

AN ARCHIPELAGIC LITERATURE: RE-FRAMING ‘THE NEW NATURE WRITING’

In a 2010 essay for Art Events, Robert Macfarlane tells the story of a group of islanders from Lewis in the Western Isles and their battle to preserve an area of moorland from the engineering and energy giant AMEC. As part of Scotland’s drive to source forty percent of its energy from sustainable alternatives by 2020, AMEC filed an application in 2004 to site Europe’s largest onshore wind farm down the middle of the north of the island. The journalist and former editor of Granta Ian Jack took the side of AMEC in this dispute, describing the area known as The Brindled Moor, in language reminiscent of eighteenth century agricultural improvement, as ‘a vast dead place: dark brown moors and black lochs under a grey sky all swept by a chill wet wind’ (Macfarlane 2010: 124). In response to this and other descriptions of the moor as a ‘wasteland’, the leader of the opposition to the planning application, Finlay MacLeod, called for a language to challenge Jack’s and AMEC’s representation of the moor. He called for the following, from which Macfarlane takes the title of his essay:

What is required is a new nomenclature of landscape and how we relate to it, so that conservation becomes a natural form of human awareness, and so that it ceases to be under-written and under-appreciated and thus readily vulnerable to desecration. What is needed is a Counter-Desecration Phrasebook (124).

This idea of a ‘Counter-Desecration Phrasebook’ becomes an important one to Macfarlane and seems to chime very well with his own efforts to revisit the landscapes of Britain and Ireland in his 2007 work *The Wild Places*. For MacLeod there is an intrinsic link between the ‘under-written’ and the ‘under-appreciated’. For Macfarlane, this is a vicious circle: ‘language-deficit leads to attention-deficit’ (115). As words such as ‘catkin’, ‘conker’, ‘brook’, ‘minnow’ and ‘bray’ are being eroded from the *Oxford Junior Dictionary*, his argument goes, so, gradually, is our ability to see and hear such things (116). It is a nuanced version of the structuralist argument that ‘nothing is distinct before the appearance of language’ but one which contains within it an argument for conservation as well (Saussure 856). To counter such desecration the Lewisians have collected an extraordinarily alert vocabulary of local terminology into a glossary and phrasebook: ‘*teine biorach*’ is ‘the flame that runs on top of heather when the moor is burnt in the summer’; ‘*éig*’ is ‘the quartz crystals on the beds of moorland stream-pools that catch and reflect moonlight, and therefore draw salmon to them in the late summer and autumn’ (109). Such a glossary of terminology seems

to offer more than just nomenclature. It offers an insight into careful acts of attention, and alludes to personal and community narratives, perhaps even the beginnings of - with a small “c” – culture as brokered between land and people, land and community. In *The Wild Places*, Macfarlane realises that ‘certain landscapes might hold certain thoughts, as they held certain stones or plants’, suggesting that we have aspects of our lives and aspects of our culture invested in and invested with geography (2007b: 115). This is the point at which, as MacLeod suggests, ‘conservation becomes a natural form of human awareness’ where to protect land is to protect thought and to protect thought is to protect land (Macfarlane 2010: 124).

The idea of a ‘Counter-Desecration Phrasebook’ seems to encapsulate rather nicely the agenda of a popular boom in the literature of landscape and place in Britain and Ireland today, one that has come to be known rather awkwardly as ‘The New Nature Writing’ (Cowley 2008). One of the problems with such a term as ‘The New Nature Writing’ is that it does not seem to acknowledge the fact that the desecration it is endeavouring to counter is as much cultural as it is natural, that it is precisely *cultures of nature* that are under threat, cultures without which it becomes increasingly hard to care, both for and about, the non-human world around us. The title of ‘The New Nature Writing’ simply does not begin to describe the way its authors are concerned with how this cluster of islands and ecological niches is related in complex ways to human communities of the local, regional, and even national and global, ways of life that are lived out across and within them. It is for this reason, and the fact that the very term ‘nature’ has come under some considerable scrutiny recently, that I have taken the term ‘place’ rather than ‘nature’ to be the guiding object of this paper (Morton 2007; Soper 1995).

From Nature Writing to Place Writing

The other problem with the term ‘New Nature Writing’ is that it seems to ignore the specifically American heritage of the term ‘Nature Writing’. Eric Lupfer has dated its usage to the end of the nineteenth century in the United States, to the tradition of essays descending from Thoreau and John Burroughs (2001: 177).ⁱ The earliest usage I have found in England is from 1922 in Alfred Richard Orage’s *Readers and Writers: 1917-1921* which has a very brief chapter titled ‘Nature in English Literature’. Orage argues that all the greatest ‘Nature-writing’ is in fact English, citing Richard Jeffries and W.H. Hudson as examples (67-8). As

he does so, however, he adopts the American hyphen to the term ('Nature-writing') that descends from the school of 'Nature-observation' and 'Nature-study' practiced by the American author, horticulturalist and champion of the commonplace Liberty Hyde Bailey (Bailey 1911: 2-49).ⁱⁱ

The danger in using the term 'Nature Writing' to describe this popular boom today is that it ignores how frequently the British genre is concerned with human cultures. It risks presupposing a landscape more pristine and untrammelled than might be the case in what Kathleen Jamie has called this 'ancient, contested country' (2008: 25). Jamie reminds us of this in a particularly critical review of Macfarlane's *The Wild Places*. In this she bemoans the Macfarlane who goes in search of the wild: 'What's that coming over the hill? A white, middle class Englishman! A Lone Enraptured Male! From Cambridge! Here to boldly go 'discovering', then quelling our harsh and lovely and sometimes difficult land with civilised lyrical words' (26). There is a danger that in trying to step out of the human world in search of moments of intimate contact with the wild, with nature as the other-than-human, that Macfarlane is in fact assuming that his rather privileged and empowered position is a neutral one. But Jamie may be a little too quick to judge. *The Wild Places* is modelled on the form of a *bildungsroman* in which our narrator undergoes a coming of age or wisdom, an epiphany which, in this case, opens his eyes to the more delicate intrications of nature and culture closer to home. At the turning point in the chapter on Ben Hope he encounters a side of nature that is simply 'gradelessly indifferent' (157). Macfarlane sees the error of his ways in a book that is very carefully plotted and planned. The difficulty, however, is that the 'gradelessly indifferent' to an outsider may be less so to someone with a more tangible cultural allegiance to the place. Jamie's argument is really with the separation of the human and the natural realms, a theme that she keeps coming back to in her own book *Findings*. The Macfarlane that we encounter at the end of *The Wild Places* though is much more in line with Jamie's own belief that the two are inseparable.

It is a dilemma that arose very early on for Richard Mabey as well. 'I can remember being called a 'nature writer' for the first time,' he wrote in 1984, 'and flinching at the implication that this was different from simply being a writer' (*Second Nature* xi). Mabey feels uncomfortable about the way the term reinforces the nature/culture binary and with the implication that a 'nature writer' is somehow writing about issues that are, on the one hand, either more scientific and therefore more impersonal or, on the other hand, less engaged, less political than the issues of a regular writer. 'Nature writing is an unsatisfactory term,' says Macfarlane, voicing his own uneasiness, 'for this diverse, passionate, pluriform, essential,

reviving tradition - but it is the best there is, and it serves as a banner to march beneath' ('Call of the Wild'). Tim Robinson, who can be seen as something of a peripheral forefather to this movement, along with Richard Mabey, moved out to the Aran Islands in 1972 after a distinctly urban existence as an artist in Istanbul, Vienna and London. He was a member of a movement known as 'environmental art', a movement beginning to question the means of production and consumption of art as controlled by the major metropolitan galleries (Robinson 2001: 51). What he found on the Aran Islands though was not 'nature' but Aran, its cliffs and sea and people and language all folded together. What he found was a *place*, in all the fusion of human and non-human that the word implies. The books and maps that he would spend the next 25 years writing and making could equally be described as a project of 'Counter-Desecration' in so far as they endeavour to recognise and conserve the historical interrelations of people and land, people and sea, geology and folklore, in short nature *and* culture.

Macfarlane's essay on the Isle of Lewis is from an anthology of like-minded essays called *Towards Re-Enchantment* and subtitled *Place and Its Meanings*, distinguishing it from the other anthology to come out the same year funded by the Wildlife Trust, *Nature Tales: Encounters with Britain's Wildlife*. They feature some of the same authors but the former, importantly, brings together Macfarlane, Jamie and Richard Mabey with Iain Sinclair, Ken Worpole and Jane Rendell. It brings them together as authors of place rather than separating them between authors of the human landscape and authors of 'nature'. Stephen E. Hunt has done something similar in *Green Letters 10* where he framed this 'New Nature Writing' as what he called 'psychoecology', drawing on affinities with Sinclair and Will Self, and emphasising the 'agency of the writer in constructing as well as describing the natural world' (2008: 76). Traditionally 'nature writing' plays down 'construction' in favour of 'description', whereas the writing of place seems more alert to its role as creative and constructive. Place as a term, however, seems to ground and focus the attention on a specific cultural geography where 'psychoecology' might rather drift with the mind of the author. That said, place does not come without its own complicated baggage.

Doreen Massey has described how the 1980s saw a rise in place and locality studies and, like David Harvey before her, interprets this as 'deriving from the unsettling nature of the times in which we live', in particular as a reaction to increasing globalisation (143). The times we live in are nothing if not more unsettled today, so perhaps we can see this anthology as part of that same anxiety continuing rise. But for Massey, the result of such a 'reactionary' move was 'a view of place as bounded, as in various ways a site of an authenticity, as

singular, fixed and unproblematic in its identity' (5). Such a reactionary move as she witnessed in geography and local studies departments risked disengaging to a dangerous degree from the very threat that it was so concerned about. In literary terms, this is the eternal 'fly-in-amber quality' of regional writing that Raymond Williams warned against, or the kind of essentialist place narrative that Ursula Heise has criticised in the United States (Williams 1983: 231; Heise 2008: 62). What is most interesting about Massey's writing on place though is that she manages the scales of the local and the global in such a way as to offer a framework for thinking about place as progressive and open. For Massey, place must not forget that it

includes relations which stretch beyond - the global as part of what constitutes the local, the outside as part of the inside. Such a view of place challenges any possibility of claims to internal histories or to timeless identities. The identities of places are always unfixed, contested and multiple [...] Places viewed in this way are open and porous (5).

The problem that begins to arise is how place writing can respond to the unsettling nature of the times in a 'progressive' rather than a 'reactionary' fashion (Massey 147). It is a question of how it can make the most of being 'unfixed, contested and multiple', of how it can be 'open and porous' without leaving the place itself vulnerable to desecration; and it is a problem that has been addressed by a rising tide of place writing over the last six or seven years, one thread of which I would like to explore in some detail in this paper (5). By examining the rise of what I will call an 'archipelagic literature' (after Macfarlane, 2007a: 13), I hope to demonstrate a useful framework within which to set this contemporary fascination with place, one that utilises a distinctly 'progressive' understanding of the term. By offering such a framework in which to re-think some of the most exciting new work in contemporary literature, I also hope that this will contribute to presenting a way forward for some of the current 'nature-sceptical' arguments in ecocriticism.

Devolving the Archipelago

In the years leading up to the Scottish and Welsh referendums on devolution in 1997 there was a growing political and national uncertainty over precisely what was meant by the obviously Anglocentric implications of the terminology in titles such as 'Great Britain' or the 'United Kingdom'. As readings of the national space, such terms as 'Great' and 'United'

were beginning to groan with their own ill-balanced weight. Tom Nairn has described of the time

the formal end of Empire, stirrings of Republicanism, an Anglo-Irish agreement based on Britain's recognition that it no longer had to stay in control of Ulster, Welsh and Scottish dissent, a campaign for regional representation in the North-East of England, and an articulate and serious programme for reform of the British constitution itself (42-3).

The referendums were held and Scotland and Wales voted for partial devolution, leaving the meaning of 'Britain' less certain. In the wake of such political turmoil, John Kerrigan's study of Early Modern literature, *Archipelagic English* (2008), has offered a conceptual and spatial framework to re-read, if not to re-map, the cultural space of the British Isles. It is, he claims, an attempt to 'strip away modern Anglocentric and Victorian imperial paradigms' in reading the seventeenth century, and to 'recover the long, braided histories played out across the British-Irish archipelago between three kingdoms, four countries, divided regions, variable ethnicities and religiously determined allegiances' (2). The term 'archipelagic', he claims, designates a 'geopolitical unit or zone'; it does so 'neutrally (avoiding the assumptions loaded into 'the British Isles'); and it implies a devolved, interconnected account of what went on around the islands' (vii). As such, Kerrigan's devolved archipelago is one with an emphasis on connection and communication rather than partition and isolation.

It does not privilege any one of the political powers that occupy it, reading under the national boundaries and revealing the more complex, cultural relations over, across and between the islands it describes. It works as a metaphor for what he calls 'polycentrism', the multiplication and distribution of sites of agency across a network rather than their clustering around a central power (3). It is a move that has become more imaginable as the United Kingdom has become less united. It empowers its many centres over and above, or rather under and below, the pull of Empire and nation. A new picture of the space begins to rise up through what Tom Nairn has called the now partially eroding 'sovereignscape', that 'deeper configuration of central authority inherited and taken for granted, and in practice grafted on to most ideas [...] of the nation, of 'what it means' to be British or English' (*After Britain* 125).

One of the readers of *Archipelagic English* acknowledged in the front of the book, Andrew McNeillie, literary editor and manager of the small publishing house Clutag Press, drew on John Kerrigan's methodology in such a way as to strike a chord with the rising tide of environmental thought and writing. In 2007, Robert Macfarlane organised an event in

Cambridge in memory of Roger Deakin, who had recently died, and at which Richard Mabey and others spoke about 'Passionate Natures'. It was at this conference that McNeillie launched the first edition of the now well recognised literary journal *Archipelago* declaring:

Extraordinary will be its preoccupations with landscape, with documentary and remembrance, with wilderness and wet, with natural and cultural histories, with language and languages, with the littoral and the vestigial, the geological, and topographical, with climates, in terms of both meteorology, ecology and environment; and all these things as metaphor, liminal and subliminal, at the margins, in the unnameable constellation of islands on the Eastern Atlantic coast, known variously in other millennia as Britain, Great Britain, Britain and Ireland etc. (vii).

McNeillie develops the 'archipelagic' here, tightening the focus on natural histories, the topographical, climatic and the ecological. This is still a decidedly Celtic fringe and a perhaps more-than-partially devolved cultural geography, but that fringe suddenly begins to occupy foreground and centre stage on the journal's cover as London and the south east fade away over the curvature of the Earth and behind a gannet's head, something that was by quite deliberate instruction to the artist (Julian Bell was commissioned to paint the image for the cover). In an emailⁱⁱⁱ to Bell, McNeillie describes in some detail what he hopes the image of the islands will look like:

What I want is a bird's eye view of a map of the archipelago set in a stormy and mounting sea, with sea birds wheeling (a gannet stooping), and three fishes visible in the waves. I would like [...] the distorted map pushed to the lower right hand frame of the picture, with south-east England chopped off by the frame (quoted in 'Letter to Robert Macfarlane').

McNeillie, born in North Wales to a family descending from Scotland, spent a very formative year on the Aran Islands when he was a young man, before Tim Robinson moved there himself. *An Aran Keening*, his account of the year, is again a book about the place itself, as enamoured by the friends and neighbours he met as by the gigantic cliffs and clouds of seabirds. McNeillie's editorials to the journal demonstrate an interesting dual passion for wildlife and landscape and for Celtic culture, its language, poetry and folklore. What is most interesting is the way he seems to come to the defence of both as marginalised by an Anglocentric literary perspective suggesting, like Macfarlane and Robinson, that something of a relationship to the land needs righting in the English tongue. Hence *Archipelago*'s first issue has Mark Williams writing sensitively of the textures of the Gaelic language (79-96)

and Roger Deakin giving a vivid account of working with the qualities of wood (39-61), as if to commend both to us for greater appreciation.

The spatial metaphor of the archipelago with its fluid and neutral polycentrism is a very useful way of thinking about place as progressive. It is open to the possibility of a kind of cosmopolitanism whilst at the same time being wary of top-down impositions of power. But perhaps what is most important about the term is that it emerges from a careful engagement with the specific geographical territory on which it is based. I mean it is ‘grounded’, in the sense that Arif Dirlik uses the term in relation to place. Place, as he sees it ‘suggests groundedness from below, and a flexible and porous boundary around it, without closing out the extralocal, all the way to the global’ (155). Dirlik is careful not to essentialise place in his definition of ‘grounded’ by retaining that ‘flexible and porous boundary’. Grounded is not the same as rooted. It involves an ongoing engagement, creative and inventive like the ‘Counter-Desecration Phrasebook’. And it is from a sense of this groundedness that the term ‘archipelagic’ was first used of this ‘New Nature Writing’ by Robert Macfarlane in a review of the first edition of McNeillie’s journal.

‘Landscape art’ is blandly tepid. ‘Nature writing’ is sapless and text-specific. ‘Pastoral’ summons swains and greenswards. ‘Environmental’ has become gummed by politics. Perhaps the adjective ‘archipelagic’ might serve, catching as it does at imaginings that are chthonic, marine, elemental and felt (2007a: 13).

I am not sure that being ‘gummed by politics’ is at all a bad thing today and it should be remembered that the term ‘archipelagic’, recalling as it does those devolutionary moves across the UK, is probably, hopefully, ‘gummed by politics’ as well. However, I’d like to think for a moment about those adjectives, ‘chthonic, marine, elemental and felt.’ ‘Chthonic’, of the earth; ‘marine’, of the sea; ‘elemental’, physical, actual, not spiritual or figurative; and ‘felt’, of the human body and mind. They point us toward a very specific kind of geography, one pared right back, one that is distinctly affective and psychological but one that is also deeply ‘grounded’ in the sense that Dirlik means above. The term ‘chthonic’ is particularly useful here for its simultaneous geological and mythological register, both empirical and imaginative at the same time. In talking about the geopolitical space of Britain and Ireland, ‘archipelago’ seems to ground the attention in precisely the same way as does the terminology in the Lewisians’ ‘Phrasebook’. It grounds in a way that fosters creativity, the making of meanings. It looks a little closer and responds a little more imaginatively. It

develves a particular geographical and poetic territory from the rather conveniently united kingdom of ‘nature’.

In *Facing the Ocean: the Atlantic and its People*, Barry Cunliffe explores the possibility of an Atlantic culture along the western outer edge of Europe. In this framework there are two key factors for the development of the landscape we are discussing: the first around 6500BC when the sea level rose and Britain and Ireland became a distinct archipelago; the second stretching between 9000-4000BC during which time the summer temperature rose from 9°C to 18°C, from a subarctic to a temperate climate (112). Such changes made the archipelago both habitable and independent, allowing for the development of its own distinct cultures. However, Cunliffe goes on to explore ways in which the islands, though separated from each other shared ‘innumerable routes – corridors of communication – which allowed people, goods, and, no less important, knowledge to flow’ (39).

In the nineteenth century, the discovery of the same motifs in Breton, Cornish and Welsh folk tales began to draw attention to this possibility. A number of key archaeological advances throughout the twentieth century have also brought to our attention the ancient interconnectedness of the archipelago. For example O.G.S. Crawford’s study of related Early Bronze Age settlements (1912), Cyril Fox’s study of trans-peninsular sea routes (1932) and Gordon Childe’s images of the grey coast of north-west Scotland as ‘bright with Neolithic Argonauts’ (1946) have developed a picture of these islands as culturally intertwined rather than one in which they are isolated from one another (Cunliffe 16-17). We begin to see an archipelagic culture emerging here that is prior to, and independent of, the centralised English monarchical rule alluded to in such a title as The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Such a spatial configuration that incorporates separateness and connection in the same gesture suggests networks that can be both local and cosmopolitan at the same time. The idea of a pre-nationalist (even pre-historic) geography appeals today in a search for what David Matless has observed in Macfarlane as a ‘post-nationalist’ sense of space, or at least as a space that is undergoing something of a crisis in terms of its multiple national configurations (2009: 181).

Kathleen Jamie’s journey to the chambered cairn Maes Howe with its twelfth century Viking graffiti on Orkney’s West Mainland in *Findings*, Robert Macfarlane’s fascination with the *peregrini* of Ynnis Enli in *The Wild Places*, Tim Robinson’s chapters on the mysterious clifftop fortification of Dun Aonghasa in *Stones of Aran*, Richard Mabey’s descent into Grime’s Graves in *Nature Cure* and even John Burnside’s ‘Four Quartets’

written on the coasts of Norway, Scotland and Brittany are just a few examples of this contemporary literature's appeal to a very old and pre-national understanding of the archipelagic space that resonates with today's post-national anxieties. It feels inappropriate to call this 'Nature Writing', being as it is more closely concerned with the mutual inflection of human and non-human in the idea of place. But these are not the bounded, static renderings of place that Massey warns us against either; each of these in their own way tells a story of mobility, migration and change. They suggest that place and the local can be rethought along the lines of an interconnected network of influence and not dominated by centralised, nationalist power structures. In fact, in some instances, as I will go on to show, it is precisely the nationalist renderings of place that occlude its international connections.

Connecting Place to Place

When Tim Robinson moved to Aran in 1972, the first project he put his mind to was the making of a map of the islands. Tourists were always asking the island post-mistress for one but the only available were the six inches to a mile Ordnance Survey maps, then 75 years out of date and, one can imagine, not too readily available at that. The job was no mean task though. There were numerous disparities between the Ordnance Survey and the local knowledge and oral placelore that he was learning from conversations with his neighbours. Patrick Curry has called this process of collecting and writing down such an extensive oral record 'a kind of Edenic naming in reverse', a recovery of a living but unwritten world beneath the English language that had been imposed upon it (1995: 13). Robinson soon came to realise that the Ordnance Survey, bound up as it was with a nineteenth century English colonial project of administration, had handled the island's place names 'with a carelessness that reveals contempt' betraying the fact that 'rents and rates came before any other aspect of life' and that to the surveyors the 'language of the peasant was nothing more than a subversive muttering behind the landlord's back' (Robinson 1996: 3). He learned Gaelic and spent his days talking with the islanders, walking and scrutinising every inch of the island and began to wonder if it was possible 'to make amends' for this 'historical insult' (1996: 3).

Robinson has called his work a kind of 'rescue archaeology', a term that seems to look ahead to Finlay MacLeod's 'Counter-Desecration Phrasebook'. In fact he was, in 1987, awarded a Ford European Conservation Award by the Mayor of Madrid for both his mapping and writing on Aran. What is interesting though is that at times it was precisely the global

connections of the island that had been lost under a colonial geography. One particular bay on the east of the main island had been misnamed, or Anglicised, as ‘Illaunaur’ on the OS maps which rendered it in print completely meaningless, other than perhaps retaining a echo of the word ‘oileán’, island, which it was not. In fact ‘Illaunaur’ had been a mis-hearing of the Gaelic ‘Gleann na nDeor’, or ‘Glen of Tears’, from the Biblical ‘Vale of Tears’ (*Psalms* 84: 6). Robinson explains the historical importance of the name:

In the days leading up to the famine when there was a lot of emigration from the islands, those emigrating would get a fishing boat to take them over to Connemara and they’d walk 30 miles along the Connemara coast into Galway, where they’d wait for one of the famine ships heading for America. These ships used to sail out past the Aran Islands and very frequently had to wait in the shelter of the islands while a gale blew itself out. So they would be stationary just a few hundred yards off shore from this place, Gleann na nDeor, and people would come down to that little glen where they could wave to their loved ones but not talk to them. So the name had immense resonances and told you an immense amount about the personal griefs behind the statistics of the famine (*Personal Interview*).

What is disregarded by the colonial mapmakers as perhaps obscurely local, in fact, contains within it a narrative that reaches out eastward to a Biblical instance of intertextuality and, more importantly, westward to a history of transatlantic migration. Place and the local in an archipelagic literature are about recovering the particularities of a territory which encourage conversation with other locations as a part of the very progressive rethinking of the place itself. Groundedness, in this case, opens place up.

The first conference on Tim Robinson’s work was held in September 2011 to celebrate the publication of the final book in his Connemara trilogy 25 years on from the publication of the first volume of *Stones of Aran*. It was organised by the Atlantic Archipelagos Research Project, a collaborative project run between the University of Exeter, the National University of Ireland in Galway and University College Dublin. The project website claims to ‘take an interdisciplinary view on how Britain’s post-devolution state inflects the formation of post-split Welsh, Scottish and English identities in the context of Ireland’s own experience of partition and self-rule’ (‘Homepage’). Robinson’s work has served as something of a first case study for this project in rethinking the cultural identity or the cultural identities of this ‘Atlantic Archipelago’. What is so crucially important about his work in this study is the way in which place is so carefully grounded. Such care and such commitment to place have won him, and the places he writes about, an international audience now. John Elder, for example, has published an essay in *Archipelago 6* which considers the ‘dialogue’ between the ‘landforms’ of his own Hogback Ridge in the Green Mountains of

Vermont and Robinson's Roundstone Bog in Connemara (31). Such a dialogue seems archipelagic in that it seeks to explore grounded but hitherto unconsidered resonances between two places seemingly isolated from one another.

In *The Wild Places* Robert Macfarlane compares his method of research and writing to the fifteenth century mapping practice of an 'isolarion': 'the type of map that describes specific areas in detail, but does not provide a clarifying overview of how these places are related to one another' (2007b: 88). Freed from the top-down administration of imperial or nationalist mapping practices which endeavour to fix, measure and organise places in relation to a centre and in relation to one another, the polycentrism of an isolarion is, today, quite a subversive form of map that seems to isolate its parts. However, isolated as its places are from one another in terms of their spatial configuration, the grounded care with which the qualities of each part are managed throw up fresh possibilities for connection and organisation such as John Elder suggests through his dialogue with Robinson's Connemara. The metaphor again is of islands reaching out to one another. Later in *The Wild Places* Macfarlane returns to the idea of the isolarion as he arranges before him all the found objects he has collected from all the places he has visited.

The evening I got back from the Hope Valley, I took down my stones from their storm beach on the shelf, and laid them out on my desk, adding my gritstone lozenge to the pattern. I began to move them around. First I arranged them into a long line of their finding, with the earliest to the left and most recent to the right. Then I moved them into order of their ages, as best I could: Cambrian, Ordovician, Silurian, Devonian, Permian, Jurassic [...] Then I dispersed them into a rough shape of the relative places of their findings, so that they made an approximate mineral map of the archipelago itself, and my journeys within it (2007b: 314).

This is a spatial order liberated from central organisation around a distant colonial or national authority and it reveals new, imaginative and progressive ways of connecting up its disparate parts. Far from becoming divided and isolated, such an archipelagic configuration encourages the play of possibilities for relationships offered by a network. It also encourages recognition of certain movements from the bottom up to challenge top-down administration. Macfarlane continues:

My journeys had revealed to me new logics of connection between discrete parts of Britain and Ireland, beyond the system of motorway and flight paths. There were geological links: tor answering to tor, flint to flint, sandstone to sandstone, granite giving way to mud [...] The connections made by all these forces - rocks, creatures, weathers, people - had laid new patterns upon the country, as though it had been

swilled in a developing fluid, and unexpected images had emerged, ghostly figures showing through the mesh of roads and cities (314).

‘Ghosts are to be created, not found,’ suggests Robinson at the end of a long chapter on Aran’s kelp makers, reminding us that for all our superstition and felt intimacy, place is not a sheer object to be written about but an ongoing social collaboration (2008: 211).

Macfarlane’s ‘new logics’ are geological, arboreal, fluvial and coastal but they are also distinctly human at the same time. The very notion of centre and periphery is gone in favour of something much more fluid and complex, a progressive but grounded understanding of place that is interested in relationships between and across points on a network other than those dictated by infrastructure.

The spatial configuration of an archipelago, in a similar movement between the locally grounded and the outwardly resonant, suggests islands with a strong sense of cultural identity surrounded by an ocean that, rather than isolating them, connects them to the world beyond, bringing and taking visitors with the coming and going of the tides. Island life is distinguished by a heightened awareness both of autonomy and of the importance of connection to other islands. I have referred to Lewis and to the Aran Islands here, but the beauty of an archipelagic framework is that it needn’t be islands alone that fit this description. All places are in a sense like islands in space, remembering Massey’s call for the boundaries of place to be considered ‘open and porous’ (5). Such a framework offers a polycentrism that responds to contemporary uncertainties surrounding national identity, but it also empowers communities in their efforts toward, not just the conservation, but also the creation, of distinctive cultures of place. It is a framework on the scale of the local but with potential to connect up into the global in such a way that remains grounded and protective of its complexity. Radical new social and cultural formations are being called for in response to these slipping scales of the local, the national and the global. What I hope to have shown here is a way in which a handful of writers today might be seen to be responding to this call in a body of literature that takes conservation to be a call for creative and progressive thinking.

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ⁱ Lupfer has even suggested, following Lawrence Buell's appendix to *The Environmental Imagination*, that the term 'Nature Writing' in the United States might, in fact, owe more of a debt to certain 'elite literary institutions whose influence strongly determined its form, its audience, and the cultural capital it represented' than has previously been thought, perhaps even more, for Lupfer, than to the fact that readers were 'concerned about the natural world' (2003: vii).

ⁱⁱ There is one much earlier use of the term in Scotland in the *Dundee Courier and Argus*, in a review of a translated Norwegian story *Little Grey, the Pony of Nordfjord* by Jonas Lie that does seem to suggest that the term was in use and had a similar meaning - of a faithful depiction of a natural scene - that it had in America: 'The story is natural throughout, a specimen of nature writing, a true picture, whose lights and shadows can be understood, and it cannot fail to prove attractive' (Anon. 1873).

ⁱⁱⁱ All email correspondence is being collected in a digital archive by the Bodleian Library.