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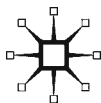
Strange Beauty: Ecocritical Approaches to Early Medieval Landscape
by Alfred K. Siewers

STRANGE BEAUTY

ECOCRITICAL APPROACHES TO
EARLY MEDIEVAL LANDSCAPE

Alfred K. Siewers

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STRANGE BEAUTY

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*To Olesya, Nick, Kevin, and Papas Pavlos and Mark;
and in memory of Karl, Marjorie, and Kristine*

Let us adore the Lord,
Maker of wonderful works:
Great-bright heaven with its angels;
On earth the fair-waved sea.

—From “Lord of Creation,” anonymous
ninth-century Irish poem

There are some, although few indeed, to whom divine grace has given power to contemplate the whole orb of the earth and the sea and heavens around it, brightly and most manifestly, with scope of mind miraculously enlarged in one and the same moment as if beneath a single ray of the sun.

—Attributed to Columcille of Iona

Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in... I would drink deeper, fish in the sky whose bottom is pebbly with stars.

—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

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PREFACE

This project grew from interest and research in environmental history and narrative, and in medieval studies. I grew up in inner-city Chicago, amid neglected parks designed by the pioneering ecological restorationist Jens Jensen, an overgrown backyard inspired by his prairie landscape style, and native oak groves preserved in a nearby cemetery. Our neighborhood was near the site of my grandfather's subdivided farm, from whose fields had come old Indian relics stored in our basement. There, along a glacial-sea ridge near Lake Michigan, on a Native American treaty line still traceable on the street grid, I became acutely aware of landscape and interested in cultural narratives of it. This was reinforced by devoted parents who were teachers interested in local ecology and history, and by my discovery in junior high, in the basement of the old Kroch's and Brentano's bookstore under the Wabash L, of the Everyman English edition of *The Mabinogion*. My fate seemed sealed as I sat on the floor absorbed by the presentation of landscape in that small book, while trains rumbled overhead and in the subway below. The end result of that encounter is now in your hands.

Later, while doing doctoral work in medieval studies, I was also chronicling the fate of the ecological restoration movement in the oak savannah preserves of metropolitan Chicago, an effort that resulted in an article published first in the University of Wisconsin at Madison Arboretum's *Restoration and Management Notes* (now the *Journal of Ecological Restoration*) in 1998, reprinted in revised form in *Whole Earth* in 2001. I had firsthand knowledge of, and involvement in, that restoration movement with its principals, having earlier covered it as a regional writer for the *Chicago Sun-Times* and briefly as a staff writer for *The Christian Science Monitor*. In the process I came to see in practical terms the important role of cultural narratives that can engage human communities in responding creatively to environmental devastation. The lack of such highlighted narratives in the Chicago area resulted in a political backlash against restorationists, who in effect were reconstructing an ecological narrative from accounts of early settlers and reports of Native American land-management practices, while gathering rare native seeds from pioneer cemeteries and railroad embankments, and using fire to manage vanishing oak savannah on public lands around Chicago. A resulting moratorium on their work severely disrupted this effort for a time. But the importance of the narrative the restorationists developed, slowly and often in discourse not apparent to the public, revealed itself physically in walking through their work: The sun-dappled oak savannah in spring at Somme

Woods, filled with wildflowers, butterflies, and native birds, so different from far less ecologically diverse (often seemingly monocultural) overgrown thickets elsewhere in unrestored forest preserves. I also became intrigued at how past transcendental narratives of regional landscape—most notably Daniel Burnham’s Swedenborgian-tinged lakefront Plan for Chicago but also including the Classical-style Christian Science churches (once attended by some of my mother’s family) on the city’s old boulevards and Chicago’s network of European-style ethnic Catholic parish churches (once frequented by my father’s extended family)—had ultimately, if grandly, failed.

The project in hand evolved from a subsequent doctoral dissertation (another related portion of which can be found in “Landscapes of Conversion: Guthlac’s Mound and Grendel’s Mere as Expressions of Anglo-Saxon Nation Building” [*Viator* 34 (2003): 1-39, revised and reprinted in *The Postmodern Beowulf: A Critical Casebook*, ed. Eileen A. Joy, Mary K. Ramsey, and Bruce D. Gilchrist (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2006)]. *Strange Beauty* is offered here in hopes that, in a small way, it may help advance understanding of the workings of narrative as an environmental phenomenon, and the potential for literary studies to contribute to that understanding, with even perhaps some indirect support to efforts by ecological restorationists who work urgently in many fields worldwide today.

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St. Beuno's well in rural northwest Wales; native monastic centers associated with the saint probably played a role in compiling the Four Branches of the *Mabinogi*. (Author's photo.)