

Perception of landscape in Natal: the Geographer's point of view

THE DIFFERING perception of landscape in Natal has had a profound effect on settlement, and it is the purpose of this article to study landscape evaluation from the point of view of historical geography, largely during the nineteenth century. Historical geography employs both the historical and geographical approaches to a study of a region in the past and should not be confused with geographical history, where the historian examines historical events in relation to their geographical setting. The geographer is interested in studying the physical and human elements—relief, climate, vegetation, soils, settlement patterns, communications, agriculture and other economic and social activities—that react on each other in a given area.

Geography is a many-sided subject that enlists the aid of specialists in such diverse fields as geology, meteorology, soil science, economics, anthropology and particularly history. Many people are sound amateur geographers and have a fairly good eye for landscape, although their concepts of landscape may be closely conditioned by the type of society from which they have come. Young children are very poor geographers and have a limited view of space and distance; their world is circumscribed and vital to them, with little place in it for anyone but the immediate family. It is only as we grow older that our horizons widen. How many of us have returned in later years to a house or garden familiar to us in youth only to find it small and unimportant, where before it had the magic and size of a world that could be expanded indefinitely when manipulated by childish imagination. The appreciation of distance, shape and size even in the adult is conditioned by culture; for example Eskimo maps show accurately the number of loops and turns in a river but neglect distances. Many Africans, accustomed to round and not square shapes, find it difficult to draw a straight line.

Physical and biological factors restrict human perception and many species may have keener sight or a better sense of smell than the human, although compared with most species the visual world of the human is full of colour. Nevertheless, a concept like colour is conditioned by cultural background, and to some people colour conjures up emotions, so that red is warm and comfortable and blue is cold and remote, although to the Navajo of North America red is bad and blue is good. The Xhosa maiden conveys a message to her lover by her arrangement of coloured beads in a bracelet or belt. In Western society there are numerous expressions in which white connotes goodness and black evil. Man tends to build up stereotypes and myths and in the whole field of human relations colour, shape, size and other physiological characteristics of the human body have cultural significance. For example, a dark skin and hooked nose is associated with Semites, while to many Englishmen, foreigners are strange because they are not English. Relief is viewed in different ways at various periods; the eighteenth century traveller regarded mountains with dread and Gilbert White, the Selborne naturalist, talked about the mountains of Sussex. During the nine-

teenth century a number of intrepid Englishmen pioneered the sport of mountaineering in the Alps and during the last twenty years there has been a new appreciation of snow-covered mountain slopes in winter, with a resultant boom in skiing.

According to R. Williams,¹ man's version of the world he inhabits is a form of interaction with his environment which allows him to maintain his life and achieve greater control over his environment. We see in certain ways according to certain rules which are not constant. In each individual the learning of these rules through inheritance and culture is a kind of creation. Particular cultures carry particular versions of reality which they create.

So the earth is shaped for individuals and viewed through cultural and personal spectacles coloured by our customs, experience, memory and imagination. The effect of our cultural environment, the books we read, the pictures we see, the shibboleths and traditions we inherit from the past are all important agents in moulding our concepts of the world around us. In order to develop the potential of a region to the full, man's reaction to environment must be flexible so that he can adapt to the challenge of a new scene and a changing situation. Where attitudes are preconceived and unchanging man is unable to respond to the stimulus of a new challenge and society tends to stagnate.

There is little record of man's occupation of Natal in pre-Bushman days, apart from artefacts, and even the Bushmen, besides their paintings, have not left many traces of their 8-10,000 years' sojourn in Natal. To the Bushmen the landscape of Natal must have meant teeming herds of game that could easily be hunted in grassland areas where there was an abundance of wild plants and bulbs to gather. It is conjectured that South Africa may have been able to support only 10,000-20,000 of these hunter-gatherers exploiting the environment so extensively. The Bushmen perceived landscape in terms of hunting potential and so, partly through a sense of sympathetic magic, partly through the sheer joy of creativity, recreated that potential in visual form in their fine paintings and rock engravings. But the tragedy of Bushmen society was that it was unable to adapt in time to the encroachments of invading Hottentot, Bantu and White pastoralists, although John Wright interprets cattle raids by Natal's Mountain Bushmen as a sign of cultural change and appreciation by the Bushmen of the value of cattle for exchange in order to obtain guns, tobacco and other commodities.²

To the invading Bantu arriving in Natal 600 years ago or more, the grasslands and rivers of Natal would have meant good grazing and an adequate supply of water for they viewed landscape largely in terms of cattle and crops. The main area of settlement must have lain in the lower, warmer parts of Natal with at least 25-30 inches of rainfall a year. During the seventeenth century it must have been a fruitful environment. Consequently movement in search of fresh pasture and water was unnecessary for long periods. The land gave most of what was needed in the form of mud, wood and reeds for hut and kraal, and soil, water and grass for crops and livestock, with a bonus in the form of great herds of game supplying meat and skins for clothing and other purposes. The land was held in common; the men herded and hunted and the women tilled the fields and looked after hearth and home. It is very difficult to estimate the size of Natal's Bantu population in the eighteenth century; even in the nineteenth century statistics were highly unreliable, although it must have been many times greater than that of the Bushmen.³ The superiority of the pastoral-cultivating organisation of the Bantu meant that Natal's fertile environment could support increasing numbers

until the balance between numbers of people and livestock and the natural resources was disrupted. The supply of land may have seemed inexhaustible, but by the eighteenth century pressure for space was already developing and relations between the tribes became strained. The struggle for new land seems to have contributed to the Zulu wars of the early nineteenth century.

The nineteenth century was a most significant period in the settlement of Natal. It is interesting to contrast the opposing views of landscape held by Voortrekkers and English settlers, both in terms of their physical approach by land and sea, and in terms of their mental approach from two widely differing cultural backgrounds. The Voortrekkers came over the Drakensberg into Natal via the dry Ladysmith basin and therefore assessed the potential of the grasslands of the Natal Midlands in terms of large farms and pastoralism. The concept of the 3,000-6,000 morgen farm, necessary in the dry areas of the Eastern Cape, was adopted by the Trekkers as their standard of farm size regardless of climate and soil. The pastoralist looked for good pastures and sufficient water and, despite the sourgrasses of the Midlands, the Trekkers sought this region out in preference to the sweetgrasses of the northern areas as the Midlands were better watered. The dense vegetation of the coastal belt and the dissected terrain of Zululand and the Tugela Valley were rejected by the Trekkers. Another criterion in their scrutiny of land potential was accessibility to the coast at Port Natal, because, although they were a land-borne people, they were fully aware of the necessity for coastal access, as shown by attempts on the part of the Transvaal to obtain a corridor to the sea in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The best quality land in Voortrekker eyes thus lay in a broad swathe from the Drakensberg to the coast at Port Natal, and they established their capital at Pietermaritzburg nearly halfway between the mountains and the sea. Land to north and south of this belt was of decreasing value because of distance; in the north the ruggedness of terrain and the possibility of Zulu attacks were further disadvantages.

Natal's environment can likewise be viewed from the agricultural and arable point of view and both British officials and English settlers visualised Natal's landscape and its potential value for farming rather in the light of experience gained in Western Europe than in South Africa. Most emigrants had preconceived ideas as to the type of farming they wished to pursue, that is small intensive arable farms with some livestock. Most West Europeans farms were small at that time, and the majority of French farms are still considerably less than 50 acres in size, so that the promise of 20 acres to the Byrne settlers seemed generous. Also land at 4/- an acre appeared cheap compared with the price of land in Britain. Coming from a previously forested environment in Europe the British settler judged the value of agricultural land partly by its tree cover. Thus the dense vegetation of the coastal forest was assumed to have developed on rich soils that would offer far better prospects for arable farming than the interior grasslands. In North America the unfamiliar problem of exploiting the apparently limitless expanses of prairie halted the westward advance for more than a decade after the pioneers had emerged from the familiar wooded landscape of the Appalachians onto the western plains.

The Byrne and other settlers realised very quickly that a 20-acre plot was hopelessly inadequate when even the Voortrekkers did not appear able to make a living from farms hundreds of times larger in size. Most of the 20-acre lots were not taken up and the British government's desire for closer settlement for security reasons could not be achieved. It was a long time before the idea per-

colated through to officials in Britain that European concepts could not be applied to Natal, although the coast was better suited to small farms and closer settlement than the interior.

The final element in the population structure of Natal was provided by the arrival of many thousands of indentured Indian labourers to work on the Natal sugar plantations after 1860. Coming largely from impoverished Hindu rural areas in South India the warm coastal lands of Natal would not be wholly unfamiliar, and reality not too remote from their perception of the new land. After their indentures were over the majority of them chose to stay, so that for them Natal must have fulfilled to some extent their vision of a better life.

A major problem in the differing approach to landscape perception was ignorance of the local environment. The Trekkers had become well adapted to the physical and human milieu in South Africa over a period of 150 years. They were extensive pastoralists with free ranging herds tended only by the occasional Bushman or Hottentot herd. With his ox wagon serving as mobile home and fort, and equipped with gun and horse, the Trekker could subsist in a sub-humid region and provide for most of his own wants. However, the prospective settler coming to Natal was usually a man with some capital and hailing from an English town—therefore, with a far wider range of expectations than the Trekkers in regard to what might be achieved in the new environment. The immigrant was enticed by the attractive wording of pamphlets, books and reports encouraging him to settle in a land that was as promising to him in the 1850s as it seemed to the Trekkers in the 1830s. Even the earnest Dr. Bleek⁴ succumbed to the lure of Natal and wrote "I do not see why German immigrants should not select Natal as their new home ...the fare is of course much more than that to America. Natal is certainly a better proposition than Australia. Wages here are very high, whilst at the same time provisions are cheap".

Although the early reports were promising enough to attract about 5,000 settlers to Natal in the early 1850s, the country was at a grave disadvantage compared to North America, Australasia and even the Cape Colony, so that the European population of Natal grew very slowly. By 1859 there were 11,580 Europeans in Natal of whom 8,000 were in the rural areas, at a density of little more than one white person per square mile. By 1880 the white population was still only 22,564 which, however, had nearly quadrupled by 1909. This was the railway age of Natal when her increased value as a route to the interior became more significant. Perception of landscape had broadened from its agricultural base to embrace more fully Natal's role as a corridor to the Transvaal, a role that was commented on long before by Thomas Phipson: "Natal is now little more than a road to the interior and almost the only way for its inhabitants to get a living is to be more or less connected with trade and transport."⁵ The size of Natal's white population prior to World War I compares unfavourably with that of Western Australia, which had only 3,853 Europeans in 1843, but 282,114 in 1911. Obviously this is not the whole story and if one compares the total population of Natal, about 1½ million in 1910, it is over four times that of Western Australia. Nevertheless, for the development of Natal it was fortunate that mistaken environmental perception encouraged 5,000 white settlers to leave Britain and settle in a land that, although it did not come up to expectations, eventually assured them of a modest competence.

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1. R. Williams, *The Long Revolution*. Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1961.
2. John Wright, *Lecture to the Natal Historical Association on the Mountain Bushmen of Natal*, 22.4.71.
3. T. J. D. Fair, *Natal Regional Survey Vol. 3*. Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1955, p. 17.
4. O. M. Spohr (ed.), *The Natal Diaries of Dr. W. M. I. Bleek, 1855-56*. Balkema, Cape Town, 1965, p. 3.
5. R. N. Currey (ed.), *Letters of a Natal Sheriff*. Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1968, p. 150.
6. Useful additional references not specifically mentioned in the text are: D. Lowenthal, *Geography, Experience and Imagination: Towards a Geographical Epistemology, from Cultural Geography-Selected Readings*, ed. by F. E. Dohrs and L. M. Sommers. New York, 1967. A. J. Christopher, *Natal: A Study of Colonial Land Settlement*. Unpublished, Ph.D. Thesis, University of Natal, 1969.