

Harsanyi on Lyons (2018)

Lyons, Martin. *The Pyrenees in the Modern Era: Reinventions of a Landscape, 1775–2012*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, pp. 267, ISBN 978-1-3500-2478-6

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Why do we seek to see with our own eyes unfamiliar natural landscapes? What do we find there? Elegantly avoiding the clichéd answer that the landscape is in the eye of the beholder, Martin Lyons invites readers on a brief tour not of the Pyrenees as such, but of what the Pyrenees have signified over time to different kinds of outside visitors, from scientists and artists to hikers and anthropologists. References to Fernand Braudel notwithstanding, the book is not an exercise in *longue durée* methodology; as the reader learns from the first page, it deals with the transitory, not the durable. It offers: “an interpretation of evolving constructions of the landscape over 250 years” (1).

First in this time span came the eighteenth-century scientists. Imbued with the Enlightenment’s trust in the virtues of empirical research, they picked apart elements of the landscape—rocks and plants—which they observed, surveyed, measured, and classified. It was not a matter of simple curiosity: the new science of geology stood to repudiate the biblical narrative of genesis. Expecting the Pyrenees to do their part to *écraser l’infâme*, scientists had little time to devote to the beauty of the sites. It was not until the 1790s that Louis Ramond de Carbonnières, at once scrupulous geologist and Rousseau devotee, divided his solitary walks between analyzing rocks and delighting in the splendor of mountainous landscapes. He ushered in a picturesque chapter in the perception of the Pyrenees, in tune with the cultural climate of nineteenth-century Romanticism. Accordingly, travel motivations shifted “from science to sensibility” (35) and visitors climbed the Pyrenees anticipating emotional and esthetic encounters with nature, not with scientific learning. Instead of measuring and classifying, the new brand of traveler contemplated the sites with an eye for rugged, enthralling, yet grandiose beauty. Furthermore, the Gothic literary vogue prompted cultured travelers to dip into the region’s rich past and project a medieval imaginary onto an already heavily encoded landscape. Expressing intense emotions needed equally powerful narrative devices; hence, the profusion of letters and diary entries penned in ornate prose brimming with more or less felicitous, but always elaborate, metaphors—readers will be grateful for the generous selection scattered throughout chapter three.

Actual history, in the form of brief summaries, was of more interest to the next wave of travelers, the unloved mass tourists. Mass-produced tour guides aimed at giving customers value for their money, and rolled picturesque, emotional, scientific, and historical components into practical information. One of the most satisfying sections of the book is the analysis of these guides’ composition and narrative style as they targeted a middlebrow audience that arrived by train, resided in comfortable hotels, and sought to maximize leisure with multilayered experiences. This meant, increasingly, forgoing the effort of climbing the mountains altogether, preferring instead the calmer pleasures of spa centers like Biarritz, with the mountains reduced to mere scenic backdrop.

Starting from this historical moment, mass tourism diversified, each generation producing its own type of serious traveler opposed to the mere accidental tourist. In chapters six through ten, readers meet heroic climbers and no less heroic bikers (the Tour de France crosses the Pyrenees) alongside an illustrious cast of professional anthropologists, sociologists, and historians. The latter turned their gaze to the inhabitants rather than to the scenery. Succinctly, Lyons surveys the work of these scholars who, like their eighteenth century predecessors, showed little interest in the beauty of the sites, preferring methodical investigations to emotional or esthetic rapture—except that people not rocks came under scrutiny. Perhaps because of the success of at least some of this research (chapter ten includes a short discussion of Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie’s *Montaillou* and its reception), images of the Pyrenees nowadays increasingly feature local villages and their inhabitants.

The newfound popularity of Cathar history and the fondness for authentic village life have generated new constructions of the Pyrenees as a natural and human landscape endangered by mass tourism and modernity in general. Lovingly presented historical events and traditional ways of life have become the main tourist attractions in the area. Lyons does note the irony of simultaneously using history to lure in sightseers and bemoaning the negative effects of swelling mass tourism. The theme would merit more analysis. The book ends with the actions of activist environmentalists who now stand watch over the integrity of the ecosystem, battling industry interests to preserve something approaching the sublime of unspoiled nature, thus closing the circle started 250 years ago.

Evolving constructions of the landscape is Lyons’s stated aim, but the book is not a linear narrative and includes much more, even at the risk of giving short shrift to complex subjects such as the cultural history of the French-Spanish frontier, including

the saga of refugees from the Spanish civil war. To grasp the material in all its richness, this reviewer would recommend reading the book haphazardly, jumping from topic to topic, much as the traveler in the real Pyrenees would do, accompanied by Lyons's surefooted guidance.

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