Book Review
Where Land Meets Sea: Coastal Explorations of Landscape Representations and Spatial Experience

Anna Ryan, Ashgate, 2012
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The book presents the research of Anna Ryan on her pursuit of ‘an engagement with the concept of landscape, interrogating it as construct and questioning its material presence’ (Ryan, 2012; 4). The field research focuses on coastal landscapes and the associated spatial experience of local communities. It questions the suitability of the term landscape when considering the physical and more-than-physical world and moves to generate awareness of the relationship between self and surroundings.

She develops the term *surroundings* as a substitute for the traditional term *landscape* to emphasise a broader understanding of the relationship of people and their local environment. This exploration of the spatial experience between the natural world and its local cultural interpretation is well constructed and convincingly articulated.

The book is illustrated with artworks from established professional artists and contributions from the research participants. It commences with a discussion of the experiential qualities and spatiality of human engagement with the coastal interaction of sea and land. Ryan engages with the writings of philosophical, geographical and architectural thinkers, primarily associated with the relationship between body, mind and context. She sets up discussions on geography and research methodologies, leading to the presentation of the field research focused on the Irish coast.

Over 60 participants are recruited to investigate the two coastal locations of Ireland: the South Wall of Dublin Bay, with an urban population and the Maharee Peninsula, which is home to a rural community. The participants were strangers to Ryan and were approached in public places including roads, pubs and at the coast. They were given a disposable camera and a location specific note. The South Wall participants were asked why they came to the location. The Maharee participants were asked what they thought was important about the location. A similar exercise was conducted with some participants asked to draw, rather than photograph.

The period between the participants taking photos and discussing their experience with Ryan took an average of one to two months. Ryan describes her role in these discussions as more of a facilitator rather than an interviewer, preferring to run the discussions informally with no planned questions. Aided by the photos or drawings Ryan discussed with the participants their lived experience of interacting with the ambiguities of the coast’s fixed land and its shifting sea. The participants were perceived as placed within their surrounds, rather than as simply observers. Their reflection of coast as local lived experiences is not deconstructed but
recognised as instructional within itself. Ryan considers this method of participation ‘is not so much a tool of the project; the methods are the project’ (ibid: 117).

The investigation of these participant experiences expressed in the form of photos and drawings can be linked beyond Ryan’s research to the visual arts methodology of practice-led research, where artists engage with their surroundings to producing active expressions of space, place, time and emotion.

Throughout the book, Ryan expands her consideration of the physical and more-than-physical world and notes ‘The aspiration of this research is to encourage a deep awareness of one’s relationship with one’s surroundings, and in this way to draw more conscious attention to one’s unconscious embodied special sensibilities’ (ibid: 125).

While the research fieldwork is focused on the Irish coast and community, links can be made to other local cultures, including indigenous cultures that live the experience of a physical, emotional and spiritual relationship with nature. Ryan makes reference to Siberia, the Arctic and the Sahara to demonstrate that a ‘given environment appears as place-ful for one group of people and as “empty wilderness” for others’ (ibid: 4). In concluding, Ryan looks beyond her research toward an investigation of ‘surroundings as a valid representation and conceptual understanding of spatial experience’ (ibid: 258).

Keven Francis
PhD candidate, Research School of Humanities and the Arts, Australian National University