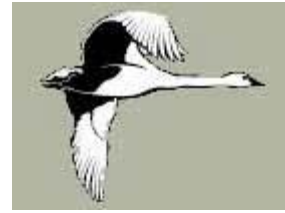


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### Idaho's Middle Landscape



#### Todd Shallat

Too far from Boise to smell the espresso, too close to the rush of the traffic racing from Nampa to Star, Rich Brown bumps a hay wagon through a field of nostalgia between romance and modernization, between working farm?oats, corn, pumpkins, alfalfa?and the tourist-based farming museum of an urbanized age. Come down for a three dollar hay ride. Come down for a soft-spoken lecture on holistic agriculture: chemical-free, labour-intensive, old tools, old methods, old values?the "alfalfa- bet" of sustainable farming, the gospel according to Brown.

"All things are connected," says Brown, looking east toward the subdivisions. "If we cover our land with asphalt then we are depleting our food supply." <sup>1</sup>

Brown farms his grandfather's homestead. Straw hat, plaid shirt, his grey beard *sans* mustache in the style of an Amish elder, he hails from "Dunkards" (Church of the Brethren) who baptized ("dunked") their children in water from the Phyllis Canal. A collector, he keeps a barn full of obsolete things. Hay knives. A horse-drawn hay mower. A fancy carriage from the 1890s. A fringe-topped wagonette surrey built from the parts of old automobiles. It is an ambience vaguely historic, but only by western standards. The wagon has rubber tires. Barn-door speakers blast Eric Clapton. Tourists silently wait for the King Throne port-a-potty, a garish aquamarine.

It's not yet a Grey-Line tourist attraction. It's not yet a teaching facility or much of a spiritual center, although Brown hopes to move an old church to the site. It remains, however, an oasis beyond the electronic city, a place in between: in between suburbs, strip malls, and Simplot, and in between the excess of industrial farming and longing for wide-open space. Historians call it "the middle landscape."<sup>2</sup> A geography first defined by Leo Marx in *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), a famous book on cultural symbols, the middle landscape was psychic terrain where great writers like Twain, Melville, Whitman and Hawthorne came to mediate conflicting ideals. One ideal was material progress through industrialization?the machine. Another was escape into a rural Eden of tranquil living?the garden. Americans, said Marx, recoiled at uncut nature. They felt compelled, even predestined, to dominate wild places, yet they pined for a simpler, greener, more chaste America, a lost way of life. They turned to nature for inspiration without wanting to return there on a permanent basis. They fretted about modernization without losing faith in tools and machines.

The idea of the middle landscape helped the Civil War generation strive for a pastoral place where the good shepherd made wise use of clever devices. Blurring old into new, nature into civilization, it reconciled the promise and peril of a strange new industrial age.

Farmer Brown also fears modernization. He seems to believe, as Hawthorne put it, that "the inventions of mankind are fast blotting out the picturesque, the poetic, the beautiful out of human life."<sup>3</sup> Yet his farm remains dependent on tractors, a fax, the interstate, Idaho Power, and a canal fed far up river by three federal dams. Simplicity. Sophistication. The farm seems to fit the Leo Marxian model of the machine in the garden?except for Marx's claim that Americans, by the 1860s, were abandoning the middle landscape. As pasture gave way to factory cities, as immigrants flooded the seaboard and the ideal of the genteel planter died at Shiloh and Bull Run, the machine

took over the garden, sending America into shock. Soon the image of a green landscape became "ironic and bitter." <sup>4</sup> Americans, said Marx, gave up the pastoral vision before Idaho was even a state.

So ends the story of the machine in the garden, closing on a sour note in the cynical decade before the Church of the Brethren settled in Ada County. But the ending is far too abrupt. Had Marx extended the story farther west and further in time he would have found an arid terrain of technological accommodation where rural people kept pastoral visions alive.

Mythic thinking about paradise reborn through advanced technological systems has left Idahoans with grand expectations for the lava frontier. Mormon pioneers saw the land as a province of Zion. Intensely materialistic yet anti-capitalist, the Mormons of the 1880s repudiated the factory city, embracing, instead, a bucolic vision of a Canaan sustained by sophisticated dams and canals. Idaho also inspired an irrigation crusader named William Smythe. A newspaperman from Nebraska who featured the Snake River country in a futuristic book about high-tech agriculture, Smythe, in 1895, led a group of Chicago investors to New Plymouth near the Payette. It was a communitarian township laid out in the shape of a horseshoe, an experiment, said Smythe, in better, more "efficient," more "democratic" living through a "policy of material conquest." <sup>5</sup> Only through modernization could democracy hope to survive.

Soon Idahoans were moving from words to action wherever rushing water brought dollars for dams: at Milner, where, in 1904, public land and private capital financed ditch irrigation; at Minidoka, an early hydro project; at Arrowrock, American Falls, Palisades, and Blackfoot. The desert, no longer "hopeless" and "discouraging," had become "a comparative Paradise," said *Harper's Weekly*. Rural Idaho had become "a miracle of modern American life."<sup>6</sup>

Dam builders promised a pastoral homeland, a Magic Valley, a Treasure Valley, a Cambridge, an Oxford, a wet Shakespearian landscape as green as the rainy East. They assumed?like Thomas Jefferson, like the frontier historian Frederick Jackson Turner?that settlement meant agriculture, that the snowmelt was virtually boundless and its rush through vertical canyons was a gold mine of national wealth. Critics, however, have questioned that pastoral promise. One was architect Frederick Law Olmstead, the co-founder and first superintendent of New York's Central Park. Touring California in the 1860s, Olmstead denounced "the absurdity of seeking good pastoral beauty in the far West," and he cautioned respect for the brownish hues of desert mountains and prairies?a different kind of beauty, surely, but beautiful nevertheless. <sup>7</sup> Another voice of restraint was the one-armed explorer of the Colorado, John Wesley Powell. His *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region* sent to Congress in 1878 warned that the water bonanza would deplete soils, displace Indians, enrich the rich, impoverish the poor, and drive the small farmer off of the land. But the frontier beckoned. "Free land and the movement westward were ingrained expectations," wrote Wallace Stegner, a Powell biographer, a critic of dams. "Habit, politics, and real estate boosterism won out over good sense."<sup>8</sup>

And so we have a farm policy built on the shaky assumption that the whole of society benefits when every drop of snowmelt is harnessed and farmers are enriched as a group. Never mind that one per cent of the farmers own more than a third of the West's farming lands. Never mind that the total number of farms has fallen by more than half since 1900, or that the big operators, squeezing out neighbours, have increased their acreage by almost thirty per cent in each of the last three decades. <sup>9</sup> Farming, say irrigators, is the wealth of the green republic, a public good. Farming gives us beets in the Idaho desert. It gives us potatoes, grain, fruit, alfalfa, onions and organic pumpkins?all watered from public projects for about 1,300 gallons per penny, a fraction of society's cost.<sup>10</sup> Southern Idaho, in fact, uses more gallons per person than any place in the country. Per capita that water produces more millionaire farmers as well.

No wonder we yearn for sylvan landscapes, and not just on the ranch and the farm. Boise, a Sussex in a Sahara, takes pride in its manicured greenbelt and the lavish shade trees and lawns of English-style woodland parks. Boiseans love water so much they build in the floodplain. They crowd on the banks each year to celebrate the gentle beauty of a river that was a muddy and shifting torrent before Lucky Peak Dam. Craving a nature unlike nature, they decorate malls and community centers with country cottage Tudor motifs, as if English spelling (Boise *Towne* Square, Boise *Centre* on the Grove) granted respectability, as if the town was too hick to have a style of its own.

Congestion, sprawl, the blight of the strip mall, the demise of the homestead farm? all spur interest in a smaller-is-better concept the ecologists call sustainable growth. Farmer Brown calls it "permaculture" but the principle is the mostly same: "Every generation," says Edith Brown Weiss, an environmental writer, "receives a natural and cultural legacy in trust from its ancestors and holds it in trust for its descendants."<sup>11</sup> Restraint and long-term planning can sustain the next generation. Good farming. Good science. Respect for community. Respect for the earth. It sounds like progressive thinking, but the concept is hard to pin down. Do we sustain potatoes at the expense of the salmon? Do we allot loggers a sustained yield by planting seedlings in place of old growth? Sustainability implies an accurate way to compute the limits of nature. It assumes, writes historian Donald Worster, "that we can easily determine the carrying capacity of local and regional ecosystems."<sup>12</sup> Nature? defiant, chaotic? is far too fickle for that.

But credit Farmer Brown for a vision. Credit his defence of family tradition, even if machines threaten the garden, even if the green republic is increasingly hard to sustain. "Farming is therapeutic," says Brown, still preaching the gospel of hay rides. "We need to educate people. Kids who grow up in the city don't know what life's all about."

## Endnotes

1. Rich Brown, interviewed by Todd Shallat, *Meridian*, November 20, 1995.
2. See, for example, Howard P. Segal, *Future Imperfect: The Mixed Blessings of Technology in America*. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1994, pp. 13-26.
3. George Parsons Lathrop and Julian Hawthorne, eds., *The Complete Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, 15 vols. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1882, 3:160.
4. Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1964, p. 364.
5. William Smythe, *The Conquest of Arid America*, originally published in 1899. New York: Macmillan Co., 1969, p. 11.
6. Louise Morgan Sill, "The Largest Irrigated Tract in the World," *Harpers Weekly* October 17, 1908, pp. 11- 12.
7. Frederick Law Olmstead, *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmstead: Vol. 5, The California Frontier*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990, p. 451; the author thanks political theorist Michael Black for directing him to the Olmstead papers and this valuable quote.
8. Wallace Stegner, *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs*. New York: Random House, 1992, p. 51.

9. In 1969 only three per cent of the population was actively engaged in commercial farming and, in the Mountain West, the richest one per cent owned thirty-eight per cent of the farmland; see U.S. Department of Agriculture, A Time to Choose: Summary Report on the Structure of Agriculture. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, January 1981, pp. 34, 75; see also, Donald Worster, The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 89, 92, 230.

10. University of Idaho economists have estimated the "hypothetical" real cost of irrigation water at \$28 per acre foot. In 1988 the Minidoka irrigators rented water to Idaho power for \$2.50 per acre foot, although the cost of stored water can cost as little as 12 cents per acre foot; see William Bailey and Roger Long, The Economics of Water Supply in Idaho. Moscow: University of Idaho, Agricultural Experiment Station, 1975; see also, Tim Palmer, The Snake River: Window to the West. Washington, DC: Island Press, 1991, p. 130.

11. Edith Weiss Brown, "In Fairness to Future Generations," Environment, 32 (April 1990), p. 6: for sustainable agriculture see also, Charles Wilkenson, Crossing the Next Meridian: Land, Water, and the Future of the West. Washington, DC: Island Press, 1992, pp. 297-298.

12. Worster, Wealth of Nature, p. 154.

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