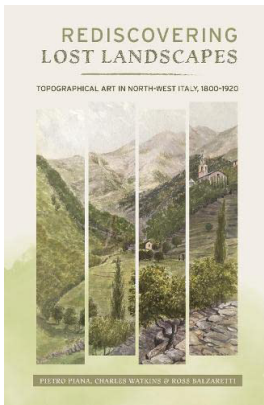


Pietro Piana, Charles Watkins, Ross Balzaretti: Rediscovering Lost Landscapes. Topographical Art in North-West Italy, 1800–1920,
The Boydell Press, Woodbridge 2021, 308 + xii pp.

Bridging historical geography and art history has been a rooted tradition at the University of Nottingham. A recent example of this characteristic can be found in *Rediscovering Lost Landscapes* by Pietro Piana, Charles Watkins, and Ross Balzaretti. It is a noteworthy and inspiring study



of art, landscape, and social processes shaping them both, despite the inadequacies described herein.

Charles Watkins, a professor of Rural Geography in Nottingham, specialises in investigating environmental and landscape topics using works of art as key sources.¹ In the discussed case, he was accompanied by Ross Balzaretti, a professor of Italian History in Nottingham, whose interests span from medieval times to the modern era, and Pietro Piana, a geographer who defended his PhD on art and landscape history of Liguria in Nottingham and currently works at the University of Genoa. Thus, the team consisting of two

geographers and a historian had already been experienced in landscape studies and the past of northern Italy.

The book builds on the results of the research project “British amateur topographical art and landscape in Northwestern Italy 1835–1915”. Apart from writing several journal articles and preparing two exhibitions, this project included setting up a website and a Twitter account.² The volume, however, reaches further than the abovementioned project and its scope requires some explanations. The timespan provided by the title, 1800–1920, is understandably approximate and in some cases rightly extended. However, the geographical outreach of “north-west Italy” is much more disputable. The authors carried out research in Liguria, Aosta Valley, and Cottian Alps, but totally neglected the Po Plain that spreads in between those three mountainous regions. It is highly probable that its landscapes were less attractive and therefore rarely depicted, but such omission could be clarified. The authors justified the usage of both professional and amateur works claiming that “there is no clear distinction between topographical and landscape drawings and paintings” (p. 7). On the other hand, the difference between the titles of the book (“Topographical Art”) and the research project (“British amateur topographical art”) is noticeable. In effect, the narrative stands in-between: it focuses on British travellers and artists, juxtaposes them with Italians, but tends to overlook incomers from other countries.

The book has a clear structure, with a methodological introduction and two

¹ See for instance: C. Watkins, B. Cowell, *Uvedale Price 1747–1829: decoding the picturesque* (Woodbridge, 2012); C. Watkins, *Trees, Woods and Forests. A Social and Cultural History* (London, 2014); *Europe's changing woods and forests: From wildwood to managed landscapes*, ed. K. Kirby, C. Watkins (Wallingford, 2015).

² <https://topographicalart.wordpress.com/>; <https://twitter.com/TopogArt/>.

initial chapters on artists and the relation between art and photography, followed by the analysis of landscape depictions. They are aligned thematically: mountains, coast, villages and castles, agriculture and industry, river valleys, modernisation and luxurious resorts.

The introduction presents the aim of the research: “We analyse drawings and paintings [...] to provide insights into the ways Italian landscapes were appreciated and understood by visitors, tourists and residents” (p. 2) and the sources that (apart of paintings and drawings) consisted of photographs, maps, archival documents, and fieldwork, including oral history. The research was initiated by identifying artists and their works stored in public and private collections. The next stage was the identification of particular viewpoints and their comparison with contemporary situations. At this step, the authors employed all the abovementioned kinds of sources.

The analyses of over 900 images and fieldwork at around 150 sites provided manifold results regarding not only particular persons and places but also more general patterns of landscape perception and possibilities, as well as challenges of exploring the topographical dimension of art. The authors noticed the role of artistic techniques, stressing the differences between rapid travel sketches and studio works, sometimes painted with the help of photographs, or between professional artists’ experiments and amateur accuracy (p. 44). A photograph and a painting alike could be a compilation of various sights from the same area, as exemplified by the works of Ezio Benigni (pp. 62–65) and John Brett (pp. 80–82). Personal attitude clearly influenced the choice of topics: Henry Alford and Clarence Bicknell were both Anglican clergymen depicting Ligurian Riviera, but only the latter – favourably disposed to Catholics – used to paint Catholic churches, omitted by Alford who disliked them (p. 139–140). Some

valuable observations concern Ligurian beaches, once used for drying fishing nets and clothes or for shipbuilding as in the curious case of Varazze (pp. 121–123), that turned into what we know today: hotels-lined spots for sunbathing and swimming. Interestingly, many pebbly beaches are a by-product of 1860s railway building, widened with rocky debris from tunnels (pp. 117–118).

A significant part of the book comprises 27 colour plates and 91 black-and-white figures. The vast majority are reproductions of analysed paintings, drawings, photographs, and maps, all very well integrated with the text. It is only disappointing to see very few contemporary photographs that could help the reader better understand what the authors described and compared. This is particularly regrettable since such photographs were taken during fieldwork and shared on the project’s website and Twitter account. Furthermore, a surprising feature of a book written by geographers is that it contains just one very general map of north-west Italy. Providing detailed maps of case-study areas would enrich the volume and make its perception easier.

The conclusion contains an exemplary detailed assessment of a single painting, i.e. Alfred Sells’ watercolour *S. Andrea di Foggia, near Rapallo* from 1900 (pp. 272–274), also represented on a front cover. The analysis starts with a description of the painting, followed by identifying the viewpoint and its viewshed employing nineteenth-century cartography and GIS. Then the authors turn towards fieldwork, explaining the contemporary landscape and describing plant species growing now in the area depicted by Sells. On the one hand, it demonstrates the large extent of land abandonment and woodland regeneration; on the other, it stresses the necessity of incorporating multiple sources into any landscape study. One can only wonder why such an in-depth analysis appears only

in the conclusion and concerns only one painting. Maybe it would be more useful to analyse fewer depictions but with analogous accuracy.

Arguably, the most relevant finding of the book is the re-assessment and appreciation of the value of professional and amateur artistic depictions in the title, *rediscovering* past landscapes. The authors provided some fascinating insights into how and why people represented views and what these representations can reveal about attitudes towards landscape in the past and today. Therefore, it is a highly inspiring work that raises questions about other regions and countries. From the Polish perspective, it is tempting to suggest this kind

of analysis could focus on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century depictions of historical Polish-Lithuanian lands, such as the works by Zygmunt Vogel, Napoleon Orda, or less-known amateurs. Another possibility is to compare the paintings and drawings of Italian landscapes made throughout the nineteenth century by travellers from different countries, including Polish artists and tourists. To achieve this, it is inevitable to integrate not only all kinds of available tools and sources but also scholars of various disciplines and nationalities. ■

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