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The Emergence of Psychoecology: The New Nature Writings

of Roger Deakin, Mark Cocker, Robert Macfarlane and

Richard Mabey

Stephen E. Hunt

There is much common ground that prompted me to draw together the recent flush of books by four exceptional nature writers: Roger Deakin's *Wildwood: A Journey Through Trees*, Mark Cocker's *Crow Country*, Robert Macfarlane's *The Wild Places* and Richard Mabey's *Beechcombings: The Narratives of Trees*.¹ Together, they confirm 2007 as a year when each new day seemed to surpass the previous one in revelations about the quickening threat to global ecosystems and biodiversity, and as a moment when the genre of nature writing flourished and excelled itself with outstanding publications. It is coincident, though perhaps more than chance, that the late Roger Deakin lived, and the other authors all dwell today, in low-lying East Anglia – no wilderness, but immediately vulnerable to marine inundation in time of rising sea levels. Each speaks through writing that is not only wonderfully descriptive but is fortified with a resilience that transcends didacticism and nostalgia. As Andrew Motion observed in his discussion of Robert Macfarlane's *Wild Places*, to persuade one's reader of the beauty, vitality and human necessity of what is under threat is to voice the most eloquent case for action.²

There has been a marked camaraderie between these four nature writers indicated by respect and mutual encouragement for each other's work. Robert Macfarlane developed a close friendship with Roger Deakin at the end of his life and dedicated *Wild Places* to him. Richard Mabey was also a friend of Deakin and literary collaborator with Mark Cocker on *Birds Britannica*. Not only do they all write from East Anglia

but they all follow in a venerable tradition of East Anglian nature authors, for behind them are W. G. Sebald and Ronald Blythe.

Macfarlane, Cocker and Mabey are more exclusively concerned with vernacular and indigenous nature. Mabey and Cocker take particular species as the focus of their books as a starting point for a discussion of the Chilterns and Epping Forest, the Yare Valley and, from there, the interaction between human intercourse with the natural world at large. Macfarlane takes us on exhilarating expedition through the wild fringes of the British Isles brought to life with verve and finesse. Indeed this success in representing forgotten corners of the British Isles in all their fascinating variety raises a longstanding dilemma. Does this enticement risk contributing in some small way to

the destruction of the things these writers love as they celebrate and draw attention to places such as Jura when it was the inattention that made them evolve with minimal intervention?

Describing a journey to the Burren in County Clare in the company of his close friend Roger Deakin, Robert Macfarlane writes:

We learned, or were taught by the ground, how to walk without premeditation: turning corners when they came, following bends in valleys, our paths set by the ancient contingencies of footfall, our expectations quickened – ready for surprise when it happened (Wild Places, p. 166).

Such green flânerie speaks of the emergence of a psychoecology, with richly attuned meanderings that have strategic affinities with the work of psychogeographers, such as Iain Sinclair and Will Self who in recent years have negotiated more urban terrain.

For these are experiential and cultural accounts of the natural environment and living organisms, drawing upon autobiographical and travel narratives, art, literature and folklore as well as the many branches of natural history. In *Beechcombings*, Richard Mabey is acutely aware of his role as the creator of a narrative of the natural world, wondering from the outset, 'Is there such a thing as a real tree, beyond the images we make of them as lovers of views or curious naturalists or harvesters of

timber?’ (Beechcombings, p. 2). Awareness of this now familiar phenomenological predicament as one hopefully understood by contemporary readers liberates all four authors to engage with their themes in a way that avoids spurious detached objectivity while retaining a healthy respect for the otherness of their subjects. Indeed emotional engagement is celebrated at a time when enthusiasm is often regarded as embarrassing. Macfarlane finds that he feels an ‘increasing fondness’ for the Victorian chronicler of waves Vaughan Cornish whose ‘monomania’ ‘hovered partway between spirituality and hard science’ (Wild Places, p. 250). Macfarlane is impelled to look beyond the seeming contradiction in Cornish’s approach to locate a dynamic and insightful holism. Cocker is more forthright in commending the naturalist’s passion for his or her subject, asking ‘What strange presumption fortifies the unengaged and the dispassionate to express this scorn for the enthusiast?’ (Crow Country, p. 171).

The passions of the English psychoecologists are not indulged by adventuring in ecologically spectacular regions such as tropical rainforests or Arctic tundra – now both more readily accessible in an age of cheap flight. They often eschew such exotic zones to undertake a fresh exploration of the locally distinctive possibilities found in such localities as the Yare Valley or on the island of Jura. In this sense they share with the psychogeographers a discerning attitude that acknowledges the uniqueness of particular encounters in the environment while bringing to bear the full force of

cultural context upon a subject. It is an approach that reinvigorates the quotidian aspects of commonplace surroundings habitually unnoticed due to their familiarity.

For Iain Sinclair and his cohorts a fulfilling day involves moments with a beautiful concatenation of elements brought about by a 'transient passage through varied ambiances' – for psychogeographers the discipline of the *dériveur*.³ One such moment is the 'morning epiphany' experienced when chancing upon an endangered species – a caravan functioning as a transport café alongside a waste disposal yard on the M25 London orbital road. Here are revealed wonders such as 'white plastic tables', 'strip-lighting on the strobe', 'a large lady with big gold rings in her ears'. They then find contentment offered by enjoying 'The best of England: close to a canal path, close to allotments, close to a football stadium, faces deep into a (£2.50) "big breakfast"...'⁴

The avoidance of the pastoral on the part of Sinclair and his companion Laurence 'Renchi' Bicknell is such that they claim to experience 'anxiety' when they stray too far from the motorway (London Orbital, p. 187). However, while Sinclair's journey is defined by the motorway its trajectory is entirely and radically subversive of the paradigm of movement that the motorway dictates. Psychoecologists, of course, prefer to stride out along bosky holloways but similarly resist the marshalled pathways of national parks and the orchestrated vistas of exotic destinations. For Cocker the meaningful 'epiphany' may consist of a crepuscular moment by the rookery; for Deakin admiration for physical and

mental immersion in a woodland craft; or for Mabey the bound of imagination to contemplate another species reality: 'The beechlings are springy, spiky. I wonder what they feel like to a cloven hoof' (Beechcombings, p. 256).

An exploration of personal interaction with more immediate surroundings can be accomplished by travel within the home shores. This not only reduces air miles but, for Macfarlane in particular, prompts a critical reassessment of the impact of fossil-fuelled driving and flying. First, because the car and plane are obvious culprits in environmental destruction:

The radio broadcasts spoke of climate change: another pessimistic report on sea-level increases had been released. It made me feel even more guilty than usual about driving, made the road seem an even less desirable place to be. (Wild Places p. 164)

Second, because, again in common with the psychogeographers, there is a feeling that to experience an environment from within the confines of a motorised cabin insulates sensory perception and radically limits direct sight, touch, sound and smell. To travel by bicycle, on horseback in the manner of a Defoe or Cobbett, or, above all, by walking or swimming (Deakin's chosen mode of propulsion – ideally naked – in

Waterlog) is to reclaim the primacy of the senses. Will Self recently articulated this demand for immediacy on the part of the psychogeographer arguing,

I feel that nothing puts you in touch with the environment quite as much as walking; it has a balanced, rhythmic mantra of movement. When walking you lose the screen through which you habitually perceive modern life.⁵

This return to an awareness of time and place more familiar to our evolutionary tempo enhances the lived experience of a writer and a critically aware human subject. There is also an inherent liberation in straying from the fixed matrices of the mass transit transport network, making for the kind of purposeful and creative wandering that can unleash surprise encounters born of serendipity. Macfarlane, for example, found that his 'journeys had revealed new logics of connection between discrete parts of Britain and Ireland, beyond the systems of motorway and flight-path' (Wild Places p. 314). Furthermore his kindred spirit and mentor, Deakin, celebrated the freedom to enjoy the unmediated physicality of the material world without the tight-control imposed upon a heritage landscape:

Most of us live in a world where more and more places and things are signposted, labelled, and officially 'interpreted'. There is something about all this that is turning the reality of things into virtual reality. It is the reason why walking, cycling and swimming will always be subversive activities. They allow us to regain a sense of what is old and wild in these islands, by getting off the beaten track and breaking free of the official version of things.⁶

On one particular excursion Richard Mabey is moved to crawl through a thicket on his knees following animal tracks, a feat for which he is rewarded with 'prodigious plants' – twayblade, spotted and fly orchids, herb paris (Beechcombings, p. 46).

Restless desire for contact with exquisite plants on the part of Mabey is evidence of his continued zest for life following the account of severe depression and recovery through friendship and re-engagement with the natural world in his previous book *Nature Cure*. 7

The psychological benefits of engagement with the natural environment are central themes for all nature writers working in the penumbra of a widespread 'end-of-nature' discourse. As threats to the environment appear to be actualised in the form of pollution and climate change, there is a temptation, Macfarlane acknowledges, to accept the 'obituaries for the wild' (*Wild Places*, p. 11). But he offers resistance to this notion that increasingly defines the context in which nature writers treat their

subject. In a recent interview with Olivia Laing, Mabey commented:

I do have trouble with the predominantly pessimistic strain in environmental thinking [...] This is hard for me, because I know in some ways that it is proper and the correct response to what has happened, but I also know enough about natural systems to know that they are much more resilient than conventional environmentalism gives them credit for. Squaring those two things is difficult and that's what I regard as the hard work in my writing: actually to celebrate the inventiveness and individuality of wild things at the same time as saying, yes, they are threatened. Somehow we have to work across that gap.⁸

This celebration of the individuality of wild things was at the heart of Roger Deakin's approach. Deakin has left us just two full-length books, the quirky and inspiring *Waterlog* by which he made his name, and its companion volume with a similarly elided title *Wildwood* published posthumously following his untimely death in 2006. But what a superb legacy.

It is unsurprising that Deakin should have quoted from *Cottage Economy* (1821) – William Cobbett's emphasis upon 'abundant living' could surely be a signature for Deakin's life as a whole made evident in *Wildwood* with its contemplation of the prolific diversity of all things sylvan. Deakin makes use of an organic assemblage of discursive vignettes of particular species, artists, naturalists and craftspeople. These encounters occur in locales from his own cherished Suffolk to expeditions that allow us to accompany him in a search for the origins of the domestic apple in Kazakhstan,

to the olive groves of Lesbos and the forests and deserts in the Australian outback.

In all cases Deakin successfully uses an evergreen language to bring to life the smell of leafmould, the dappled light and sun of a woodland glade, and the hospitality and humour of human dialogues. Here he is on owls:

Last night owls sounded their cool oboe-notes along the hedges. Theirs is such a soothing note for such murderous birds. Owls and the moon work hand in hand; accomplices in the killing of voles and shrews. I lay listening to the nightly shrewicides (Wildwood, p. 14).

While such spare lines have the fresh-cut spontaneity of observations from a field journal these are matured to present a sense of the quiddity of an owl. If Wildwood is sentimental for a rural past, it is frequently a dark sentiment. Thomas Hardy's *Woodlanders* is a shadow text - that bittersweet elixir of life among the trees of Little Hintock. This fascination and respect for the otherness of living beings is accompanied by a love of the forms and structure of human-crafted objects wrought from natural

materials finding a beauty in them in the tradition of William Morris. Deakin writes approvingly of the artist Mary Newcomb's 'delight' in 'simple, vernacular structures or machines: rowing boats, bicycles, weather-vanes, telegraph poles, bird boxes, lighthouses, windmills, church towers' (Wildwood, p. 180). There is a *jouissance* in the cutting and burnishing of phrases to fit the perfect marquetry of the sentences, such as in the following description of the formation of burrs:

The burr is an excrescence of would-be buds rising from somewhere deep inside the tree like a spring. When cut across the grain by the giant pencil-sharpener as the buds bubble towards the bark of the tree, their turbulence is displayed, with every little eddy and vortex held perfectly still. A burr may arise as a reaction to some itch in the tree, a kind of benign wood tumour. There is an outburst of mad cell division, and elephantiasis sets in. What begins as a disfigurement ends life as an opulent adornment. A frog is revealed as a princess. Cutting the light a thousand ways in its eyes and prisms, the veneer is a celebration of the tree's pent-up energy in a whirling wood-dance (Wildwood, p. 141).

The beautifully detailed prose, ending in a gorgeously evocative sentence, is firmly grounded in its socio-political context. Deakin is alert to the 'mildly ironic' fact that sumptuous walnut veneer finds its use in the *décor* of cars for the ultra-rich and militarist adventurism. The walnut is 'a tree whose nuts are celebrated as an elixir of long life' so it is scarcely fitting that it 'should find itself reincarnated in guns, and that wars should always have increased demand for the wood' (Wildwood, p. 143).

Even without such literature Deakin's legacy as a man at the forefront in promoting the benefits of contact with the natural environment for human well-being would be

secure. As an influential member of the fledgling Friends of the Earth during the 1970s and as co-founder of, and driving force behind, the establishment of Common Ground with Sue Clifford and Angela King in 1982, Deakin was a fine communicator of a politics of connection with the natural world. In my opinion Deakin's works will be savoured as parts of the essential bibliography of nature writing for many years to come, becoming more richly appreciated over time like an amethyst sloe gin made from one of his beloved blackthorns.

Cocker devotes his book to the corvid family, especially inspiring us to look with fresh eyes at the infinitely rehearsed choreography of rooks. Until more recently perhaps, jackdaws have been tappers of our chimney pots and dancers on our roofs, and the harsh but familiar background susurrus of the rookery has accompanied our passage from crib to winding sheet. Cocker beautifully contrasts the 'song' of the jackdaw and rook thus:

The two species create deeply contrasting but perfectly integrated sounds. The rook's voice is dark, earthy, coarse, tuneless. But in aggregate it possesses a beautiful and softly contoured evenness. The jackdaws meanwhile produce sharp-chipped lapidary notes, like the sweet strike of flint on flint, and in this flinty landscape nothing could be more appropriate. In fact both rook and jackdaw calls seem to come from deep within the Earth, as if it were the valley itself celebrating the onset of night. (Crow Country, p. 3).

His exhaustive study of rooklore causes him to experience what he calls 'tremendous feelings of well-being' (Crow Country, p. 17) – sensations of completeness and belonging. Furthermore, Cocker recounts fascinating case histories of how the methodical study of the crow family's habits helped in rehabilitation following trauma. The hapless clergyman Lewis Harding suffered a mental breakdown from witnessing the penal terrors meted out in Norfolk Island during the 1840s (Crow Country, pp. 182-184). Harding's anguish was eased by his doctor, Jonathan Couch, who had the foresight and wisdom to prescribe a nature cure that involved his patient recording the habits of the neighbourhood rookery. Couch's sensitive and forward-looking administrations amount to a kind of rook therapy for what we would now term post-traumatic stress syndrome. Similarly, Cocker tells of the experiences of three British ornithologists who became prisoners of war during World War Two. Undertaking a study of the flight paths of migrating rooks and jackdaws passing over the Nazi prison camps where they were held helped them to maintain their mental stability (Crow Country, pp. 178-181).

I have discussed the publications of four British nature writers who I have termed psychoecologists, given their affinities with the recent popularity of more

urban psychogeography. They have in common an approach to nature writing that is concerned with the way that human psychology determines our understanding of and joy in the natural environment. Psychoecologists share an acute awareness of the agency of the writer in constructing as well as describing the natural world (and indeed our environment's role in constructing us). Consequently, Deakin, Mabey, Macfarlane and Cocker are unashamedly autobiographical in their writings. Mabey celebrates the idea that 'our culture won't go away' as a source of human curiosity and imagination while recognising the limits subjectivity can impose upon the understanding of the intrinsic dynamism of other species (Beechcombing, p. 61). Cocker too acknowledges a phenomenological dimension, adding human perception as an ingredient in the construction of any given landscape. This idea is given emphasis in his opening and concluding remarks, where he describes 'the elements of the natural world – the light, the environment, the birds, myself – which create it' (Crow Country, p. 170).

They are writers who describe a countryside upon which they – and in most cases we the readers – for the most part have but a tenuous reliance for our diet, being

increasingly accustomed to imported food. They speak for the set-aside generation, concerned for a land used for intensive farming from which we have been increasingly marginalised. Cocker notes the irony that green – the colour most associated with pastoral beauty – is often now encountered in Norfolk as an ‘unrelieved fertiliser green’ that ‘speaks most eloquently of [environmental] decimation’ (Crow Country, p. 46). Plaintive truths are revealed in such details. Macfarlane observes, for example, that the glow-worm’s decline, appears to be due to light pollution (Wild Places, p. 194). On species disappearances in general he laments: ‘The loss, after it is theirs, is ours’ (Wild Places p. 307). What could be a coda for his book could be a fitting coda for all four books under discussion, as they contribute to a generation of new nature writing that is made piquant by its urgency, not so much a passive and regretful nostalgia as an urgent clawing for psychic survival. Yet these are also optimistic narratives of the resilience and regenerative powers of a natural world that they celebrate both for its intrinsic worth and as a source of human well-being, thus sharing an ability to gesture beyond the limits of current environmental fears.

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Notes

1 Roger Deakin, *Wildwood: A Journey Through Trees* (London: Hamish Hamilton/Penguin, 2007); Mark Cocker, *Crow Country* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007); Robert Macfarlane, *The Wild Places* (London: Granta, 2007) and Richard Mabey, *Beechcombings: The Narratives of Trees* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2007).

2 Andrew Motion, 'Mapping nature's heartlands', *The Guardian*, 25th August 2007, p. 6 G2

3 Merlin Coverley, *Psychogeography* (Harpending: Pocket Essentials, 2006), p. 96.

4 Iain Sinclair, *London Orbital: A Walk Around the M25* (London: Penguin, 2003), pp. 186-187.

5 Will Self, talk on 'Psychogeography' at the Arnolfini, Bristol 27th November 2007.

6 Roger Deakin, *Waterlog: A Swimmer's Journey Through Britain* (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 4. The cultural and subversive possibilities of walking are explored in depth in Rebecca Solnit's full-length study *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (London: Verso, 2001).

7 Richard Mabey, *Nature Cure* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2005).

8 Olivia Laing, 'The Hedge Kid', an interview with Richard Mabey. *The Guardian*, 22nd December 2007, Review section, p. 9.