

## From Countryside to Environment: British Non-Fiction Prose Nature Writing

1960-1980

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[An expanded version of a draft chapter for Kate McLoughlin (ed.), *Flower/Power: British Literature in Transition, volume 2, 1960-1980* (Cambridge University Press, 2016)<sup>1</sup>

Sometime between 1960 and 1980 the British ‘countryside’ metamorphosed into ‘the environment’. A shift in cultural perspective took place as a post-war, backward looking, interest in literary ruralism came to be replaced by a more serious, scientific, sharply engaged mode of writing that was implicitly aware of the threats of pollution, urban and industrial expansion and a wider, global sense of the Cold War’s potential for a nuclear attack that would overwhelm the British environment. Of course, there was no single moment of schism in these two strands of writing about landscape and nature; they overlapped in both time and in the developing work of individual writers – even within a single book. Indeed, some would argue that ‘countryside’ writing has persisted into some current popular forms of nature writing and that current ‘environmental’ writing, having originated in the 1960s and 70s, has by no means shrugged off idealised nostalgia for past traditions. But the geopolitical situation in the early 1960s, the popularisation of the notion of ‘ecology’ and the establishment of the term ‘environment’ widely across the culture, combined to change non-fiction prose writing about nature and landscape into a more self-aware sense of the individual as part of an ecosystem with the dilemmas of responsibility that follow from this. Perhaps a key image of this period was the publication of NASA’s satellite photograph of the earth featured on the first *Whole Earth Catalogue* in 1968.

The period began with a world-wide concern that enlarged the British sense of environment and put this new environmentalism on the agenda of a variety of literary forms. The Cuban missile crisis of 1963 hangs over our period, resulting in a global sense of the Cold War’s potential for a nuclear threat to the world environment. This crisis produced two songs that expressed an anxiety about nuclear fallout: Bob Dylan’s ‘A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall’ and The Seekers’ recording of ‘What Have They Done to the Rain?’. It is perhaps no coincidence that the period that saw the formation of Greenpeace (1969) and Friends of the Earth (1969 in San Francisco; 1971 in the UK) also saw the founding of CND (1958). It was protest at nuclear weapons testing by the USA in 1969 on a remote island off the Alaskan coast that led to the establishment of Greenpeace, which by 1977 had seven international offices, including one in London. Undoubtedly this global sense of the earth under threat from radiation reflected in those two iconic songs fed into the growing awareness of interconnection derived from the new science of ecology to produce a changed sense of the countryside as environment and to raise questions about how culture represented nature.

‘As a social and cultural movement, however, ecology began to develop only after the Second World War, and did not really catch on until the 1960s’, writes Peter Marshall in *Nature’s Web: An Exploration of Ecological Thinking*. Marshall cites a book published in

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<sup>1</sup> This version is indebted to discussion of a presentation of a paper to postgraduates at St John’s College, Oxford in June 2015 and to the ASLE UKI conference in Cambridge in September 2015.

1963 as crucial to the expansion of the concept to include human culture and therefore an ethical responsibility: 'It has grown from being a minor branch of biology to an interdisciplinary study which, as the subtitle of E. P. Odum's work *Ecology* (1963) suggest, provides *The Link Between the Natural and the Social Sciences*'. Indeed, the problem of the human species as not only the voracious top of the food chain but the dominant ecological presence on the planet led to concerns about human population growth, as demonstrated in the original title of Paul Ehrlich's influential book *The Population Bomb: Population, Resources, and Environment* (1968). This was followed by what has been referred to as the culmination of the first wave of environmentalism, the publication in 1972 of *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind*. In the same year the United Nations Environment Programme produced a report on the *Human Environment* and Gregory Bateson published his influential *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* with its final section titled 'Crisis in the Ecology of Mind'. One needs to think of Gavin Maxwell's *Ring of Bright Water* (1960), a popular book which brought attention to the vulnerability of the otter in the UK, alongside the International Union for Conservation of Nature's publication of *A World Conservation Strategy* (first draft published 1978) and the Worldwatch Institute's provocatively titled report *Disappearing Species: The Social Challenge* (1978). Environmentalism was clearly part of the international zeitgeist and in 1977 even the long-standing UK government Department of Local Government changed its title to 'the Department of the Environment, reflecting a developing role for the Department in the area of environmental promotion and protection'. Whether the tension between 'promotion and protection' could ever be resolved by government policy makers would be the challenged addressed by Richard Mabey at the end of these two decades.

Some commentators have produced interesting reasons for this cultural shift towards environmentalism during this period. 'During the late 1960s and 1970s a radical environmentalism evolves in part through a self-made landscape of free festivals, Albion Fairs and rediscovered ley lines', writes David Matless in *Landscape and Englishness* (1998). 'An emerging Green Englishness connected to a revitalization of movements for organic farming', he observes. But it is also significant that this period saw the emergence of the notion of 'deep ecology' from Arne Naess (1973) and seminal books such as Richard Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene* (1976) and James Lovelock's *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (1979). Meanwhile a notion of environmental aesthetics was also emerging with the publication in 1966 of what is 'widely viewed as marking the emergence of environmental aesthetics as a distinct field': Ronald Hepburn's essay, 'Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty'. According to art historian James Nisbet, 1971 was the year in which environmental aesthetics transitioned from 'land art' into 'ecological art'. But in British prose nature writing the thrust towards an ecological art during the 1960s and 1970s was a slow process, with much persistence of traditional attitudes towards the countryside and its inhabitants. 1975 may have been the year in which the Marxist historian Raphael Samuel published his first major work in the editing of *Village Life and Labour*, but Tim Dee observes that writers about the Fens in particular were slow to represent the real lives of rural workers: 'Many writers (almost all before 1960) milked and mined the fens for the characters those students [Cambridge University's self-styled 'Republic of Upware' club of the mid

nineteenth century] would have loved to patronise. Much “country writing” across Britain was imprisoned by this two-dimensional dehumanising of its own people; in the fens, with very few exceptions, it seems to have been endemic.’ Part of the reason for the persistence of pre-environmental attitudes was simply that pre-war authors were still publishing ‘country writing’ and retained a certain degree of nostalgic popularity.

Tim Dee’s complaint might have been aimed at H. V. Morton, who in 1927 had written in *In Search of England*, ‘History proves to us that a nation cannot live by its town alone: it tells us that the virile and progressive nation is that which can keep pace with the modern industrial world and at the same time support a contented and flourishing peasantry’. There is a pastoral nostalgia to the phrase ‘contented and flourishing peasantry’, especially as contrasted with ‘the modern industrial world’. Morton would have seen himself as part of a long tradition of non-fiction prose nature writing about the British countryside which is generally regarded as having its origin in Gilbert White’s *A Natural History of Selbourne* (1788) and to include William Cobbett’s *Rural Rides* (1830), George Borrow’s *Wild Wales* (1862), Richard Jeffries’ *The Amateur Poacher* (1879), W. H. Hudson’s *Afoot in England* (1909), Edward Thomas’s *The South Country* (1909) and H. J. Massingham’s *In Praise of England* (1924).<sup>2</sup> In the work of these writers the English countryside is celebrated with a combination of the close observation of nature in the present and a strong sense of nostalgia for rural tradition, described by W. J. Keith in his significantly dated 1975 study *The Rural Tradition: William Cobbett, Gilbert White and other non-fiction prose writers of the English countryside*. However, in 1975 H. V. Morton is to be found ‘leaning against a fence in portentous silence’ in his pictorial survey, *England*, and musing: ‘those things which men break their hearts upon are not worth so much in the long run as the sight of the moon tangled up in the boughs of a young birch wood. Heresy, of course!’ This is a writer aware that his own pastoral nostalgia is out of touch with the zeitgeist, although his implicit challenge to modern ways of establishing value in the countryside would be taken up by Richard Mabey when he asserted that bluebell woods have a ‘use’ because ‘people like them’.

More complicated is the case of Kenneth Allsop’s book *In the Country* (1972) in which he collected his weekly country diary contributions to the *Daily Mail*. In the 1960s Allsop became well known as a TV news presenter, but in 1949 he was a young novelist whose first book, *Adventure Lit Their Star*, opened with a remarkable account of bird migration from Africa to Britain. Richard Kerridge has pointed out that because this is located in the spring of 1944 and because the language is martial (swifts are ‘silent dark squadrons’), it has the effect of evoking the D-Day landings. Indeed, it emerges that the

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<sup>2</sup> The maleness of this list may not so much be due to the cultural difficulties of a woman walking the countryside alone, but to the male domination of natural history publishing. David Elliston Allen, in his history of field guides, includes only two women: Ann Pratt’s five volume *The Flowering Plants and Ferns of Great Britain* (1850-7) and Eliza Brightwen’s *Wild Nature Won by Kindness* (1890). Allen, *Books and Naturalists* (London: HarperCollins, 2010), p. 194 and p. 316. W. J. Keith, in *The Rural Tradition* (1975) includes Mary Russell Mitford’s *Our Village* (five series published 1824-1832). In our period the male domination was broken only the nostalgic popularity of nature notes written in 1906 and published in 1977 as *The Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady* by Edith Holden (London: Book Club Associates, 1977).

narrative perspective is that of a former RAF pilot and bird-watcher, Richard Locke, the novels's main character. Kerridge remarks that 'Nonhuman nature provides a way of glimpsing the terrible moments on the D-Day beaches without having to face them directly'.<sup>3</sup> But the passage also works in the other direction, at the same time heightening awareness of the scale, struggle and costs of long distance bird migration. This merging of mutual understanding is what ecocritics, following Donna Harraway, call 'natureculture'. It could be argued that human culture's need to be reminded of its being embedded in nature is a function of the newspaper country diary (that has continued on a daily basis since 1904 in *The Guardian*, for example) such as Allsop wrote for the *Daily Mail*.

There was nothing of Morton's nostalgia or whimsy in Allsop's columns. Certainly his prose could have a poetic quality at times, as when he described 'a tawny owl, wafting over the corkscrew chimney on wings dark as dead oak leaves but soundless as snow'. Soft assonance and contrasting dark and light are at play here, but the sentence is set in visual motion by the verb 'wafting'. This vivid immediacy of experience is the key to Allsop's style in these short pieces which do not avert their eyes from negative presences in the contemporary countryside:

How was my tree-creeper doing? It wavered off through the rain – certainly into other birds' territory, but steering along a fine guideline of balance leading it only to what it needed, the rest left for others. That seems a good code for living in our world of non-returnable containers, non-consumable rubbish – and non-renewable resources.

The ecological notion of 'balance' here is used to lead to a reminder that an environmental crisis is underway in the exploitation of 'non-renewable resources'. If the tone is gently didactic, in Allsop's references to DDT, which by now had been banned as a pesticide, he could afford to be gently mocking, in his old serviceman's way, at its former widespread use. Rabbits, he said, were virtually wiped out in Britain by myxomatosis, but 'when DDT was being squirted over the countryside like scent in a brothel, more died from eating carrion: birds poisoned by sprayed grain'. In another reference to the ban which eventually followed the research of scientist Derek Ratcliffe, Allsop is more severe about the tragic irony of DDT: 'Yet it is a strange, ugly role into which the manufacturers' salesmanship has lured the farmer: the husbandman poisoning the land traditionally in his care, upon which he and we live'. 'Husbandman' is a word Morton would have used, but the reference to tradition here serves a critique in which the author and his readers are implicated. This is a very different kind of nature writing from that before the 1960s, displaying an alert sense of environmentalism which begged several questions. Had we been taking nature for granted? How did we arrive at a point in Western civilisation when nature itself appeared to be under threat? Could the British public use their leisure time to support the protection of this new awareness of 'nature'? What might be the role of literary production in developing this awareness and exploring this informed appetite for writing about nature? The poet Ted

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Kerridge, 'Nature writing for the welfare state', *Anglistik: International Journal of English Studies*, 26 (1) (2015), p. 35.

Hughes had been considering such questions since his return from America with his wife Sylvia Plath in 1959.

Increased leisure time and mobility saw an increase in the number of naturalist and outdoor magazines, together with books of a high literary quality catering for these interests and concerns exploring new conceptions of local 'nature' as larger environments. In 1970 *The Ecologist* magazine was founded and in the third issue of the journal *Your Environment* Ted Hughes reviewed Max Nicholson's new book *The Environmental Revolution* (1970). According to Daniel Huws it was Ted Hughes who in 1970 persuaded his Cambridge University friend David Ross to start the magazine *Your Environment* in 1969. The first two issues listed Hughes, David Ross, and Daniel Weissbort as editors. Hughes began his review by asking why so much of the activity of conservationists was unknown to the general public in 1970, claiming that Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*, which revealed to Americans that industrial agriculture had poisoned their land, 'has not reached the average gardener' in the UK. An ecofeminist ahead of his time, Hughes identified the biblical rejection of a feminised Nature as the source of a deep-seated resistance to environmentalism in Western culture: 'The subtly apotheosized misogyny of Reformed Christianity is proportionate to the fanatic rejection of Nature'. By 1970 Hughes had a fully formed cultural theory of Western patriarchy's responsibility for the alienation from nature that was responsible for the current environmental crisis.

Away from the Faber big hitters like Hughes, in the alternative poetry scene of the little magazines and small presses a number of poets were beginning to engage with place as environment, including Lee Harwood, Jeremy Hooker, Kevin Borman and others. Harwood, in *Landscapes* (1969), used painting as a means of objectifying environments. The title poem of the collection concludes: 'It doesn't really matter whether this is / the real or a symbol – the end's the same'. In Hooker's *Soliloquies of a Chalk Giant* (1974) there was an awareness of the danger of pagan nostalgia overlaid upon what is actually a military environment that is satirised in the opening statements of 'Matrix':

Druids leave their shops at the midsummer solstice; neophytes tread an antic measure to the antlered god. Men who trespass are soon absorbed, horns laid beside them in the ground. The burnt-out tank waits beside the barrow.

But a poem like 'A Chalk Pebble' managed to encompass the powerful combination of the forces at work in the Cretaceous, 'the foetus / Of a giant', saurian tyrannizers of the shallows, a barrow as a turtle on a hill summit and 'alchemical water / For the slow formation / Of a perfect stone'. Borman's poetry was a much more personal evocation of landscapes as the sites of intimate moments in a relationship that arose partly because of their environmental location: 'as we wait for sleep, / listening to [...] the place itself.

In the theatre apparently isolated plays gave a new role to place as environment, as in David Rudkin's debut play *Afore Night Come* (1962) and Christopher Hampton's *Savages* (1973). Rudkin set his play in an English orchard, but any expectations of pastoral complacency are shattered by the violence between the fruit pickers that evokes a pagan environment in which blood is necessarily shed for the fertility of crops. Hampton's play

engaged with the exploitation of land and resources in Brazil that led to the extermination of the indigenous Cintas tribe in an incident in the early 1960s. This is represented at the end of a pioneering play concerned with what would now be called environmental justice.

Mountaineering literature flourished to such an extent that two seminal anthologies were published at the end of this period. *The Games Climbers Play* (1978) collected imaginative and innovative essays and articles about climbing and *The Winding Trail*, published in 1981, but inevitably drawing much of its material from this period, collected writing about hill-walking. W. H. Murray, Scotland's foremost mountaineering writer, combined the intimate knowledge of a naturalist with a poetic prose in his majestic book *The Scottish Highlands* (1976). For Wales the naturalist William Condry produced the authoritative *Snowdonia National Park* (1970) in the revived Collins New Naturalist series and the Lakeland poet Norman Nicholson's published an influential anthology *The Lake District* (1977). These last three books of informed engagements with mountain landscapes contain some of the best nature writing of the period, although Robert Macfarlane might beg to differ. His Introduction to the recent reprint of Nan Shepherd's *The Living Mountain* ([1977] 2011) claims that 'Along with J. A. Baker's *The Peregrine* (1967) – with which it shares a compressive intensity, a generic disobedience, a flaring prose poetry and an obsession (ocular, oracular) with the eyeball – it is one of the two most remarkable twentieth-century British studies of landscape that I know'. What is particularly significant is that this personal account of experiences in the Cairngorm mountains was actually written 'during the closing years of the Second World War', but only found a publisher in the local Aberdeen University Press in 1977. Shepherd's prose is of the zeitgeist in that she seeks to express how she walks herself into a sense of unity with the mountain that is both physical and spiritual at the same time: 'One walks among elementals, and elementals are not governable. There are awakened also in oneself by the contact elementals that are as unpredictable as wind or snow.' This is a powerful attempt to capture the experience of being in a state that one might call 'natureculture'. Of sleeping on a mountain summit Shepherd writes:

If sleep comes at such a moment, its coming is a movement as natural as day. And after – ceasing to be a stone, to be the soil of the earth, opening eyes that have human cognisance behind them upon what one has been so profoundly a part of. That is all. One has been in.

There is not a loss of self here, but a deepening of it, not in an egocentric manner, but with an ecocentric focus. This is nature writing that is far from the personal consumption of nature as escapism from human concerns. It is writing that is on a different plane, having shifted the perspective from the British tradition of countryside writing epitomised by H. V. Morton.

Elsewhere Robert Macfarlane makes the case for Jacquetta Hawkes' geological history of Britain *A Land* (1951) as transitional in its paradoxes: 'One of the oddest contradictions of *A Land* is between its island patriotism and its planetary holism'. It also contained 'cutting-edge science and first person-narrative [...] It's for this reason that I proposed *A Land* to be a missing link. It stands, with [Rachel] Carson and company, at the beginnings of what is now uneasily known as "environmental writing": ecologically literate,

ethically minded and politically explicit work.’ Actually, Macfarlane’s claim that these qualities might be found in *A Land* overlooks Hawkes’ nostalgia for rural tradition in the conclusion of her book, which concludes with a breath-taking rejection of any kind of urban culture: ‘The urban masses, having lost all the traditions I have just named which together make up the inheritance which may be called culture, tended to become, as individuals, cultureless’. Hawkes’ faith in what Macfarlane calls ‘cutting-edge science’ is invested in the backward looking notion of ‘restoration’: ‘The people of this island should put their hearts, their hands, and all the spare energy that science has given them into the restoration of their country’. And it is not actually science that is being called upon here, but the ‘spare energy’ of leisure time conservation in the service of ‘island patriotism’. If all this places the book firmly in the period of writing about the countryside prior to 1960, what has been going on in Macfarlane’s claims for it in his ‘Foreword’ to its re-publication in 2012?

Robert Macfarlane is a leading figure in the recent resurgence in British non-fiction prose nature writing and as such is seeking to connect with the long tradition that preceded ‘what is now uneasily known as “environmental writing”’, as he puts it, in which category he would presumably include his own work. *A Land* was one of three books republished in 2012 in the Collins Nature Library which he introduced with a Foreword. Such reconnection, whilst at the same time exploring the possibilities of ‘environmental writing’, is a feature of what has, even more uneasily, been called ‘New Nature Writing’. This would include, for example, Richard Mabey’s *Nature Cure* (2005), Kathleen Jamie’s *Findings* (2005), Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts’ *Edgelands* (2011), Robert Macfarlane’s *The Old Ways* (2012), Tim Dee’s *Four Fields* (2014), and Helen Macdonald’s *H is for Hawk* (2015). Richard Mabey is the biographer of Gilbert White, whilst Macfarlane’s *The Old Ways* reconnects with Edward Thomas and Macdonald’s book sustains a dialogue with T. H. White’s *The Goshawk* (1951). This eagerness for continuity with a native nature writing tradition about the countryside originating in Gilbert White’s *A Natural History of Selbourne* begs the question of just when and how the transition into what Macfarlane uneasily calls ‘environmental writing’ came about. Jamie’s book recounts how her interest in her local peregrines led her to search the internet for a then out of print book, J. A. Baker’s *The Peregrine* (1967) and this is a good place to start an enquiry into this transition.

This shift in perspective in British nature writing from the egocentric to the biocentric is nowhere more apparent than in J. A. Baker’s *The Peregrine*. This is the personal story of a seriously obsessed and scientifically knowledgeable bird-watcher following a pair of falcons through a single winter in East Anglia. But, as Jamie puts it, the author/ornithologist ‘has utterly effaced himself from his book’. That Baker’s interest is a purely scientific one in this sharply detailed observer’s diary, does not prevent him from attempting to express the peregrine’s perspective on the world in poetically inspired language: ‘Hawks live on the curve of the air. Their globed eyes have never seen the grey flatness of our human vision.’ Baker’s displacement of self here, at the very moment of achieving a remarkable self-expression, is matched by his denigration of the very human vision that empowers this expression. This is challenging ecocentric writing that requires, as does Nan Shepherd’s

writing, an attempt to extend human perspective in a new engagement with nature. What can it mean to ‘live in the curve of the air’? What does a ‘globed eye’ see?

On the first page of his book Baker explicitly seeks to avoid ‘countryside’ writing when he writes: ‘Detailed descriptions of landscape are tedious.’ His next two sentences reveal two levels of understanding landscape, the second of which is, again, both poetic and challenging: ‘One part of England is superficially so much like another. The differences are subtle, coloured by love.’ This is exactly the point that Richard Mabey makes in valuing bluebell woods, quoted above, that in the intimate knowledge of local people they are ‘coloured by love’.

Of course, writing in 1967 Baker was aware of Ratcliffe’s research on the effects of farmers poisoning the foodchain with organochlorine pesticides upon peregrine infertility and thinning of eggshells. In a remarkable passage of *The Peregrine* Baker discovers a pair of birds at a seacliff nest site that has no eggs.

They had no song. Their calls were harsh and ugly. But their soaring was like an endless silent singing. What else had they to do? They were sea falcons now; there was nothing to keep them to the land. Foul poison burned within them like a burrowing fuse. Their life was lonely death, and would not be renewed. All they could do was take their glory to the sky. They were the last of their race.

This particular environmental crisis has produced a new kind of nature writing that can balance the ‘glory’ of soaring birds with ‘their life was lonely death’, the poisoned land with the possible hope of the sea, all summed up in the paradoxical ‘endless silent singing’. But it is the bleak rhythm of blunt statements that also builds towards the apocalyptic effect of the final sentence.

Indeed, one could argue that writing such as this contributed to the public concern that actually rendered this final sentence inaccurate, not only saving the peregrine population, but bringing it back to a strength greater than before systematic records began. In fact, the reason why an obscure scientific paper by Derek Ratcliffe and a book like Baker’s had such a cultural impact was because between 1960 and 1980 Britain had turned into a nation of birdwatchers. In 1960 the RSPB had 10,000 members which had risen to 100,000 by 1972. In 1980 there were 300,000 members and the RSPB’s Young Ornithologists’ Club, which had been launched in 1965, had 100,000 members. Birdwatchers are, of course, aware of the countryside as an environment and that even their gardens are actually habitats. Amateur birders were contributing to scientific surveys and using their leisure time to visit the countryside in new way, especially making use of the growing number of nature reserves. Suddenly a large proportion of the British population was interested in issues of land-use that were to be addressed by a nature writer whose early observations of the margins and hedgerows of the countryside now led straight to key questions about environmental pollution.

It was the decline of the peregrine population, of course, that was one of the indicators of the effects of toxic pesticides in post-war agriculture. Macfarlane referred to Rachel



Carson whose book *Silent Spring* (1962) is now commonly cited by writers in the UK as beginning the transition towards environmentalism. But the less well-known scientist who first made the link between the thinning of eggshells in the British peregrine population and a toxic food chain, Derek Ratcliffe, made no reference to Carson's work. His 1980 monograph *The Peregrine Falcon*, which told the story of his independent scientific research, significantly has no reference to Carson. Even the 2015 tribute *Nature's Conscience: The life and legacy of Derek Ratcliffe* has no reference to Carson. Ratcliffe's 1963 paper, 'The Status of the Peregrine in Great Britain' was the first UK evidence of the effects of a widespread post-war pollution of the British countryside by an increasingly industrialised agricultural business using toxic pesticides. The traditional innocent, reassuring, rolling British countryside of Richard Jeffries, Edward Thomas and H. V. Morton could never be the same again. Richard Mabey observed that 'this survey had far-reaching effects upon the control of agricultural chemicals in this country and played an important part in the ecological awakening that happened in the sixties'.

Of course, although published within a year of each other, Ratcliffe's paper did not have quite the popular public impact in the UK that *Silent Spring* had in the USA. The corporate might of the chemical companies did not mount personal attacks on Derek Ratcliffe, as they did on Carson (although their scientists were characterised by Ratcliffe in his own exchanges with them as 'vicious'). But Britain's nation of bird-watchers for whom the countryside, like their urban gardens, had become a habitat and their weekend pastoral retreats into National Parks, or the increasing number of nature reserves, had become more scientifically aware consumptions of nature and more conservationally inclined journeys of support. Ratcliffe's research actually changed UK legislation, as did Carson's writing in the US, but he cannot be claimed as the marker of the environmental turn in nature writing in Britain. My point is that neither can Rachel Carson, as so many New Nature Writers like Macfarlane, together with contemporary British ecocritics, retrospectively tend to assume. The temptation to exaggerate, from our present perspective, the impact of *Silent Spring* upon British nature writing at the time of its publication is understandable, given that a writer of the stature of Ted Hughes has acknowledged her contemporary influence in his 'greening'. But Hughes had read Carson whilst in America, with the result that, as his university friend Daniel Huws wrote to me recently, 'You can safely say that when Ted came back from America he had become an environmentalist. It had become a big concern.' If we have a *Silent Spring* moment in British nature writing, I would argue that it was Richard Mabey's *The Common Ground* (1980), nearly two decades later (which also contains no reference to Carson).

In 1980 the public appetite for the science of nature was about to be satiated by the television series *Life on Earth* and Richard Attenborough's accompanying book (1981). *The AA Book of the Countryside* (1974), which Helen Macdonald cites as a major childhood influence,<sup>4</sup> was in some ways superseded by *The Sunday Times Book of the Countryside*

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4 Helen Macdonald, 'Helen Macdonald: The six books that made me', *The Guardian*, 28 January 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/28/helen-macdonald-h-is-for-hawk-costa-prize-six-nature-books>

(1980) as a large format family reference book. But the first books of the popular nature writer Richard Mabey explored new perspectives on the British environment with significant titles such as *Food for Free* (1972), *The Unofficial Countryside* (1973) and *Pollution Handbook* (1974). In 1980 Richard Mabey produced a book that represented the pivotal culmination of the new environmentalism that had been building during the previous two decades with the title *The Common Ground: A Place for Nature in Britain's Future*. Many features of this book indicate its significance as a work of what would now be called 'natureculture' and that have come to be typical of Mabey's later concerns to balance the values of science and aesthetics, naturalists' and farming interests, and traditional and modern land use practices within a national conservation policy. First is the fact that this book was commissioned by the government agency that advised on conservation policy, managed national nature reserves and designated Sites of Special Scientific Interest, the Nature Conservancy Council (NCC), which had only been formed four years earlier in 1973. Mabey was given a free hand to 'widen the public debate on nature conservation' and access to sites and documents. So here was a book of nature writing that was informed by the latest science and had a conservation purpose. However, from the beginning Mabey intended to regard nature as culture, preferring not to use scientific terms such as 'site' or 'habitat' when he knew that what the public valued was a more complex mixture of elements that they thought of as the uniqueness of 'place'. Did the wild daffodils immortalised by Wordsworth give Grasmere's abundant daffodils a greater claim to protection than places where they were rare? 'Association, abundance, rarity, would all seem to give places equal, though different, claims.' The tone of this – inclusive, considered, fair and balancing competing individual distinctions – is important to the approach of the whole book.

This tone is applied to Mabey's treatment of tradition as important 'cultural history' that is still evolving. With a nod towards the founder of British nature writing, he writes that, 'It is this sense of an intimate community of human and natural life that is responsible for so much of the power of Gilbert White's pioneering study in ecology'. Mabey recognises that there was no 'static and monotonous' woodland cover of the British Isles 7000 years ago and that such a view 'has more to do with a mixture of sentimentality and the plantation mentality than with fact'. But he also suggests that it is remarkable that wildlife that had succeeded in surviving 'alongside an increasingly intensive agriculture for at least 3000 years should seem to be in such peril from the advances of the last thirty'. Whilst traditional agriculture had been based upon enriching whilst using natural habitats, post-war specialisation and mechanisation had led to large units of monoculture with maximised production. Significantly, the three chapters of the section titled 'Past Harmonies and Present Discord' include, after 'Woodland and Forestry' and 'Agriculture', a chapter titled 'Recreation'. It should be said that each of the first two chapters contain knowledgeable and intimate evocations of specific examples of localised land-use and historic records as well as reference to scientific studies available through the NCC. At the time Mabey was the owner of a Chiltern beechwood, Hardings Wood, the management of which provided him with dilemmas and opportunities that he later described in his book *Beechcombings* (2007). In considering the pressure of increased

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recreational use of the countryside Mabey was, in part, confronting the consequences of the implicit invitation of evocative nature writing itself. Indeed, he showed himself to be aware not only of this British lineage in references to Gilbert White and quotations from John Clare, but of recent American nature writing in quoting Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* which had been published only five years earlier. Mabey quotes Dillard asking the question, 'Why so many forms?', and answering that 'Evolution is, of course, the vehicle of intricacy'. The variety of intricacy in nature is what Mabey hopes will provide a few resistant trees in the ravaging of Dutch elm disease that was sweeping the country at the time, although he doubts whether individual species of birds, for example, can 'cope with the abruptness, the repetition, the sheer scale of current environmental change'. But it is a belief in the intricacies of the local, and their representation in scientific local case studies as well as the detailed records of nature writing, that leads Mabey to value what he calls 'parochial histories' in confronting the global environmental crisis. This is where his conception of 'place' as 'process' is located.

What Mabey calls the 'Ecological Enlightenment' has resulted in the conception of our living in a 'biosphere'. But in deciding 'how much buffeting it can take before it begins to slide into a state of irreversible decline', his emphasis is upon human choices beyond scientific criteria so that local meaning and value are balanced against scientific values in what should be, for Mabey, the ethical cultural debate underpinning his final chapter, 'Conservation and Community: Towards a Land-Use Policy'. 'Between those evasive generalisations of "scenic beauty" and "scientific importance" stretches a continuous range of natural qualities which are hard to define in the precise terms of planning designation.' It is typical of both Mabey's sense of 'natureculture' and his reading of the American nature writing tradition that he quotes Aldo Leopold: 'the "health of the land" is ultimately an indicator of the state of man'. At the same time Mabey never loses his localised knowledge that it is the 'common species [that] keep the living world ticking' and that if 'we do not want the natural world preserved as a museum piece' the cultural debate must recognise the dynamic tension between continuity and change. His last word - to emphasise 'renewal' - is both positive and literary in quoting Ted Hughes's poem 'Swifts' in which the birds' return each year signals that 'the globe's still working'. Mabey's hope that by marrying 'old practices and modern enterprise' a way may be found that is an 'effective antidote to the more sickly of our own pastoral longings' gives the clue to a possible theorisation of the shift from 'countryside' to 'environment' between 1960 and 1980 - between the writings of Morton and Mabey, for example.

During this period British literary criticism anticipated the 1990s development of ecocriticism in three publications that revised theoretical interest in the pastoral, falling between William Empson's *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1950) and Brian Loughrey's Macmillan Casebook *The Pastoral Mode* (1984). The first of the three was Peter Marinelli's *Pastoral* (1971), which was followed by Raymond Williams' revisionary Marxist account of English pastoral and 'counter pastoral' in *The Country and the City* (1973). Taking Williams's approach, John Barrell and John Bull's *The Penguin Book of English Pastoral Verse* (1974) announced that after Thomas Hardy and Edward Thomas English pastoral poetry was dead

because there was no longer any separation between town and country. Whilst Marinelli made a defence of a continuing English pastoral tradition, especially in the pastorals of childhood such as Laurie Lee's *Cider with Rosie* (1959), Williams's attack on the pastoral mode as idealising and serving a conservative political purpose (which I now regard as having been based upon a narrow historical range of country house literature) had the effect of making the term pastoral a pejorative in British literary criticism, as, indeed, it has been used earlier in this essay. The baby had been thrown out with the bathwater, but thrown out it had been in British literary critical discourse. In response to this I have proposed the term 'post-pastoral' for writing that is clearly in the pastoral tradition, but is complex and reconnective in a 'natureculture' manner that avoids idealisation. This theoretical framework suggests that the metamorphosis of the 'countryside' of H. V. Morton to the 'environment' of Richard Mabey charted in this essay may be seen as a change from the perspective of traditional nostalgic and idealising pastoral writing towards a complexity of tensions exemplified by Mabey's *The Common Ground* that may be characterised as 'post-pastoral'.