

(2025 February 24) Landscape and Memory - Schama

"What I have tried to show in Landscape and Memory is that the cultural habits of humanity have always made room for the sacredness of nature."

- Simon Schama

Speaking impromptu at the recent President's Day protest/rally in Bisbee against the Trump administration ransacking of our cultural and environmental heritage, and having in mind that bifocal perspective of my own sojourn in the Bisbee community, I pointed out that before the term *environmentalist* came into vogue, nature lovers, tree huggers and our ilk were known as conservationists, a term that applies both to those who work to save our natural environment (like the San Pedro River) and those who work to save our cultural environment (like historic Old Bisbee), *preservationist* being a distinctive subheading of *conservationist* in both respects.

Culture and environment, of course, have long been at odds and conservationists have for several centuries been telling us (Derrick Jensen's salient Endgame books come to mind) that human cultures have always eaten themselves out of existence, if not by directly outstripping their food supply, then metaphorically by using up or devastating other essential natural resources — water, timber, minerals and so forth and now the meteorological (biogeophysical) environment the billionaires that be seem hellbent on collapsing in a fast grab for megabucks.

Also in the past few decades, anthropologists, social and environmental justice advocates, and climate activists have been telling us (and, in particular, reminding hardcore environmental preservationists) that much as we may long for pristine landscapes, untouched wilderness and marine wonderlands, there aren't any Edens (if there ever were) and whatever relatively unblemished lands we have left that we may want to designate as park, preserve, sanctuary or wilderness never have been untouched by human culture but, in fact, were once or again the homelands of indigenous people until one way or another they were overtaken and overrun, colonized, exploited by our present, industrialized, ultra-capitalist, environmentally voracious culture.

The social and environmental justice movements of the past few years have not only called into question the exclusionist (visitors only) ethic of the well-intentioned and largely successful 20th C efforts to establish national parks and preserves globally, but in many places have initiated reparation programs and begun long overdue legal and material recognition that indigenous peoples, whose cultures have for millennia co-existed with nature, may in fact have something worth listening to about how to live sustainably and certainly must have a say in how sequestered ("protected") lands are to be managed

Recently, in one of Bisbee's cultural delights, the Copper Queen Library used bookstore, I picked up for 50¢ a copy of Simon Schama's *Landscape and Memory* (Random House, 1995), a book (a tome, really, at nearly 600 pages before notes, bibliography and index) that in an oblique way addresses these culture/nature questions. In what blurbs call a "lavishly illustrated" tour de force,

Schama presents a history of mostly Western Euro-American culture's relation to the natural world through the lens (and frames) of landscape painting.

In the Introduction, Schama says "What I have tried to show in *Landscape and Memory* is that the cultural habits of humanity have always made room for the sacredness of nature." I've only just begun reading the book (and to tell the truth, given it's length and depth I may never finish it, but just keep it at hand for late night dipping into), so don't know if he succeeds. But I'm sure from what I've seen and read so far, that what he has set down is worth paying attention to.