



Tom Bloemers, e.a. (eds.), ***The Cultural Landscape & Heritage Paradox: Protection and Development of the Dutch Archaeological-Historical Landscape and its European Dimension*** (Landscape & Heritage Series; Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010, 739 pp., ISBN 978 90 8964 155 7).

This weighty publication is the result of a research programme on the ‘conservation and development of a soil archive’ supported by the Dutch governmental Organization for Scientific Research (NWO). It embraces a renewed interest in landscape as a research topic and is a monument to a renaissance in landscape research. Including some 43 essays by both Dutch researchers and those from other countries, it is organized under seven headings that deal with a wide range of questions relating to cultural landscapes, with the ultimate aim to preserve the archaeological heritage. This is a laudable aim, achieved through stimulating new interdisciplinary research.

The premise for this book is the seemingly general acceptance of ‘biography of landscape’ as a way of historical investigation and ‘action research’ as the collaborative participation and social process in which it is achieved. Biography of landscape is defined, re-defined and even renamed as ‘cultural biography’ in the various essays, and was a concept first proposed by the American geographer Marwyn Samuels in 1979 as a metaphor for the study of a landscape in contravention to then fashionable quantitative approaches, preferring to concentrate on the actions of humans instead. While we are being told that this is an innovative approach, elsewhere it is revealed that this has its roots in the geographical work of Paul Vidal de la Blache (1845-1918) and historian Fernand Braudel (1902-1985). Additionally this biographical writing is identified with new studies of perception, symbolism and ideological significance (90). This provides a suitable international perspective, but this approach breaks with former writings on Dutch ‘cultural’ landscapes, such as those by J.T.P. Bijhouwer, H.J. Keuning, M.F. Mörzer Bruyns and R.J. Benthem, and in such journals as *Boor and Spade*. While it might be argued that, except for Tetje Heeringa’s seminal 1934 research on the Achterhoek region, these earlier publications do not adopt a scientific methodology, they were based on lifelong observation and profound understanding of different land uses and how they affected the making of specific

landscapes. However while they may not wholeheartedly have adopted 'scientific' archaeology, they fully embrace field archaeology, i.e. a reading of lumps and bumps and other features in the field to advance the understanding of the development of the site. It appears that the approach chosen for this book contrasts with the wider objectives of multidisciplinary, of being all embracing, and in fact provides a rather narrow perspective of how this type of research ought to be carried out.

As becomes clear from the content of the book, there is a significant archaeological bias, informed by geography theorizing. In itself this is not a problem, however the term 'cultural landscapes' in the main title suggests a more general approach, and although 'archaeological-historical' landscape qualifies this – and indeed this focus might be considered one of the qualities of the book – , those enticed by the general title are being undersold. Unfortunately a clear definition of 'cultural landscapes' is missing to set the general context of the book. However individually the essays extend knowledge and understanding of issues. To me the greatest interest was in those papers that provide details on specific landscapes or solutions to set questions. Another paper that seems to sum up wider issues is 'Heritage policy in spatial planning' by Koos Bosma. Unfortunately there are only few papers like this included, and most authors are keen to exemplify their methodology rather than discuss specific results of what they have added to existing knowledge. This emphasis can probably be explained by the fact that all these contributions are linked with an official research programme, which is why a number of these texts resemble more the type of writing one would expect for an application to a research fund, or the report written once this has been completed, than a book dealing with a central theme. Such contributions also do not aid the more specific focus of the book as they emphasise individuality rather than cohesion. The editors appear to have realized this and have attempted to compensate for this by linking some of these papers with commentaries by other writers.

As a work published in a foreign language this book is clearly aiming at an academic readership. Significantly it is a proof of the status of Dutch landscape research today, with which it positions itself internationally. While individual essays will be of interest as a starting point for future research, the index is a rather minimalist affair, which does not make it easy to search specifics. The overly reliance and general adoption of 'new' – post modern – writing will certainly alienate a general audience, who also would not be interested in the first 300 or so pages in which methodologies are the main focus, nor do many of the essays adopt a language that can be readily accessed by a wider public. The repetitive manner in which some general terms are re-defined in the various essays provides a hindrance to reading the text as a continuous narrative. It is of course easy to criticize this type of multi-author publication in lacking a consistent

storyline. It has been attempted to compensate for this by organizing the essays under loose headings, but these only provide a general direction and do not provide conclusive guidance. Additionally it is not made easy to find specific references and follow leads; the Harvard reference system has been generally adopted, providing author and date, but page numbers have only been rarely included; additionally there is a poor index – perhaps not a major concern in a digital age, where digital resources can be searched in various ways – but an annoyance when a hard copy has been acquired. This publication therefore requires a determined approach, but for those who do persist there are some rewards.

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