins (eds.), *The Picturesque Landscape: Visions of Georgian Herefordshire* (University of Nottingham, 1994).

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