Forward

Charlotte Scott

In the preface to the first edition of *Poly-Olbion* in 1612, Michael Drayton invites his reader into the imaginative world of his chorographic landscape. Like Scipio’s dream, Drayton describes the landscape spread out beneath our vision, ‘lying far under thee’, where he ‘will convey thee down by a soul-pleasing descent through delicate embroidered meadows, often veined with gentle, gliding brooks.’ Drayton is describing what he calls ‘Great Britain’, but his offer to enable the reader to gaze down on the earth from above, from the divine perspective of a god, draws on a long and distinguished classical tradition stretching all the way back to the Roman philosopher Cicero’s *Dream of Scipio* (c. 54-51 BC). Cicero’s dream imagines the Roman general Scipio Africanus rising up above the earth and looking down on it in an irenic contemplation of the beauty of the world and the futility of man’s mortal acts upon it. Drayton draws on Scipio’s dream to offer a tender invitation to his reader to take part in this ‘Great Britain’, to trace the ‘mountains, forests, rivers and valleys’ with a receptive mind and a capacious spirit.

Drayton dedicated the poem to the teenage prince Henry: he was the great hope for England’s future and his death the year the poem was published casts a tragic shadow over the poem’s ambitions. Drayton presents his project as homage to the future as much as a record of the past. Imagined through three perspectives – location, description, and history – Drayton challenges his reader to visualise, inhabit and understand the landscape in which they live. Uniquely in English poetry of this period, Drayton attempts to fuse the imaginative and the physical worlds through an absolute sense of personal identification: the land comes to life even as he describes it. Animating the natural world through personification and investing it with ‘sundry postures’, ‘loves’ and ‘delights’, Drayton’s genius is to provide one of the first epic poems of the English landscape, shaping our creative faculties to render this country our country, not as a politically empty celebration of human triumph but as a temperate challenge to take possession of, and responsibility for, the environment in which we live. As Andrew Mc Rae writes, this is not a ‘nature’ poem as we understand such poetry from the Romantic pens of Wordsworth or Coleridge: quite the contrary; where, for later writers, the natural world was a refuge from human toil, a pastiche of emotional and creative energies or a canvas for ideological change, Drayton’s nature, like almost all invocations of the cultivated landscape, is a record of human values. Addressing the poem to the prince, ‘as the hopeful heir of the Kingdoms of this Great Britain’, Drayton situates the landscape at the centre of his vision of power. Frequently drawing on the terms of ‘love’ Drayton presents the countries and counties of Great Britain as relative forms, linked by his affection as well as the rivers, coastlines, hinterlands and hedges between them.

The mercurial nature of Drayton’s poem resists any attempt to homogenise the landscape. There is no sense of stasis or sterile perfection here, rather Drayton describes a shifting, changing nature that is constantly under duress to adapt, position and improve on her own creations. The multiple substances of organic nature – water, soil, rock, grass – as well as the animal and human bodies that inhabit them, are in a state of constant motion which suggests a country that is both receptive and vulnerable. Although Drayton like many of his contemporaries understood poetry as an ideal form in which the imaginative world could combine with the lived world to produce something perfect or inspirational, the voice in Poly-Olbion is more alert, critical and aware that nature is not an idealised narrative of a golden world but something that is worked, marked and changed by human life as well as time, weather and seasons. Despite the poem’s larger celebration of harmony in the ‘ever-happy isles’ of great Britain the detail with which Drayton records the infinite variety of the natural world produces a rich and textured landscape. Tracing the industries of mining, timber, animal husbandry and arable farming Drayton draws his reader into the dynamic between the human and natural worlds in order to emphasise the ways in which nature is a resource for survival as well as pleasure. Focusing our gaze on diamonds, ‘neatly cut’, amber, or Neptune, ‘the King of waves’, he positions England as a mighty and creative space within the wide world:

Great *Neptune* when he swells, and rageth at the rocks

(Set out into those seas) inforcing through his shocks

Those arms of sea that thrust into the tinny strand

By their meand’red creaks, indenting of that land,

Whose fame by every tongue is for her minerals hurl’d

Near from the mid-day’s point, throughout the Western world (the First Song, ll. 155-160).

This is no parochial island but a central point through which the seas flow as tributaries to England’s rich resources and mighty power. Consciously positioning England within a growing culture of trade, navigation, development and export Drayton consistently invokes Greek and Roman mythology to define the country’s history as both ancient and formative within the intellectual traditions of the early modern period. Perhaps one of Drayton’s greatest achievements in *Poly-Olbion* is to evoke a landscape that is at once unique, precise and local whilst at the same time augmenting Britain’s significance within the western world. Almost always beginning from a Ciceronian aerial view, we range over the land on the wings of birds with his muse for our companion: precipitously and vertiginously we descend into fields, banks and tracts to observe the aspects that many of his readers would call home. As the essays in this catalogue suggest, Drayton was writing to an emerging culture of nationhood: a culture in which the local, region, national and world map was supporting a growing sense of identification with the land in which you lived. Drayton’s poem works hard to develop and augment this sense of identity and his sweeping vision that focuses in and then zooms out is not unlike an imaginative online digital street map. For this poem is about where you live and how that space and landscape reflects your life, loves and needs: whether you are from Cornwall or Wales, Scotland or Jersey; whether you have swum or fished in the Trent; sailed from Falmouth or walked along the river Severn it is in all our natures to trace the landscape that we know, to find the places we recognise and to imagine that this land is our land. Yet this is no misty-eyed patriotism: Drayton’s landscape is deeply scarred by conflict, shame, disappointment and brutishness. In *Poly*-*Olbion* all nature has a human history and Drayton’s poem demands that we understand the landscape as a record of human life, not an escape from it.

The exhibition at the Royal Geographical Society is not only a celebration of Drayton’s long-neglected poem it is also a celebration of the indomitable power of the landscape to bind us as both social beings and conscientious individuals. As McRae’s essay here observes, *Poly-Olbion* understands the importance of futurity and Drayton’s vision, whilst commendatory, is never complacent. The essays in this catalogue, along with the beautifully illustrated maps and portraits of Drayton, Seldon and Hole [check], situate *Poly-Olbion* at the heart of the British landscape. There has never been a more ambitious or life affirming poem about the nature of the English Isles and what the scholars, poets, artists and chorographers who have been involved in this project have achieved here is to bring Drayton’s vision - both fulfilled and unfulfilled – to the forefront of our modern understanding of both the natural and social worlds. The essays in this catalogue celebrate Drayton’s achievement but they also state in different keys the challenges many modern (and early modern) readers contend with in this poem. Yet as this exhibition shows you can access *Poly-Olbion* in many different ways: whether through imaginative imagery, precise description, detailed chorography, or creative mythologies the poem invites its readers on a journey of identification. For some it may be a fairy land, companioned by Muses and littered with remnants from an Arthurian legend: for others, it traces the co-ordinates of the land in which they grew up; and for others, still, it may be a record of fault lines of the history of their country, or even a reminder of what we cherish and what we destroy. As Philip Schwyzer writes, ‘*Poly-Olbion* is at once a work of preservation and transcendence’ and it is precisely the co-existence of those qualities that this catalogue celebrates. Many of the contributors here record the challenges that we and they face in appreciating *Poly-Olbion* and yet, as Daniel Cattell observes, it is often the unevenness of the poem that brings it to life with ‘an undulating poetry whose rise and fall mimics the contours of the land’.

Never has the question of Britishness been more fraught or more complex than it is now; and yet what *Poly-Olbion* demands is that we go on reaffirming our human relationship to the natural world and, above all, perhaps, noticing it. As London hosts this exhibition in one of the city’s historic buildings it is perhaps prescient that this poem asks you to look at your landscape – to trace, to touch, to stand upon, to breathe, to drink, to inhabit the space you call home and to see that place – wherever it might be – as both discreet and unified, as unique but also as belonging to that which Drayton justly celebrates as *great* Britain.