Our ship reached Southampton late in the day. Numbed and disoriented, foliage scratching against the canvas overhead, we twisted down country lanes until the convoy of trucks came to a halt. The tailgate dropped, and we jumped down stiffly into blackness, stumbled to a Nissen hut, and shivered under mounds of blankets until the first pale light and the sergeant’s whistle. In a white mist, we were counted, given a breakfast of sorts, lined up two by two, and sent off on a long hike to improve our morale and muscle tone. The line of march led down deep-cut lanes hedged with yew to Middle Wallop, its houses thatched and gathered cozily together, and, a bit further on, to Over Wallop with its ancient parish church. Then we turned north and west into Wiltshire and the eastern edge of the Salisbury Plain. In that one morning we passed from village clusters and bounded fields following along a calmly moving stream out to the edges of an unbounded world of open, rolling, gently sculpted downs and wolds—the images I had brought with me across the Atlantic made so completely, so immediately, manifest!

How I perceived those landscapes had little to do with experience. There was no “landscape” in the flat land where I grew up—or so my culture told me. There might, perhaps, be “countryside,” but only in the most literal sense: large rectangular cornfields, isolated barns and sober farmhouses, roads pointing straight to the horizon. No footpaths led walkers across fields from one settled place to another. Travel between towns would most likely be by private car. Motorists left town gradu-
ally, entering the surrounding country past ragged roadside developments. A steady accumulation of billboards, Burma-Shave signs, gas stations, taverns, and scruffy fringe enterprises then guided travelers toward the next town and its center. As students of the region have noted, that center would seldom be a communal green or an imposing building, whether sacred or profane, but Main Street—lined with red brick shops at ground level with a floor or two of offices above. Towns like mine seemed to have been built by and for people who were always prepared to move on. If I close my eyes, I can summon up individual houses: large, wooden ones with deep front porches, expanses of green—the whole framed by huge elms and oaks—but I have difficulty picturing the community and its surrounding countryside as a distinct place, in finding mental images that enable me to set my hometown apart from any other in that level and, to my eyes, undifferentiated expanse of geography.

Thus I was led or conditioned to look elsewhere for landscape, to New England, but especially to old England. Home and school provided a compact cultural amalgam: Wordsworth’s Tintern Abbey and Michael, Gray’s Elegy, a cluster of novels and stories: Tess, The Mayor of Casterbridge, Wuthering Heights, Silas Marner, The Railway Children. But the image that returns to me with particular force is a paperweight on a study bookshelf. Fastened to the bottom of this half-sphere was a section from Samuel Palmer’s The Sleeping Shepherd. If one narrowed one’s eyes and peered long enough through the thick glass, the figure of the shepherd in the foreground sunshine would take on an extra dimension. His head resting on his hand, a yellow straw hat on his head, he reclines, his feet and one of his legs disappearing into loose, golden hay. Lulled by warmth and quiet, he dozes. Close by his flock stands grazing, the flow of their fleeces and bodies anticipating and blending with the undulating russet grassland above and beyond. The young tender of sheep is part of this finished land: hills and valleys shaped by nature but cultivated over the centuries by a long partnership between animals and their keepers. Rest, fruitful harmony, coherence, continuity—these were what I had been prepared, consciously and unconsciously, to look for. And those virtues were, not surprisingly, what I found and, at that troubled moment in world history, responded to with all my heart.

Since that icy November morning, so many years ago, when “actual” and symbolic landscapes seemed to converge, I have learned to approach British landscapes with more circumspection. William Hoskins’s The Making of the English Landscape suggested to me, as it has to so many
others, that in order to read a landscape in any depth, the reader must isolate and examine the many themes, notice how and when they were introduced, and observe the intricate way they were woven into harmonious compositions. An afternoon spent on a New Hampshire hillside with an ecologist, Herbert Bormann, tracing root grafts in a grove of hemlocks, gave that metaphor of the intricately fashioned web a new dimension and did so only a few years before Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* shocked almost everyone of my generation with its revelations about the way modern technology can work below the surface to corrupt these harmonies. Further study taught me to treat even the concept of harmony with caution and to recognize what escaped me so completely on that first encounter with the British countryside: that every landscape is an ambiguous and layered text whose meaning will alter with the culture as well as the political and social circumstance of the reader. Thus surface tensions will be apparent, in the author as well as the subject, between an awareness that a countryside must be a living and therefore a changing entity and a desire to preserve that image of beauty, order, and community, formed so early in my imagination.

Two geographers, John Robinson and Graeme Wynn, gave me an idea of what it means to be an environmental historian. Other friends and associates made criticisms, spotted errors, suggested refinements, offered encouragement: Dianne Newell, Thomas Blom, Robert Kubicek, Anne Gorsuch, Robert Allen, James Huzell, Ruth Richardson, Peter Bailey, Beryl Morphet, Jean and Roderick Barman, Allen Sinel, Peter Ward, Christopher Friedrichs, Michela Sorrentino, Matteo Hermani, Robert Winter. To all of these worthies and especially to my wife and confederate, Pierrette, I am greatly in debt and offer thanks.