

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Deborah Sutton.** *Other Landscapes: Colonialism and the Predicament of Authority in Nineteenth-Century South India.* Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2009. Illustrations, maps. xvi + 239 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-87-7694-027-0.

**Reviewed by** Robert Simpkins (San Jose State University)

**Published on** H-Asia (December, 2011)

**Commissioned by** Sumit Guha

The use of the word “landscape” in academic writing has proliferated across multiple disciplines in recent years. Landscape perspectives are included in the vocabulary of such fields as geography, history, anthropology, sociology, art history, and philosophy. It is not difficult to understand why—we experience the world visually and in three dimensions, and symbolically construct the space of our experience with meaning. Landscapes are also negotiated, contested, and subject to manipulation. Landscape perspectives enable us to emphasize the relationships among places, and see not just how individual locations changed over time, but also how the configurations of relationships among places have changed.

Deborah Sutton’s book, *Other Landscapes*, addresses several themes that relate to the conception and experience of landscape in the Nilgiri Hills. For many social scientists, this high-altitude region is best known for the presence of such populations as the Todas, people sometimes described in earlier literature as tribal, hill peoples, or aboriginal inhabitants of the region made famous through the work of scholars like W. H. Rivers (*The Todas* [1906]). Sutton’s focus is less on these populations themselves than on the changes in the representation of the region in the documents and images produced by the British over the course of the nineteenth century in the creation of an “Imperial landscape” (p. 3). As she notes, her book is “substantially” based on her dissertation through the Centre for Historical Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University (p. x).

The book’s chapters outline the process by which the Nilgiri Hills landscape became “constructed” in the British experience. The Nilgiri Hills occupied an important place in the British imagination, as Sutton describes early in her book. They were a kind of refuge for the British from the rest of India, with

a temperate climate and romantic imagery that included the hills and trees, but also the indigenous populations—even as British policies had an impact on their traditions and increasingly forced them into more rigid and legalized methods of survival.

Individual chapters examine areas in which British actions “created” the landscape they experienced in the Nilgiri Hills. Chapter 2 describes some of the early interactions between British settlers in the hills, the indigenous communities, and administrators of the East India Company who were forced to understand and sort claims of land ownership and transfer between the former two groups. As groups like the Todas turned increasingly to the British administration to support their claims, in doing so they were also becoming part of it. The British were also forced to learn manners of land use foreign to their understanding. The result, described in chapter 3, was a series of largely unsuccessful land surveys that attempted to impose cartographic order on this confusing landscape, and conflicts over land use and categories of land that led indigenous agriculturally based groups like the Badagas to see their perception in British eyes diminish and their use of the landscape through practices like swidden cultivation be seen as wasteful, as described in chapter 4. The role of forest management and the imposition of new views of “scientific” forestry are outlined in chapter 5. The hills lacked good sources of timber, a necessity for the British settlements in the region, and the indigenous populations were again seen as destructive to proper forest management, whereas supposedly scientific endeavors, such as the introduction of acacia and eucalyptus trees, were encouraged despite their later failure and damage to the ecosystem. Chapter 6 examines early ethnographic views of the hill populations and the emergence of Todas as the candidate for the aboriginal population and the Badagas, Kotas, and others

as later arrivals. The Toda village settlements called *munds* became places of romantic mystery, linked to a prehistoric past that captured the hills as they were prior to the nineteenth century. Tourism and publications highlighted the *munds* and the Toda populations that were increasingly confined not only to their village spaces, but also to an economy in which the British image of them was itself a commodity to be exchanged. With the arrival of ethnographers, like Rivers, their culture too was appropriated into the realm of anthropological knowledge, codified by Europeans. This may be seen as culminating in the Toda *kedr*, a funerary ritual described in chapter 7, which became an event as much for a foreign audience eager to see these exotic rites firsthand as it was for themselves. It also led to conflicts between the desire to witness the events by some and the desire to suppress aspects of them, such as slaughter of buffalo, by others, either on the grounds of cruelty or waste. The final stage of British appropriation of the hills in Sutton's thesis was the material culture of the hill people themselves, with otherwise mundane objects acquiring special status by virtue of their association with hill peoples and desired by collectors and museums. Todas even traveled abroad as "exhibits" for people like P. T. Barnum (p. 216).

Sutton's book is perhaps most valuable to other scholars due to her extensive archival research and footnotes. The use of East India Company and Madras Presidency records, as well as newspapers from the time, enables her to include numerous historical details that were previously not familiar to me. The shape of the book, however, seems overly dictated by the content of these sources when some of the work of other scholars on the Nilgiri Hills, much of which she does cite, is discussed more briefly. The discussions within each chapter of the events of each year or decade on a specific issue in the colonizing of this landscape can make for slow, heavy reading. The middle chapters are particularly demanding in this sense, when at times it is difficult to understand why some of the many details included are important to the larger points of the book.

From my own perspective, I wish she had included a discussion of regional studies during this period by early antiquarians and archaeologists, who even in the nineteenth century, were attempting to link the present-day populations to the visible signs of a prehistoric past on its landscape. Robert Sewell's *Antiquarian Remains in the Presidency of Madras* (1882), for example, in describing the artifacts and

"rude stone monuments" of the Nilgiri Hills makes it clear that for nineteenth-century antiquarians, the landscape of this region was not a blank before the nineteenth century, but one filled with curiosities that hinted at an exciting past to be uncovered.[1] The remains of stone circles, dolmens, temples, forts, and mining shafts were described by Sewell, and in some cases credited to some of the same individuals described in Sutton's narrative. Sewell, for example, cited J. W. Breeks's work, *An Account of the Tribes and Monuments of the Nilagiris* (1873); Sutton does as well, but only for the ethnographic and photographic representations of the Todas, not for the antiquarian and archaeological observations cited in Sewell's survey. Breeks even excavated some of the burial sites and reported the objects found within them. For me, the omission of the antiquarian interests in the region of these figures by Sutton is significant and affects her arguments about how the British perceived the landscape that preceded their arrival to the region. Similarly, both Sewell and Sutton cite the work of Harry Congreve, but for Sutton it is only with respect to his speculations on the semi-mythical origin of the Todas, not for his interest in the antiquarian remains of the region (pp. 161, 185n7).[2] Present-day archaeologists writing about the region, like Allen Zagarell, also draw from the work of early authors, including Congreve and Breeks, in discussing the history of research in the region; such a discussion may be found in Zagarell's contribution to the volume *Blue Mountains Revisited* (1997). This volume appears to be cited only once by Sutton, and only with respect to the essay by Anthony R. Walker, but in my view Zagarell's article in this volume and his earlier publications are relevant to Sutton's book as well and precede it by several years, so they should have been known to her.[3] While the early antiquarian interests do not preclude a contrary perception of the Nilgiri Hills by others in the early period of British settlement, Sutton's work might have benefited from the exploration of these multiple and contradictory observations of the pre-British history of the Nilgiris by nineteenth-century British writers.

Even Sutton's brief reference to the fact that, just prior to the British efforts to control the hills in 1799, they had been part of the empire of Tipu Sultan is discussed too briefly for its implications to be clear. Tipu Sultan collected tax revenues from the inhabitants of the hills and constructed a series of forts in the hills to facilitate the process of doing so. That the British knew this means that in a sense the "owner-

ship” of the hills was simply shifting from one empire to another, and that the indigenous inhabitants were neither isolated nor experiencing the process of incorporation into a larger state system for the first time. I would have liked a greater discussion of this transition, but Sutton’s strict focus on the nineteenth century either required that it be mentioned only briefly, or she preferred not to delve into it.

The use of visual aids in telling her story I found unsatisfying. The only map of the entire area of the Nilgiri Hills is reproduced from an 1873 original, but so reduced in size as to make the details largely unreadable. Several maps that she presumably uncovered in her examination of archives are shown with poor-quality photos and not explained particularly clearly. Some contain notations that cannot be made out in the photo, and could have been clarified by her but are not. There are no original maps included that might make the locations of the various areas and sites clearer for the unfamiliar reader. Photos are limited, and some are puzzlingly reproduced at a very small size, such as plates 5.2, 5.3, and 5.4 on page 148. Only one is printed at full-page size, although some would have benefited from enlargement.

Scholars frequently become infatuated with terms and perspectives that are used extensively for a time before becoming unfashionable. I hope the popularity of the term “landscape” does not follow this pattern

because, like Sutton, I find it a useful way to discuss the experience and interaction with the physical world. What I hope to see more of among scholars who use it is a greater effort to engage with the scholars of other disciplines who also use the term. While I found flaws with *Other Landscapes*, it nonetheless remains an important contribution to the literature on the Nilgiri Hills and contains significant summaries of material not replicated elsewhere. Sutton appears to have moved on to other topics in her research, but has left behind an important document for scholars of the region, or those seeking comparative studies of European colonization and its impact on cultural and physical landscapes.

#### Notes

[1]. Robert Sewell, *Antiquarian Remains in the Presidency of Madras* (Madras: Government Press, 1882), 224.

[2]. Harry Congreve, “The Antiquities of the Neilgherry Hills, Including an Inquiry into the Descent of the Thautawars or Todas,” *Madras Journal of Literature and Science*, no. 32 (1847): 77-147.

[3]. Allen Zagarell, “The Megalithic Graves of the Nilgiri Hills and the Moyar Ditch,” in *Blue Mountains Revisited*, ed. Paul Hockings (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 23-73; and Anthony R. Walker, “The Western Romance with the Toda,” in *ibid.*, 106-135.

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**Citation:** Robert Simpkins. Review of Sutton, Deborah, *Other Landscapes: Colonialism and the Predicament of Authority in Nineteenth-Century South India*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. December, 2011.

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