



## David Lowenthal's Archipelagic and Transatlantic Landscapes His Public and Scholarly Heritage

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## BOOK REVIEW

**David Lowenthal's Archipelagic and Transatlantic Landscapes His Public and Scholarly Heritage**, edited by Kenneth Olwig, London, Routledge, 2023, 110 pp., £135 pb, ISBN: 9781032508245

David Lowenthal's distinguished legacy as a scholar, advocate and activist in the fields of geography, conservation, heritage studies, environmental studies and landscape studies is the subject of this volume of essays, originally published as a special issue in *Landscape Research*. Widely considered a founder of heritage studies, Lowenthal was born in New York, and studied history and geography at Harvard and Berkeley respectively. He completed his doctorate on the influential conservationist George Perkins Marsh while at Wisconsin. During World War II, he served in the United States Army, and later held appointments in the State Department, before moving on to various university positions in the US, the UK and the West Indies.

It is this experience in the West Indies that ignited Lowenthal's fascination with the region and more generally archipelagic worlds. These nine essays were written in his honour, originally part of a special session at the Association of American Geographers' Annual Meeting, thus home in on his work with archipelagic and transatlantic landscapes. Through this prism, they frame his passion and indefatigable work ethic, capturing his personality and role as a mentor and colleague to students, future scholars, academia and museum professionals.

Kenneth Olwig's introduction unpacks Lowenthal's scholarly identity, before summing up the contributions contained in the volume. Olwig points out that the throughline in Lowenthal's research is 'landscape'. His emphasis on the 'ordinary' lived-in experiences of those inhabiting the landscape distinguished Lowenthal as a 'public intellectual', allowing him to pivot away from traditional aesthetic and elitist understandings of the subject.

The first two chapters give insight into Lowenthal's formative years and experiences: Hugh Clout's piece 'David Lowenthal, 1923-2018, renowned academic and public intellectual' focuses on his childhood, education, war years and academic career, noting that Lowenthal's research on the Guianas, not physically islands but presenting in many ways as small island states, would come to shape Lowenthal's understanding of islands and his 'archipelagic thinking'. Trevor J. Barnes's chapter 'David Lowenthal on geography and its past' follows on organically as it explores Lowenthal's geographer credentials. Lowenthal's introduction to spatial thinking arose from his mapping responsibilities at the State Department. But the field was a natural home for Lowenthal primarily because it defied categorisation. Its methodological fluidity and commitment to humanism suited Lowenthal's approach to multilayered issues of heritage, community, and landscape.

The following two chapters highlight Lowenthal's mentors. Luca Muscarà's contribution 'Transatlantic landscapes: Gottmann and the roots of Lowenthal's intellectual heritage' discusses the influence of Jean Gottmann, who introduced Lowenthal to the French landscape tradition during the war, which would go on to shape Lowenthal's drive to protect degraded landscapes, and lead to his stint at Berkeley and studies in geography and of geographers, primarily Carl Sauer and George Perkins Marsh. Lowenthal's time with Gottmann, who was also of Jewish heritage, influenced Lowenthal's research into what would become heritage studies, not as a means of supporting ethno-nationalist posturing, but as a subject of critical intellectual inquiry.

Kenneth Olwig's chapter 'David and Max Lowenthal – and Marsh: public intellectuals and advocates in the political landscape. A personal view' centres Lowenthal's personal heritage – his relationship with his father Max Lowenthal, a lawyer, professor, public servant and activist. Max was a trenchant critic of the public sector. This and his experiences as an advocate for many social issues meant that he often courted controversy. He marshalled a wide range of sources, not simply scholarly ones, for his critique of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, because it was

important that the published work connect with a generalist audience. This interest in reaching a wide readership, stimulating debate and an exhaustive gathering of sources were all hallmarks of Lowenthal's own scholarly profile.

In her chapter, 'David Lowenthal and the genesis of critical conservation thought', Laura Alice Watt reflects on Lowenthal's fundamental contribution to conservation thought, which predated his work on heritage and landscape. His 'landscape' thinking was ever present, and prescient, because he elided those binaries of nature/culture and human/nature that underpinned fields such as ecology and conservation biology. The idealised wilderness disturbed by humans prevails as Watt observes, but Lowenthal's landscape lens always unsettled this view, drawing attention to local communities and their embedded understandings of everyday life. Watt recounts Lowenthal's influence on her work, and how their intellectual association later ripened into friendship.

Elizabeth Thomas-Hope's chapter 'Lowenthal, the Caribbeanist', sheds light on Lowenthal's Caribbean years (1956-67), during which he lectured at the History Department at the University of the West Indies, Mona Campus, Jamaica. This was a time of transition in the non-Hispanic Caribbean, as former colonies were becoming independent states, and Lowenthal honed his analytical skills there with critical insights into this rich but much misunderstood and complex region. His recognition that the region could not be generalised led to important contributions on place, geography, history and heritage. Thomas-Hope shares an interesting anecdote in which Lowenthal tries to raise funds to return archival documents to Barbuda. He was ultimately unsuccessful, but the repatriation of heritage became his lifelong concern. And as Thomas-Hope notes, the themes of islandness, pluralism, alienation and belonging that Lowenthal explored continue to resonate in this region, with Barbuda's recent attempts to protect its environment, land rights and heritage reaching the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council.<sup>1</sup> One wonders what he would have made of this.

Sverker Solin uses his chapter, 'David Lowenthal's archipelagic landscape of learning', to demonstrate the practical application of the 'archipelagic thinking' that was inspired by Lowenthal's Caribbean experience. Solin discusses Lowenthal's final work, the Stockholm Archipelago Lectures, which were published in 2019 under the title 'Quest for the Unity of Knowledge'. He sees these lectures as the culmination of Lowenthal's life's work, reflecting Lowenthal's maturity as a scholar as he explored the tensions between the individual and the collective, the natural and the cultural, the global and the archipelagic. His quest for knowledge was unceasing in this regard and continued the tradition of public engagement that defined his practice.

In the afterword, we come full circle as Charles Saumarez-Smith demonstrates what today would be called 'research impact' – Lowenthal's influence on heritage practitioners, particularly museum professionals, as part of his role as a public intellectual. Saumarez-Smith notes that Lowenthal's book, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, gave birth to heritage studies. Lowenthal saw the interpretation of the past through historical monuments and landscapes as a subject worthy of study in its own right. 'The Uses of the Past' seminars, helmed by Lowenthal, would shape a new generation of museum professionals who reconsidered their relationship with the public and the true nature of the museum's popular function.

These essays are all linked by the affection and respect that these contributors have for Lowenthal as friend, colleague and mentor. Threaded throughout are personal anecdotes that give true insight into a public scholar that engaged with, rather than withdrew from, the informal and vernacular. Threats old and new, in the form of colonialism, climate change, and ongoing civil conflict, continue to impact our landscapes. This portrait of Lowenthal, whose ethos was grounded in respect for the ordinary and the lived-in, even as he pondered questions of panoramic scope, will surely be informative and inspiring for researchers similarly confronted by the material realities underpinning scholarly inquiry.

## Note

1. John Mussington and another (Appellants) v Development Control Authority and 2 others (Respondents) (Antigua and Barbuda) [2024] UKPC 3.

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