

Book Review

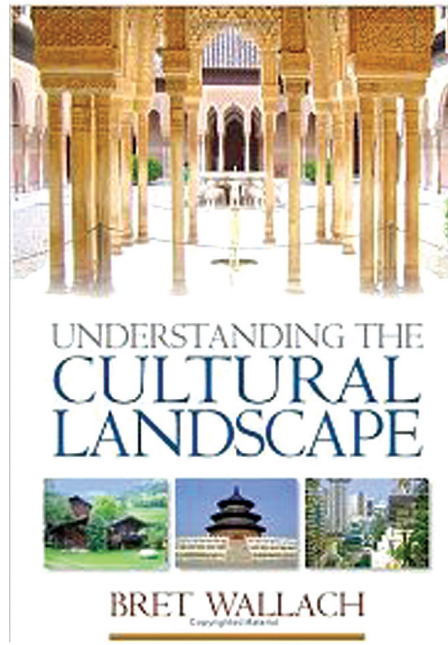
Understanding the Cultural Landscape, by Bret Wallach. The Guilford Press, 2005. ISBN 1-59385-119-7 (paperback); ISBN 1-59385-120-0 (hardback)

— Reviewed by Gerry Curtis, RPLS

I have to admit right now that I opened *Understanding the Cultural Landscape* with some apprehension about reading just for pleasure and general interest a book that gave every indication of being a textbook. The author is or was a teacher of geography at the University of Oklahoma, after all. Then I read Mr. Wallach's introduction and was even more apprehensive. His first two sentences in that introduction are "Geography is a strange subject. You may think you know what it's about, but stick around." Uh-oh! Those sentences were both scary and somehow appealing, like the introduction to a particularly graphic mystery novel. The surveyor/map reader in me was hooked.

The 377 pages before Sources and Index are not fast reading. But, like in a mystery novel, the organization of the book tends to make the reader want to turn the page, to find out what's next. Mr. Wallach begins in the same way a well organized classroom presentation would begin—with a first section titled "Anthropological Foundations" and containing such sub-headings as "Human Evolution, Diffusion, Culture, Foragers, Domestication," and so on. The foundation of the human existence and the earliest human activities are discussed in great detail, with that first section ending with a chapter titled "The Emergence of Civilization." So much of this early section reports the evolution of hunters, gatherers, and agricultural practitioners into an assortment of basic vocations and the cultures associated with them or by them!

"Historical Developments" is the title of the second section of the book. Its first two chapters relate to the growth of China and India and the geologic and geographic systems that helped to shape the cultures of those currently hugely populated areas. Wallach writes in many parts of the book about how the physical geography of areas influenced not only the type of crops grown there, but also vocations and even to an extent, the religions of the various peoples of the world. He closes the section with a discussion of globaliza-



tion, including the spread of largely British and American products and product names throughout the world. He also discusses the results of the influence of colonial powers no longer in power in places, but whose language, dress, and other customs have significantly influenced the former colonies which have retained and even adopted these cultural mores.

Then Mr. Wallach turns to the cultural landscape of today. His scope of view is wide, extending to international operations of growing and marketing food products, manufactured goods, and other commodities, while a significant part of the world still relies on small local production of similar items. The issues in these areas of human activity are so involved, explains Wal-

lach, that a review such as the one presented in *Understanding the Cultural Landscapes* cannot even summarize them in any real sense.

The final two sections of the book are titled "Environmental Consequences" and "Reading Landscapes." The attempts here are to (in a way) categorize the present day results of several thousand years of recorded histories and the historical influences that resulted in the world and our own cultural landscapes as we know them: our buying habits, our movements, or lack thereof, our dress, and even our religious practices.

I actually enjoyed reading this book far more than you might discern from this report. The wealth of ideas and reports contained within this rather short volume come at you so fast that you are virtually overwhelmed with material. The small, all black-and-white maps and photographs are as illustrative as those projected on a small screen in a classroom setting could be. My inference of Mr. Wallach's intent is to present you with all the graphic situations and incidents that have created the culture of our modern world and, perhaps, to inspire your inquiry further into the various subjects from a more detailed standpoint. I recommend this book if you have an interest in economic and cultural geography. If the pursuit of such knowledge is not among your interests, you will likely not finish the book.