

# 1 Place and the Problem of Landscape

Jeff Malpas

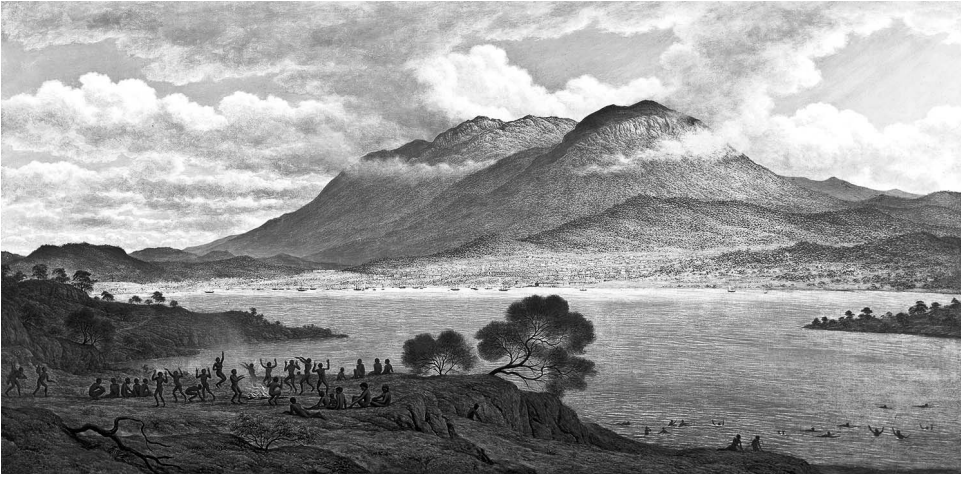
Landscape is like revelation / it is both singular crystal and the remotest things  
—Geoffrey Hill<sup>1</sup>

I

Although it seems to me mistaken to treat “landscape” as a term referring only to a particular artistic genre, it is nevertheless with a landscape painting that I want to begin—a work by the painter, John Glover, who immigrated to Tasmania from England in the 1820s. The painting is *Mount Wellington and Hobart Town from Kangaroo Point*, painted in 1834.

Thought for many years to have been destroyed in London during World War II, the painting seems to have acquired some significance for contemporary Tasmanians—so much so that the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery combined with the National Gallery of Australia to purchase the painting for a record price of AUD \$1,762,500 (approximately €1 million) when it reappeared in public view at Christie’s in November 2001. It is a landscape painting, a painting of a place—Hobart Town seen from across the Derwent River with Mount Wellington behind it.

The significance of the work undoubtedly derives from the all-encompassing view of early Hobart and its immediate surrounds that the painting presents to the viewer, as well as the record it provides of the town at this point in its history. It is through its presentation of this view that the work contributes to the sense of the town’s history and identity. Of course, the view that is presented appears within an idyllic frame—one that romanticizes the town along with its setting. Not only does Mount Wellington appear in the background as loftier and more imposing than in reality, while the town itself appears bathed in a swathe of light that cuts across the painting, but the foreground of the work is occupied by happy scenes of Tasmanian Aboriginal life that were impossible at the time the



**Figure 1.1**

John Glover, *Mount Wellington and Hobart Town from Kangaroo Point*, 1834. Oil on canvas. Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery and National Gallery of Australia.

picture was painted. There is, in fact, a cruel irony here, since, by 1836, the real plight of the Tasmanian Aboriginal people was one of destruction, displacement, and death. The rosy presentation of the developing town, and the idealized scenes before it, can thus be seen to mask the dispossession and desolation that accompanied that very development—although one might also say, and perhaps this might have been Glover's reading, that the painting portrays the Europeanized present alongside the Aboriginal past, and if both are placed within the same romantic glow, it may also be significant that the Aboriginal scenes are cast into relative shadow compared to the sunlit town across the water.<sup>2</sup>

Glover's painting presents a particular place, and a particular landscape, to us. It does so in a way that also modifies the landscape it presents. Indeed, it achieves much of its effect, in a manner characteristic of such paintings, through just such modification—the way in which the modification of landscape in pictorial presentation enables the assertion of relations of power and subjectification is a large part of what W. J. T. Mitchell thematizes in his important collection *Landscape and Power*.<sup>3</sup> So here we have a painting of a landscape, and so of a place, that is, as a painting, also itself a landscape. The way in which the landscape painting presents the landscape that is painted involves, however, the inevitable modification of the landscape so presented—it involves the adoption of a particular view

or views (Glover seems actually to have incorporated multiple perspectives into the same work) that, in this case especially, invoke the past as well as the present, while also pointing toward a future (the prosperous appearance of the sunlit town is itself an indicator of the hopes and aspirations of both town and painter).

While the painting presents a place or landscape, and presents it in the form of a landscape, what is it that is shown or revealed in such presenting? Is it a real landscape that is revealed here? Or is it purely an imagined landscape—in which case, what is revealed but the artist's own imaginative creation? Yet there is a relation, not merely of presentation, but of *representation* here, which is to say that the painting is indeed a painting *of* Hobart Town. Moreover, if we take note of the two senses that are contained in the word "landscape," and we admit that there is both the landscape represented, and the landscape that is the representation, then what is it that is revealed in and through either of these senses of landscape other than a place—a place that itself encompasses the artist's own situation in, or in relation to, that landscape?

Edward Casey has written that "Landscapes are, in the final analysis, placescapes; they are congeries of places in the fullest experiential and represented sense. *No landscape without place*; this much we may take to be certainly true."<sup>4</sup> The relation between landscape and place will be the focus of my explorations here. But in looking to this relation, I also want to explore the question of the "revelatory" character of landscape, and the matter of what is revealed in the connection between landscape and place. One of the underlying questions here concerns not only the relation between landscape and place, but also our own relation to both. Before I go any further, however, there is another question that lurks in the background, which is already evident in one of the questions I asked immediately above: what is meant by the term "landscape"? It is already clear that landscape can refer to a mode of presentation or "representation," such as a painting, as well as to that which is presented, namely a place. To some extent, every use of the term carries something of both these senses, since for a place to be a landscape is already for it to appear in a certain way—there is, consequently, an inevitable equivocity that attaches to talk of "landscape." The question as to the meaning of landscape is thus always an issue in any and every discussion of landscape—it is not a matter that can be taken as simply decided from the very start. Moreover, to ask about landscape is also, therefore, to ask about the nature of representation, since the equivocity evident in the term "landscape" is an equivocity that also affects the idea of representation as such.

What lies behind my inquiry into landscape is a fundamental problem. It is a problem already adumbrated in the equivocity I have noted here, and although it is not a problem that emerges in any clear way in Casey's work, it is certainly present in much contemporary discussion of landscape, as well as in contemporary reactions and practice in relation to landscape. To some extent, this "problem of landscape" is expressed in a common conception of landscape according to which landscape is the product of an essentially "representational" construal of our relation to the world that always involves separation and detachment. This conception takes landscape to involve the presenting of the world as an object, seen from a certain view, structured, framed, and made available to our gaze. Such "views" may well affect us, and we may well take them to be important in a variety of ways, but precisely because they are already seen as "views," so they are separated from us, and our involvement with them is based purely in the spectatorial—in a form of visual or pictorial presentation in which we remain mere observers of the presented scene. The "representational" character of landscape as an art form is often taken to underpin the "dark side" of landscape—its complicity in exclusion and oppression—since it is precisely in and through the representational character of landscape art that landscape art is seen as constructing the landscape that it presents in ways that reinforce the relations of power and authority that hold sway within it.

There is an implication here, seldom spelled out, in which visual presentation is itself understood as entailing a more passive relation to what is viewed than might other modes of presentation, and that this passivity itself functions to enable power to operate through representation (and also to conceal that operation). Such an implication of passivity in relation to vision is surely mistaken—vision, as with all modes of sensory engagement, presupposes activity (and not only on the basis of Gibsonian considerations alone<sup>5</sup>)—but it nevertheless seems correct to say that there is a sense of *separation* between the viewer and what is viewed that is more strongly and immediately evident in visual than in other modes of presentation.<sup>6</sup> Thus, although the spectatorial does not belong to the visual alone (every sensory modality allows of more or less spectatorial modes of engagement), the visual is more inclined, we might say, to a spectatorial construal. The problem that concerns me here is that the construal of the visual often leads us to disregard the fact that the visual and the spectatorial are not the same, and that the visual always implicates more just than the visual alone.<sup>7</sup>

It is the “representational” or “spectatorial” character of landscape that will be the primary focus of my discussion. My claim will be that landscape, while often understood in purely visual terms, is inadequately understood if construed as merely a “view,” and that even landscape painting, although certainly employing a visual mode of presentation, presents more than the visual alone. Landscape is a representation of place, and as such, it is the re-presentation of a relatedness to place, a re-presentation of a mode of “emplacement.” The argument may also be put in terms of a claim, itself implicit in Casey’s work, regarding the visual and the pictorial: Every view carries with it more than just a view narrowly conceived, but is itself the expression and representation of a relation to place—if every landscape is a place-scape, then so is every “view” an entry into place.

## II

In his famous essay on the country and the city, Raymond Williams put the point regarding the essentially spectatorial character of landscape as follows: “a working country is hardly ever a landscape. The very idea of landscape implies separation and observation.”<sup>8</sup> Something like the same idea also appears in Stephen Daniels and Denis Cosgrove’s important collection on the “iconography” of landscape. In a much-quoted passage, they write that:

A landscape is a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring or symbolizing surroundings. This is not to say that landscapes are immaterial. They may be represented in a variety of materials and on many surfaces—in paint on canvas, in writing on paper, in earth, stone water and vegetation on the ground.<sup>9</sup>

The idea that it is the “representational”—and especially the visual-representational—character of landscape that underpins its ideological character is often seen as tied to the way in which landscape “objectifies,” and even “commodifies,” that which it presents. The external environment, or aspects of it, is thus treated as an object made amenable to human purposes and interests—whether as an object available for enjoyment or contemplation, or for production, development, or exchange. Indeed, the art historian Enzo Carli claims that it is only when landscape has been transformed into something *useful* to human beings that it can become an object of aesthetic appreciation:

before man could begin to appreciate landscape, or rather, the elements that constitute a landscape, he had to put his mark upon it. Only when he has planted his orchards and fruit trees and gardens does it become for him a source of delight for the senses; then it commands aesthetic appreciation and he makes pictures of it.<sup>10</sup>