

Cite this article: Katherine Manthorne, review of *Painting the Inhabited Landscape: Fitz H. Lane and the Global Reach of Antebellum America* by Margareta Markle Lovell, *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 9, no. 2 (Fall 2023), <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.18175>.

Painting the Inhabited Landscape: Fitz H. Lane and the Global Reach of Antebellum America

By Margareta Markle Lovell

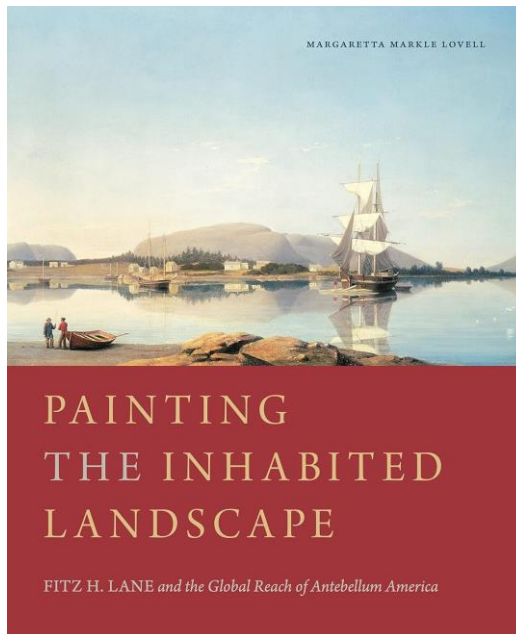
University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2023. 352 pp.; 84 color illus.; 80 b/w illus.
Hardcover: \$94.95 (ISBN: 978-0-271-09278-2)

Reviewed by: Katherine Manthorne

Margareta Lovell's book *Painting the Inhabited Landscape* is an impressive demonstration of the author's depth of research and conviction in her methodology and assertions.¹ Investigating the oeuvre of Fitz H. Lane (1804–1865) and the community of patrons who supported his career, Lovell argues that his canvases provide a window into the mindset of those prosperous New Englanders, revealing how they thought about their land, economy, history, and links with global

communities. Lovell directs our attention away from Lane's sensitivity to the natural world so evident in his painted canvases—his burnished skies, accurate coastal topography, and meditative calm linked to Transcendentalism—which has been foregrounded in scholarship to date.² Scouring his pictures of his native Gloucester, Massachusetts, along with views of Boston, New York, and Maine, she instead identifies key motifs of the "inhabited landscape" that she interprets as evidence of "the global reach of antebellum America" (the book's subtitle). These include mostly male figures engaged in work: repairing schooners in dry dock, gathering fish caught in the North Atlantic, hauling lumber cut along Maine's Penobscot River, quarrying granite, and serving tourists. She asserts that Lane's paintings work against the idea of American wilderness pictures to depict nature as productive and allied in partnership with humans to create a sustainable, balanced political economy.

Full disclosure: I studied with Barbara Novak, a pioneering figure in the study of American landscape, and remember well her eye-opening lectures on the wonders of Lane's intimately scaled oil paintings and lithographs. I valued her interpretation of his work in relation to Luminism—a term first coined by John Baur—and made regular pilgrimages to the Cape Ann Museum and to the artist's granite house on Duncan's Point.³ That said, I am delighted that Lane succeeded in captivating the attention of Lovell, who holds the Jay D.



McEvoy Jr. Chair in the History of American Art at the University of California, Berkeley. Her book represents a new direction in the study of Gloucester's native son.

The volume is judiciously organized into eight chapters, beginning with an analysis of the artist's persona in three overlapping segments. Chapter 1, "Reputation: Lane, Gloucester's Own Artist, 1842–1865," traces the arc of Lane's self-fashioning as a painter. Chapter 2, "Value: Lane, 1865–2020," follows the vicissitudes of his reputation. And chapter 3, "Canvas: Names, Naming, and Identity," probes Lane's complex personal identity, nicely relating his choice of the fabric on which he painted to his father's canvas-based trade as a Gloucester sailmaker.

The middle three chapters focus on individual pictures or related clusters devoted to commodities traded by New Englanders. Chapter 4, "Fish: Lane's Gloucester," narrates the workings of the principal industry of the artist's hometown via his canvas *Gloucester Harbor* (1852, Cape Ann Museum): fishing for mackerel, halibut, and especially cod from the local waters and then salting, drying, and packing them for export. In Chapter 5, "Lumber: Lane's Maine," his poetic *Lumber Schooners at Evening on Penobscot Bay* (1863; National Gallery of Art) is repositioned as "an image of labor and capital at work" (148). Chapter 6, "Granite: Shipwreck with Spectators," takes us back to Gloucester, where this igneous rock is ubiquitous.

The final pair of chapters highlight far-flung places that commercially engaged the purchasers of Lane's pictures. Chapter 7, "Travelers I: Surinam and California," assesses how Gloucester's links to Surinam and California were incorporated by Lane into his art; the following companion chapter, "Travelers II: Ireland, China, Puerto Rico," identifies the traces of these locations in the pictures Lane painted for his worldly buyers. Taken as an ensemble, these last chapters aim to convince the reader that Lane, who largely remained in Gloucester, understood his hometown and his art as integrally linked to international circuits of trade and travel.

For me, "Canvas: Names, Naming, Identity" is one of the book's most successful sections in presenting a balanced synthesis of information and interpretation. Lovell begins by probing Lane's heritage as the son of a sailmaker, his mother's resolve to have her disabled son (possibly the victim of childhood polio) learn the respectable craft of shoemaking, and his quotidian early existence living with his sister, Sarah, and her husband, Ignatius Winter, who was a window-sash maker. The three lived in the artist's seven-gabled granite house overlooking Gloucester Harbor that he had designed himself. The chapter considers the materiality of canvas, which was woven not only to propel ships through the water but also to provide a surface on which artists could limn their views. Through his father's tutelage, Lane learned to be discerning: "In the canvas Lane stretched for his paintings, he appears to have favored the finest, most stable twill weave" (79).

Moving from historical context to close readings of specific works—a pattern followed throughout the book—Lovell proceeds to unpack *Salem Harbor* (1853; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) for broader insights into its meaning for artist and buyer. Amid the eight vessels depicted on the water is a celebrated clipper ship, newly constructed when Lane painted this picture in 1853. Since clippers sacrificed carrying capacity for extreme speed, they lent themselves well to the ongoing rush to California for gold and to China and

Indonesia for tea, silk, porcelain, and spices. This canvas was the property of Nathaniel Silsbee Jr., who held many prestigious positions and traded mainly with Sumatra.

Lovell analyzes Lane's intriguing addition of his signature on the patched sail of the smaller vessel: "F. H. L./1853." This placement of his initials shifts our attention away from the seafaring craft and marine commerce and back to the issue of the artist's identity. If he was born Nathaniel Rogers Lane on December 18, 1804, then why does he sign the work "F. H. L."? Beginning in the early twentieth century, dealers began to refer to the artist as Fitz Hugh Lane, a melodious sounding epithet but, as it turns out, incorrect. Staff members at the Cape Ann Museum—the major repository of his work—discovered a document that reads "Nathaniel Rogers Lane, of Gloucester, may take the name of Fitz Henry Lane," indicating that he legally changed his name in 1832 (86). Shortly afterward, Lane transformed himself from a shoemaker to an apprentice in the Boston lithography shop of William Pendleton, and a bit later still, he reinvented himself once more, from lithographer to marine painter. From the chrysalis of the humble shoemaker Nathaniel Rogers, the leading marine painter of his day—Fitz Henry Lane—emerges by the end of this well-argued and intriguing chapter.

Lovell's discussion of Surinam and California in chapter 7, by contrast, shifts attention away from the artist's self-identity and to the commercial world in which his patrons sought success. It centers on a group of businessmen who were deeply involved in global trade and travel, all of whom acquired at least four of the artist's works during his lifetime—George Homans Rogers, Nathaniel Babson, Robert Bennet Forbes, and Sidney Mason. "Indeed, while on the surface of Lane's canvases there appears to be little trace of off-stage activities of this highly mobile customer group," writes the author, "close inspection of his paintings provides glimpses of these adventurers' far-flung travels (and investments), a sense of their motivations, and hints of the disparate cultures they visited embedded within the artist's decisively local views of New England" (194).

In the section titled "Sugar, Rum, Temperance, Abolition," we are introduced to select aspects of eighteenth-century trade in the Americas. For example, the author delivers several pages of statistics on rum consumption in Gloucester and Surinam and illustrates her point with a work by another artist, writing: "That this common beverage was enjoyed there [Surinam] is indicated in many records, including a mid-eighteenth-century satirical painting by American John Greenwood, [*New England*] *Sea Captains Carousing in Surinam*" (203). Lovell concludes this segment with musings on Rogers in his Boston parlor contemplating his Lane paintings as "reminders of his financial acumen and meteoric rise" but also "of the drunkenness of rum-soaked sailors and the 'diabolical barbarity' of the slave-raised sugar at the base of this prosperity" (205).

The discussion then moves from trading in rum to rushing for gold. The dream of California looms large over the Eastern Seaboard around 1848, which is when Lane moved back to Gloucester from Boston, and gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill, catalyzing a mass exodus west. But what about Lovell's proposition that Lane's paintings "arguably . . . were engaged in a rearguard action to bolster the social fabric of coastal New England as its patriarchy, its social economy, and its pride were threatened by the alternative universe that California represented" (205)? It makes sense that Lane's patrons' family members who headed to California cherished their images of Gloucester when they were four thousand miles away and feeling homesick, but do the works pictorially represent New

England's insecurity in the face of the West Coast gold fever? Lovell raises intriguing possibilities regarding the effects of the Gold Rush on Gloucester that await further elaboration.

From the first page of the introduction through these final chapters, the question continually raised is: "Who saw, commissioned, bought, and valued his paintings?" (1). As anyone who has worked on mid-nineteenth-century landscape art of the United States knows, it is challenging to pin down the nature of a commission. Were specific details for the picture's subject and handling spelled out, or were they left to the discretion of the artist? Often, we simply do not know. We have several hundred extant paintings by Lane, but as Lovell notes, "The records of Lane's career as an artist are few—he left no diaries or memoirs, no account books listing works and sales" (10). To compensate for this "rather scanty archive," the author performs close looking at single works, supplemented by an extensive excavation of contemporary newspapers (11). She sometimes asserts that works of art are commissioned, and yet the details of those contracts remain vague. There is a mention of canvases ordered by Nathaniel Babson, "two of which were commissioned specifically to travel to California," but the related citation fails to include the transaction (206–8n82). It would be helpful to have further details to cement and prove the close ties between the artist and his patrons on which Lovell's case studies depend.

The English landscape painter John Constable once wrote, "I should paint my own places best," the guiding principle behind his combination of objective studies of nature imbued with a deeply personal vision of his home turf. Lane, too, painted his "own places," but as Lovell instructs us, he embedded them into the global networks that linked New England to Dutch Guiana, Spanish Puerto Rico, Mexican California, and beyond. She charts new territory in this volume, providing an insightful complement to existing Lane studies and an invitation to subsequent scholars to tell fresh stories. Happily, Lane's painted canvases, combining the details of human industry with the closely observed conditions of the North Atlantic waters and weather conditions, continue to intrigue us.

Katherine Manthorne is Professor Emerita of Art History, Graduate Center, City University of New York

Notes

¹ Margaretta Lovell is a Book Reviews editor at *Panorama*.

² See, for example, Barbara Novak, *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century: Realism, Idealism and the American Experience* (New York: Praeger, 1969); Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825–1875* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

³ The most complete source on Luminism and scholarship on the movement is John Wilmerding, ed., *American Light: The Luminist Movement, 1850–1875; Paintings, Drawings, Photographs* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1980).