

# Robert Lawrence France. Waymarking Italy's Influence on the American Environmental Imagination While on Pilgrimage to Assisi

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[See table of contents](#)

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**Robert Lawrence France.** *Waymarking Italy's Influence on the American Environmental Imagination While on Pilgrimage to Assisi.* Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020. Pp. 345. ISBN 1527557863.

How has Italy shaped the American environmental imagination? To approach this question, landscape ecologist Robert Lawrence France considers sixteen American environmental writers and scientists whose time travelling in Italy, he argues, influenced their work. He couches this inquiry within a first-hand account of the walking pilgrimage on which he embarked in the spring of 2008 along the Franciscan Way. The dual structure of each chapter, in which France's chronicle of a leg of his journey through Tuscany and Umbria is followed by reflection on the work of one of the environmentalists, is meant to perform the ecocritical tradition of narrative scholarship. As Scott Slavic and other ecocritics have practised it, this mode of academic writing involves scholars visiting the landscapes in which cultural materials originated in order to investigate connections between text and place.

The author is impressively well-read, and the introduction and final chapter offer overviews of foundational works of Italian environmental history and recent ecocriticism that could serve as annotated bibliographies for students new to the field. Within this framing, two motifs animate France's journey. First is the difference between American and Italian understandings of the nature–culture binary. France emphasizes the long history on the Italian peninsula of the idea that civilization was meant to improve the “barren waste” of “raw nature” (48)—an idea that originated in ancient Roman agriculture, drove Mussolini's reclamation campaign, and is still evident in contemporary attitudes about land management. Such emphasis is a helpful reminder to American environmental writers not to impose American ideas about wilderness on the Italian case.

France's journey is additionally driven by interest in the legends of St. Francis, and the most ecocritical moments of the book are those in which the author connects particular landscapes to *il Poverello's* life. His reflections about how the mountainous geology of La Verna shaped Francis's spirituality (109–11) and his suggestion, upon visiting the woods where the saint prayed, that there Francis would have felt “that he was standing on the ground floor of creation” (118) gesture to the way physical landscapes give rise to religious text and experience.

Unfortunately, the insights generated by these motifs are fleeting and mostly lost in a project that lacks focus and scholarly rigour. The author does not

engage with the sixteen American environmental writers beyond choppy summarizing their work, and, by his own admission, the selection of these figures was “idiosyncratic” and based on “personal connections” (xxix), with France favouring acquaintances and figures who have influenced him. While consideration of how relationships influence academic work is true to the spirit of narrative scholarship, readers would need conceptual scaffolding for this assemblage of writers to cohere as a meaningful whole. As it is, the list throws together nineteenth-century icons Ralph Waldo Emerson and George Perkins Marsh, twentieth-century scientists G. Evelyn Hutchinson and Stephen Jay Gould, present-day land planner Carl Steinitz, and contemporary designer Alan Berger. Although the author claims that these figures are associated with sites on his hike to Assisi, the connections are tenuous: some of these Americans’ time in Italy was spent in locations as far-flung as Lombardy, Rome, and Sicily, all distant from France’s own route. This flattening of Italy into a geographically homogenous entity neglects the peninsula’s diversity and defies ecocriticism’s attention to the local experience of place. The claim that the environmentalists’ journeys to Italy were “integral to forging their ideas” (xxix) lacks archival evidence.

The first chapter, “Early Italian Impressions of Nature,” is indicative of the book’s poorly defined focus. It superficially covers a dizzying range of literary history that includes Lucretius, Dante, Da Vinci, Galileo, and twentieth-century novelists. Offering no sustained textual analysis, the author makes the bewildering claim that Dante’s *Commedia* depicts “evolution, wherein humans are thought to pass through an ontological sequence of development in which they have vegetative and animal stages of life” (54).

Most damaging to the book is the author’s misunderstanding of narrative scholarship as free license to editorialize, resulting in smug and chauvinistic prose. The author boasts about his own credentials (87) and grinds a personal axe about a former employer (39–40). When other travellers seek shelter from the rain, he complains that humans have become “a sorry, emasculated lot” (78), and he berates an “attractive [female] tourist official” who, “initially friendly, becomes testy” (215). His attacks on Italy—tiresome tantrums about reckless drivers and the “inability of this country to accomplish even the simplest of tasks” (211)—repeat pale stereotypes. He slaphappily blames Italians for what he sees as environmental neglect that shows that “the essence of Saint Francis has [not] permeated Italian society” (253), a complaint rooted in naïve assumptions about how religious symbols shape socio-political life.

The author's debasement of Italian Catholicism is especially egregious. His descriptions of southern European religious art and architecture as "ostentatious baroque frippery" (45), "tacky" (40), and "*gaudy*" (204) ignore contemporary scholarship about the meanings of excess in Catholic material culture. "Give me a stark and somber Romanesque church any day to these tawdry affections" (46), he writes, dismissing the basilica at Assisi as "an overblown, bloated perversion of grandiosity" (269). When he argues with a friar who enforces the basilica's rule against photography—calling Italian Franciscans "edgy and disagreeable" and driven by "commercial greed" (272)—he forfeits all scholarly credibility. Evidently deeming himself entitled to extract from Italy what is useful to him and trample upon the rest, France writes with a colonialist voice that has no place in modern cultural studies.

Compounding the author's penchant for cultural appropriation is his failure to scrutinize the concept of pilgrimage. He moralistically sets "true pilgrims" (2–3) apart from ostensibly fraudulent imitators, but merely defines pilgrimage as travel by foot, insisting that "pilgrimage without pain is not pilgrimage" and that those journeying to Franciscan sites by bus are but "religious tourists" (75). Besides unethically assuming what pain those religious subjects may or may not carry, the author ignores the fact that his own version of pilgrimage as a recreational, vaguely humanistic activity is itself a corruption of a centuries-old Christian tradition.

The volume's many grammatical errors, tortured syntax, and spelling and typographical mistakes make for arduous reading and, while possibly excusable in other genres of academic writing, are detrimental in scholarship that aspires to be narrative.

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