



# Commentaries on Heyde's Vision in the Twenty-first Century: Continuity and Change in Vermont

## I. INTRODUCTION

I never imagined, when I saw a photograph of Charles Heyde's "Camel's Hump in Winter" on the front page of the "Living" section of the *Burlington Free Press* in January 2001 that it would be the view of Vermont's landscape today! But that is what's so wonderful about this special corner of the universe: The joy of surprise, of the unexpected, of living in an unpredictable landscape.

This panel has a rather amazing and formidable task: to ponder how Heyde's vision of Vermont will be reshaped in the twenty-first century. Formidable, yes, but in some ways the easiest and most enjoyable task of any speaker today. Speculating on the future is both fun and risk free! Who can challenge our prognostications? So come with us, back to the future!

First, let me explain very briefly why I believe this exhibit is so very important to the future of Vermont, to those of us who live here. When one lives in such a magnificent natural landscape it is all too easy to become oblivious to it, to take the unique and wonderful for granted. This is why artists are so important to our community. They not only alert our perceptions, but even help shape public policy. They bring inside what we fail to see outside, and by inside I mean inside us.

This ability to get inside us is an ability that visual artists—the landscape painter in particular—share with poets, performing artists, and children.

Some twenty-five years ago, soon after my family and I moved from Burlington to "The Hollow" of North Ferrisburgh, my then ten-year-old son and I hiked to the top of Mount Philo, where there is a spectacular vista overlooking Lake Champlain and south toward where we lived. "Jonathan," I said to my son as we stood on the summit overlook, "I wish we had a view of the landscape like this from our house." We lived deep in the Hollow, along Lewis Creek. "But Dad!" he exclaimed, "we *are* the view . . . and the landscape." I have never forgotten that remarkable insight. We here today are part of the landscapes we cherish. And the members of this panel are people whose personal and profes-

sional lives are deeply involved in the landscapes that Heyde captured over a century ago to remind us, “we are the view.”

CARL REIDEL

## II. HEYDE’S LANDSCAPES: TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY VISIONS

In an essay written for the current retrospective exhibition of the work of Charles Louis Heyde, I focused on two recurring themes in the painter’s oeuvre: Mount Mansfield and Lake Champlain. For our generation, as well as Heyde’s, I noted, these unique and scenic landscapes have been viewed as “Places of Delight”; landscapes whose qualities and configuration appear to have remained relatively unchanged over the past two hundred years.<sup>1</sup> Upon closer viewing, however, this unique geographical area of northwest Vermont—generally defined as the Lake Champlain Basin—has witnessed unparalleled growth and change since Heyde first painted here in the 1850s. While it is true that the general features of the mountains and the lake remain relatively unchanged—many of us can still imagine ourselves capable of walking into a Heyde painting today—what in reality lies between the mountains and the lake are back-to-back towns whose yearly growth gnaws away at once profitable farmland, leaving a midscape carpeted with suburban sprawl. Subdivision and shopping malls rather than thoughtfully planned communities have sprouted to accommodate a burgeoning population. Why, we might ask, have we been unable to find alternatives to this suburbanization of the unique landscape in the Champlain Valley, especially when we have been so politically and environmentally attentive to the problems in front of us?<sup>2</sup> Two explanations come to mind.

The first has to do with the power of the myth and the sentimentalization of Vermont perpetuated by outsiders and insiders alike. It is a myth, to paraphrase Dona Brown’s study of regional tourism in New England, that has been “invented” and fostered by painters (like Heyde), poets, photographers, magazines, tourists, and residents, who prefer edited views of the landscape emphasizing an older, pre-industrial, rural,

<sup>1</sup> William C. Lipke, “Places of Delight: Mount Mansfield and Lake Champlain. Major Motifs in the Paintings of Charles Louis Heyde,” in Nancy Price Graff and E. Thomas Pierce, eds., *Charles Louis Heyde, Nineteenth-Century Vermont Landscape Painter: With Catalogue Raisonné* (Burlington, Vt.: Robert Hull Fleming Museum, University of Vermont, 2001), 20–27.

<sup>2</sup> Obviously, these observations and concerns aren’t new. They were expressed clearly and succinctly at a similar series of conferences and symposia held throughout the state in conjunction with the “Vermont Landscape Images, 1776–1976” exhibits, funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities some twenty-five years ago. See William C. Lipke and Philip N. Grime, eds., *Vermont Landscape Interpretations, 1776–1976* (Burlington, Vt.: Robert Hull Fleming Museum, 1976).



*Lake Champlain Sunset from Oakledge Park, Burlington. 2000. Photo by William Lipke.*

neighborly Vermont. The myth is “a reverse image of all that [is] most unsettling about [late-twentieth-century] urban life.”<sup>3</sup> It is in part rooted in that dreamy belief that in every season a simpler, more compelling relationship to our natural environment is possible. These images and ideas fuel the very myths upon which Heyde’s paintings depended for their appeal, both to his contemporaries and to audiences today.

The second explanation is related to the first, because it concerns the magnificent natural scenery we confront each day in Vermont. Like the tourists of yesterday traveling in this region in pursuit of scenery, we, too, are often guilty of practicing “conspicuous aesthetic consumption”—the phrase is from Raymond Williams—which aids and abets a kind of blindness. Thus we fail to see the more deadly kinds of slow change in our immediate environment over which we in Vermont seem to exercise little control. Kirk Johnson, writing in the *New York Times* on March 26, 2001, noted that “acid rain in the Northeast is not just about lakes without fish, but also about forests losing

<sup>3</sup> Dona Brown, *Inventing New England: Regional Tourism in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 9.



*Mount Mansfield from Williston. 2000. Photo by William Lipke.*

their trees and soils that hoard acid before leaching it back out to contaminate local water all over again . . . the red spruce and the sugar maple [have] been hurt in different ways by [these] acidified soils.”<sup>4</sup> As removed as we sometimes feel we are from “from the rest of the nation’s problems” we know all too well that there is “no hiding place” up here in Vermont. Our desire to invent a mythic preindustrial, rural, agrarian Vermont can make us blind to the real, even catastrophic change in the built and natural environment that makes us look more and more like Anywhere, USA. Accelerated growth and change in the last decade in the Champlain Basin undeniably has brought us face to face with that reality.

Jan Albers, in her seminal study of the Vermont landscape, *Hands on the Land*, correctly notes that Vermonters are no longer geographically or culturally remote from the rest of the country as we were in Heyde’s day. “For much of its history,” Albers observed, “Vermont’s economy was highly localized, limiting development but also helping to preserve a cultural heritage. . . . The second half of the twentieth century has seen the greatest period of economic change, as the Interstates and the

<sup>4</sup> Kirk Johnson, “Harmful Effects of Acid Rain Far-Flung, A Study Finds,” *New York Times*, 26 March, 2001, B: 1.

Internet have finally linked Vermont to the larger national and global economy. It is a situation both fraught with peril and filled with promise.”<sup>5</sup> That promise is possible if we protect and preserve this magnificent scenery for succeeding generations, not only by drawing and retaining more sharply divided lines between the urban and rural landscape, but by being mindful of the distinction between the myth and the reality of Vermont.

WILLIAM C. LIPKE

### III. HEYDE’S VISION AND CHANGE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

I don’t think the landscapes of my youth were much different from those that Heyde experienced. I grew up riding my bicycle along dirt roads and cow paths that overlooked Shelburne Bay. Often I was going out with my friend to bring in his father’s cows for evening milking. From the kitchen windows of my childhood home I could see the sky aglow as the sun set on Mt. Marcy or Whiteface with Lake Champlain stretched out below. Turning to look east I could see moonrise over Mt. Mansfield, with its slopes all rosy in the reflected glow of the late afternoon sun. In the living room, in the quiet light of evening, I literally had the view of Mt. Mansfield before me again. On the south wall above the blanket chest hung one of Heyde’s paintings of the mountain from Underhill.

As I grew older I spent time working at the University of Vermont’s Proctor Maple Center on Mt. Mansfield’s western slope, above Pleasant Valley. Each day I would travel there up along the Browns River, which offered scenes almost the same as Heyde must have sketched them. But during this time most of the foreground of the Heyde landscapes that I’d known as a child was being inexorably altered by our constant commercial and residential incursion into the scene.

When I graduated college I immediately moved around the mountain to the northeast, to escape what I was experiencing on the landscape of my childhood. The mountain remains, as always, my touchstone of home; and where I live now, as I look west toward Mt. Mansfield, my reference is only different by the compass. The attraction is the same. Now, what lies below and in the foreground is much more like what I knew as a youth, but now also, I know there is no more escaping and that how I react if I really care about Heyde’s vision in the twenty-first century must be completely different from how I reacted

<sup>5</sup> Jan Albers, *Hands on the Land: A History of the Vermont Landscape* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press for The Orton Foundation, 2000), 332.

thirty years ago. My concern is not solely about a diminished aesthetic. It is about the loss of inherent natural values and a challenge to our very livelihood and well-being.

I am a maple sugar maker. That has defined who I am. But as our business has grown many dimensions have been added to my work. We now manage tens of thousands of acres of woodland for private owners in Vermont. In our Morrisville packing plant we process and sell about 200,000 pounds of honey and nearly 200,000 gallons of maple syrup purchased each year from dozens of other farms, in addition to the production of our own farm enterprises in Johnson and Barton. So, I have a lot at stake in sustaining not only our own farm but the farms of many others as well, in what we now call the working landscape.

Without a concerted effort to change the direction of our society's view of landscape, I believe Heyde's vision will become only a historical perspective on Vermont. His background may remain unchanged, but the real possibility exists that there will be little place left where we can rise above the foreground and be similarly inspired as he was. Nor do I think that many places will remain where we can practice economic agriculture or manage a working forest. What I see now on our landscape is the same vision of man as master of nature and conqueror of each of its elements that Heyde depicted in many of his works. I am not a student of art history or of Heyde, so I don't presume to know his vision, but I doubt it ever included a concern about misplaced development, or the carrying capacity of the land, or our relationship to natural communities. Today those are necessary concerns if working landscapes, wild natural places, and inspirational scenery are to be part of our vision for the twenty-first century. These landscapes are part of my vision, and I want them available to my children's children.

For nearly forty years I have watched and helped manage the reforestation of one mountain pasture into part of a working sugarbush. As I marvel at the transformation I dream of forestry and agriculture that are restorative, that don't consume resources, that fit into the world around, and that are in harmony with the living systems that share our place. I dream of a society with a conservation ethic that values resources without exhausting them, and metes them out only as needed to further the human condition—and most importantly, without tarnishing the human spirit. Heyde's vision was just one moment in history, but over all human time we have made slaves of our surroundings, other people, animals, landscapes, earth, air, and water. Eventually though, bit by bit, we do, or will, determine the essential wrongness of this attitude.

For me a conservation ethic represents respect and a sense of honor for the life giving of our ecosystems. It is recognition of the inherent

value and essential purpose of all biota and their life-support systems. It recognizes that humans are not dominant or all knowing, but only part of an intricate web of life, death, evolution, growth, and struggle that is yet to be understood.

Our human needs, aspirations, survival, and spirit require economic activity and community support of individual and societal values, but these cannot now, nor could they in Heyde's time, exist independent of the world around us—the earth, sky, water, and life that give us sustenance and ultimate worth. Our conservation must not be of commodities but that which is of deeper value.

I have no expectation that a conservation ethic can ever be fully developed unless preceded and accompanied by a reasonable social ethic. If people don't treat each other with respect and seek to be at peace with one another, how can we expect them to respect and be at peace with other living organisms and that which sustains them? What harmony can there be with the natural world when we live in disharmony with our fellow humans?

These are two daunting aspirations, but they are what give meaning to humanity and help define a higher purpose for humankind. The cultivation of these conservation and social ethics would ensure that Heyde's vision was of a yet more special place.

DAVID R. MARVIN

#### IV. CONTRASTS AND CONTINUITY

When Charles Heyde lived on Pearl Street in downtown Burlington in the late 1860s, the landscapes he viewed from the Champlain Valley were awe inspiring. Today, Mount Mansfield, Lake Champlain, Otter Creek, and the view from Rock Point still take our breath away. As Charles Smith notes in his preface to the catalogue produced for this exhibit, the light, the sunsets, the crisp edges of the mountains against the sky, the clear-running streams, remind us as Vermonters that in landscape and character we have inherited something special.<sup>6</sup> How would Charles Heyde's approach, and mine as secretary of commerce for the State of Vermont, differ or coincide over the 150 years that separate us? Here are a few points of contrast and continuity to ponder.

<sup>6</sup> Charles P. Smith, "Sponsor's Preface" in Nancy Price Graff and E. Thomas Pierce, eds., *Charles Louis Heyde, Nineteenth-Century Vermont Landscape Painter: With Catalogue Raisonné* (Burlington, Vt.: Robert Hull Fleming Museum, University of Vermont, 2001), 9.

In the 1860s Burlington was a thriving commercial center, one of our nation's largest lumber ports. Today, although the lumber port is gone, Burlington remains the economic engine of Vermont. Instead of lumber barons, Burlington has the barons of IBM, IDX, General Dynamics, and the University of Vermont and its medical school.

As photography of landscapes gained favor over landscape painting, Heyde supported himself by patching together several jobs. Today many Vermonters do the same to make ends meet. Thus, our focus in the Agency of Commerce and Community Development has been on creating meaningful employment opportunities for all Vermonters.

Charles Heyde's scenes of the Vermont countryside captured the majesty of the mountains and the incomparable beauty of the lakes and streams in the nineteenth century. Today the significant features remain much the same, however, the foreground is very different. The space between UVM and Mount Mansfield is filled with South Burlington and Williston. Trails are now highways and power lines crisscross the landscape. Television and telephone towers occupy a portion of the Mount Mansfield ridgeline, slightly distorting the view. The views from Rock Point and Shelburne Point are punctuated by the residential and industrial growth surrounding Burlington's urban center. The people who fill these homes and populate these villages and towns are less likely to be farmers and more likely to be bankers, lawyers, and small business owners, maybe manufacturers, but probably service providers.

In the 1860s town and village centers were the undisputed hearts of their communities. Some of our vital downtowns and village centers are struggling to retain that role today. We now have legislation in place to assist that effort.

In Heyde's time our working farms dominated the landscape. Today they are dwindling in number.

Heyde sold his paintings through the local merchants on Church Street. Today our locally owned businesses are side by side with national and international corporations.

In the 1860s Vermont's people were recognized for their spirit of independence and strong work ethic. In 2001 Vermont is still known for those characteristics.

In the middle of the nineteenth century Vermont's rolling hills were relatively untouched, although the industrial age was well underway. Today the state's image still provokes a vision of pristine lakes and mountainsides, farms dotting the countryside, interrupted only by small villages and towns. Today this vision supports a \$4 billion tourism industry.

A coveted quality of life and the extraordinary sense of place that people enjoyed in Heyde's time are still the signatures of Vermont.

We begin the twenty-first century with an array of new opportunities that the people of the nineteenth century could not even imagine. The emergence of technology is beckoning even Vermont's smallest businesses to worldwide markets. The growth of industries likely in this century—information technology, engineering, and financial services—fits Vermont's goals of environmental and job quality. Traditional industries such as lumber and agriculture are adding value to their products.

A consensus is emerging about the vision for Vermont. It is a vision that includes the preservation of Vermont's fine heritage while promoting energetic, healthy communities. It is a vision that makes wide use of our land and natural resources and supports the development of our economic potential.

Tom Slayton, in his introduction to the *Vermont Life* publication, *The Beauty of Vermont*, wrote, "Vermont happens to look beautiful today because it is a place where humanity and nature have worked together for more than two centuries."<sup>7</sup>

Let us hope that 150 years from now, poets like Walt Whitman, artists like Charles Heyde, and Vermonters like your great grandchildren and mine will gather to celebrate the results of our stewardship of this very special place—this Vermont that we are privileged to call home.

MOLLY LAMBERT

## V. CHARLES LOUIS HEYDE: LESSONS FOR 2001

It has been fascinating to view the paintings of Charles Heyde and think about them in the context of Vermont's landscape today. When I got beyond my first impressions of Heyde's paintings and focused on what he was portraying in the landscape of his period, intentionally or not, I began to draw some parallels to our contemporary countryside and how we perceive it.

At first glance, Heyde's romantic view of nineteenth-century Vermont shows humanity as just a footnote in a larger natural world. The landscape is revered—"a national icon," he calls it in one of his essays. Some of his paintings, however, reveal another side of the Vermont landscape—one in which people become the sculptors of the land and

<sup>7</sup> Tom Slayton, *The Beauty of Vermont* (Montpelier, Vt.: Vermont Life, 1998), 8.



polluters of its pristine environment. We see forests on steep hillsides hacked away; erosion from clearing and grazing along streams and roads; dams blocking streams where anglers fish. Still, all of these details appear minor in comparison to the overall beauty of the scenes he paints.

A present-day view by John Douglas of Mt. Mansfield—the subject of several Heyde paintings—shows clearly that humanity’s hand on the land has expanded since Heyde’s time. And in photos taken in Dover and Cambridge, Vermont, by Julie Campoli we see that agrarian settlement and forest lands have been taken over by suburban development where people no longer live off the land but rather sleep on it when they aren’t pursuing work, recreation, and education somewhere else.

Yet there are some similarities between how Heyde viewed the landscape and how we see it today. I was struck by a painting of the Burlington waterfront in which he omitted the lumber port in favor of a more bucolic scene. Vermonters today also ignore the changes taking place on the land and continue to perceive our state as a rural paradise, while all around us the scene has altered.

A poll by the Vermont Forum on Sprawl revealed this strange inconsistency. Overwhelmingly, Vermonters support the idea of a settlement



*Mt. Mansfield. Photo by John Douglas.*

pattern of compact centers with a mix of homes, shops, and services, connected by a wide range of transportation options, and surrounded by a landscape of open fields and forests. Yet, when asked where they themselves would like to live given a choice, the vast majority chose a home in the countryside, even though they would have to drive everywhere as a result.

Our choices have altered the landscape that we profess to love. We continue to think of our woodlands as pristine forests where we can hike or birdwatch, when in fact they are gradually being fragmented by large-lot developments accessible only to a few. We think that inaccessible remote areas will be spared from development, yet a place near a wilderness area and adjacent to bear habitat now manufactures sporting equipment and has its own special exit off the highway. We think that we have abundant access to the outdoors: open spaces where we can hunt, ski, hike, go snowmobiling or horseback riding, just like the ones Heyde portrayed in his scenes of people fishing, sailing, canoeing, and rowing in rural parts of Vermont. Yet vast ex-



*Dover, Vermont. Photo by Julie Campoli.*



*Cambridge, Vermont. Photo by Julie Campoli.*

panses of flat, arable land that once sprouted wheat and corn now grow houses at the end of long driveways. It seems that today's families have given up on the idea of maintaining common open space for all to enjoy and have decided instead to grab onto a small piece of it for themselves.

As I viewed Heyde's paintings I wondered about the condition of the environment in his scenes. Today Vermont is about 85 percent forested, whereas in Heyde's time it was about 85 percent open. His paintings show old growth forests chopped down to make way for settlement—grazing, crop lands, homes, and villages. Extensive deforestation and the overgrazing of livestock resulted in substantial erosion and siltation of streams, one of the big—though quiet—environmental disasters of Vermont's history. But the light, color, and setting of Heyde's paintings minimize the environmental damage and economic hardships that we can detect in the details. How did the people in his scenes live? Was there severe poverty? Was there filth? And I thought of Vermont families today. We often forget, as we view acres of farmland converted to safe and adequate single-family homes, that others are not so fortunate.

Today, as Heyde did a century and a half ago, we perceive our agrarian landscape as a romantic place where people make their living off the land and maintain the pattern of forests and fields with wonderful old barns for everyone to enjoy. Yet we often fail to acknowledge the struggle of farmers to hold on to their livestock and land, and the pressures they face to meet the demands of the market.

And what of settlement? The tiny villages in Heyde's scenes may still be found in Vermont today, but growth in our state has given rise to a type of development never envisioned in his paintings. Although urban settlements with main streets, railroad service, compact neighborhoods, offices, and industry existed in his time, as they do today, the destructive patterns of suburban sprawl did not.

A poem by Heyde quoted in the exhibit posed for me the pivotal question:

Old summits, far-surrounding vales beneath,  
Of fruitful culture, undulating shores,  
Wave of the coolest depth and purest breath,  
O'er which the eagle from his eyrie soars,  
And, above all, man's lifted soul adores.

We need to ask ourselves, "What of today's and tomorrow's landscape will lift our souls?"

ELIZABETH HUMSTONE