An Archipelagic Environment:
Re-Writing the British and Irish Landscape, 1972-2012

Submitted by Jos James Owen Smith to the University of Exeter as a thesis for
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This thesis explores a contemporary literary movement that has been called ‘the new nature writing’, framing it in its wider historical and cultural context of the last forty years. Drawing on recent developments in cultural geography, it explores the way such terms as ‘landscape’ and ‘place’ have been engaged with and reinterpreted in a diverse project of literary re-mapping in the British and Irish archipelago. It argues that the rise of environmentalism since the late 1960s has changed and destabilised the way the British and Irish relate to the world around them. It is, however, concerned with challenging the term ‘nature writing’ and argues that the literature of landscape and place of the last forty years is not solely concerned with ‘nature’, a term that has come under some degree of scrutiny recently. It sets out an argument for reframing this movement as an ‘archipelagic literature’ in order to incorporate the question of community. In understanding the present uncertainties that pervade the questions around landscape and place today it also considers the effects of such political changes as the partial devolution of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland on the British and Irish relationship to the land. The literature that it takes as its subject often explores the way personal and communal senses of identity have found a renewed focus in a critical localism in opposition to more footloose forms of globalisation. Through a careful negotiation of Marxist and phenomenological readings of landscape, it offers an overview of what is a considerable body of literature now and what is developing into one of the most consistent and defined literary movements of the twenty-first century.
# Contents

Introduction .................................................................................................................................................. 5

**Part 1 Walking Out**

Introduction: Sweeney’s Exile .................................................................................................................. 33
Chapter 1: Deframing the Archipelago: From Landscape to Narrative .................................................. 39
Chapter 2: Enchanted Crossings: Towards a Politics of Intimacy .......................................................... 56

**Part 2 Findings**

Introduction: An Unusual Accommodation .............................................................................................. 73
Chapter 3: ‘The Unnameable Archipelago’: Strange New Things ............................................................ 78
Chapter 4: ‘Our Garden North’: Grounding the Map .............................................................................. 97

**Part 3 Writing**

Introduction: A Literary Tension ............................................................................................................. 114
Chapter 5: The Paradox of an Environmental Genre .............................................................................. 119
Chapter 6: ‘Tawny Grammar’: Imagining an Archipelagic Aesthetic ................................................... 132

Conclusion .................................................................................................................................................. 144
Bibliography .............................................................................................................................................. 150

Appendix 1
20 Poems .................................................................................................................................................. 160

Appendix 2
A Step Towards the Earth: An Interview with Tim Robinson ................................................................. 178

Appendix 3
An Interview with Sue Clifford .................................................................................................................. 187
Appendix 4
Email from Kathleen Jamie................................................................. 192

Appendix 5
Email from Jean Sprackland............................................................... 194
In what follows I will offer an introduction to the critical framework and methodology of this PhD thesis before moving on to a more extended mapping of the period under study. I will begin by reviewing a body of popular criticism as a way of marking out the territory of a literary movement of the last five years or so. Once I have done this I will explain and justify what might seem an unusual approach to a study in English literature, taking as it does a theoretical perspective that might be more at home in cultural geography and the social sciences. Because of the subject matter of this thesis though, its emphasis on the non-fiction essay and its geographical subject matter, I hope it will appear clear that such a methodology is the most appropriate to understand the particular literary movement that I have undertaken to look at.

This thesis offers one of the first book-length critical studies of what has been called ‘the new nature writing’, but that I have chosen to describe more broadly and, as I hope to show, more accurately, as an archipelagic literature. This is a body of work comprised, generally speaking, of non-fiction essays concerned with landscape and place by such authors as Robert Macfarlane, Kathleen Jamie, Tim Robinson, Richard Mabey, Roger Deakin, Andrew McNeillie and a whole host of others. I will also be referring to a small amount of poetry – Alice Oswald in particular – that is preoccupied with the same kinds of landscapes and places. There are a number of reasons for resisting the name ‘new nature writing’ that I shall outline later on in this introduction, but the first of these is that the authors that I shall be writing about are not limited to those who come under this description. The literary movement known as ‘the new nature writing’ began to be noticed in the popular presses from 2007 onwards and has had regular coverage since. Madeleine Bunting identified what she called a ‘new genre of writing’ in 2007 in a piece reviewing the work of Mark Cocker. She hesitates to call it ‘nature writing’ because (and I shall be making a similar argument myself) ‘what makes these books so compelling – and important – is that they put centre stage the interconnections between nature and human beings’ (‘We Need Attentiveness’). A number of such like reviews noticed this trend but were more inclined to go with the title ‘nature writing’ (Moran; Moss). In 2008 Jason Cowley edited an edition of Granta devoted to what he called for the first time ‘the new nature writing’ (emphasis added Cowley 2). Madeleine Bunting was herself published by Granta and in some sense the movement at this time seemed to be being steered by this publishing company. Jim Perrin has admonished Jason Cowley for calling this movement ‘new’ suggesting that there is nothing that would mark this as ‘a radical departure from the practice and preoccupations of its antecedents’ whom he feels are not properly acknowledged, or even properly read, by Granta’s authors (‘The Condry Lecture’).

In 2008 Kathleen Jamie also published her quite scathing review of Robert Macfarlane’s *The Wild Places* in the *London Review of Books*, prompting a certain critical reassessment of the terms and traditions upon which such a genre calls (‘A Lone Enraptured Male’). Boyd Tonkin, also in 2008, published an article which was a short survey of contemporary British nature writing and was representative of the
growing wariness towards how ‘nature’ is represented in this particular literary genre, suggesting that ‘an innocent quest for the beauty of wild things’ in this ‘densely-peopled heartland of vandalistic industry’ is, and should be, a politically complicated pursuit (‘Call of the Wild’). In 2009 the movement began to receive notice in academic journals as well with David Matless’s paper ‘Nature Voices’. This paper offered a critical review of an event in Cambridge organised by Macfarlane, attended by Richard Mabey and that also served as the launch of the literary journal Archipelago. Since then there have been two other academic papers, similarly by geographers like Matless.

John Wylie’s paper on Tim Robinson identifies him in relation to, though diverging from a ‘particular narrative arc [...] of loss, yearning and reconnection’ in the work of Robert Macfarlane, Roger Deakin, Kathleen Jamie and Richard Mabey (‘Dwelling and Displacement’ 31). Stephen Daniels and Hayden Lorimer have also noted the movement and have offered some more up to date and incisive commentary. Their introduction to a 2012 issue of Cultural Geographies opens the lens beyond the more sentimental endorsement of ‘nature writing’ suggesting that ‘the newest examples of writing bear witness to landscapes and environments that exist, after nature’ (‘Until the End of Days’ 4). In an interesting move they consider the work of Iain Sinclair in the same genre, something unthinkable to the earlier newspaper reviewers. Stephen E. Hunt drew a similar analogy when he coined the term ‘psychoecology’ in a paper for Green Letters in 2008 (‘The Emergence of Psychoecology’). Daniels and Lorimer though announce ‘the arrival of writers more avowedly angry and angular than their forebears’ who suggest ‘the formulation of an alternative environmental aesthetic, written in a seething, scabrous spirit, that is dissenting and knowingly contrarian’ (Ibid 5). In just a few years then, the genre has seen quite an intense change in the way it has been framed, from the sentimental to the ‘scabrous’.

I hope to steer my way through this conflicted terrain to offer a way of understanding this movement that sets it, on the one hand, within its historical context, and on the other, within an appropriate geographical theoretical context. The thesis is divided into three parts of an introduction and two chapters each followed by a short collection of some fifteen poems. In Parts 1 and 2 of the thesis I will draw on theories of landscape and place that have emerged from cultural geography over the last ten years or so. I will do this because the authors take these topics as their subject matter, and because the nature of that subject requires that they work across the disciplines of geography and literature. The movement itself is more alert than has often been recognised to the complicated critical debates that draw discussions of ‘nature’ out into more political discussions of landscape and place. Parts 1 and 2 will position this literary movement in relation to these critical debates while Part 3 will offer a slightly shorter and more purely literary examination of genre and aesthetics.

What I will do with this introductory chapter though is situate the movement within a wider cultural context than has been acknowledged either in the popular press or in academic publications so far. In doing this I hope also to introduce my reasons for describing it as an archipelagic literature. I will begin with an examination of a shift in the way the British and Irish landscape was understood in the arts in the 1970s and 80s. The rise of conservation movements in response to a growing awareness of
environmental damage meant a re-evaluation of our relationship to landscape and place and a political commitment to challenge old ways of representing non-metropolitan areas. Certain pressures being felt at this time also complicated such a literature’s relationship to its own generic antecedents in a way that has not been fully understood yet. This may have been the cause of certain recent disputes, misunderstandings and conflicts between the more enchanted and the more disillusioned of its authors. (This will be discussed at greater length in Part 1 as well.) I hope to show that certain significant projects emerging out of the debates around landscape and place in the 1970s and 80s began to plant the seeds that would grow into this archipelagic literature of the early twenty-first century.

This introduction will account for a number of ways in which the literature of landscape and place has been diverging for several decades now from certain conventions and traditions. With fresh eyes and fresh legs it is today engaged in a project of re-mapping and re-writing with an urgency that is unique to the turn of the twenty-first century and its climate of environmental uncertainty and crisis. I will focus on three key events, demonstrating how they are in fact interlinked by a narrative that has really reached its climax today in what is now a very rich cultural context. The first of these events is in 1972 when the author Tim Robinson left behind him a successful career as an artist in London and moved to the Aran Islands. I will discuss the unprecedented collision of modernist and rural cultural streams at the heart of this move before considering another collision of exactly the same type back in London. This second event is when, just a few years later, members of Friends of the Earth formed the arts and environmental charity Common Ground, an organisation that began to build a new culture of literary and artistic activism associated with rural culture. It is from this group that some of the key authors that this thesis will address have drawn an important influence. The third event comes much later but really marks the significance of the movement today. In 2007 Andrew McNeillie launched his literary journal Archipelago in a quite overt attempt at culturally remapping the islands known as Britain and Ireland. I will discuss the impact that the 1997 partial devolution of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland has had on an already uncertain relationship to landscape and place in Britain. Emerging out of this is what has been called an archipelagic culture and criticism that tries to see beneath Anglocentric paradigms in the study of literature. It attempts to ask more pertinent questions about the flow of people and ideas between the multitude of nations, regions and locales that co-exist across this archipelago, each with their own unique identity.

‘Archipelagic’ criticism traditionally has the meaning of criticism that looks at the fertile ‘criss-crossing’ of authors or influences across national and regional boundaries (Longley, Scholarcast). However, following Andrew McNeillie, I have adapted the archipelagic perspective to an environmental agenda, asking what kinds of lines of communication and influence are opened up by a geopolitical space stripped not only of its Anglocentric but also of its metropolitan, and even at times anthropocentric, bias more generally. Such a move intensifies a feeling for the local, but not the local alone, rather a whole network of locales suddenly available for arrangement in multiple and fluid alternative formations not centred on any one metropolitan seat of cultural authority. In short, it encourages us to see the landscapes that we
live in as a metaphorical and very literal archipelago, a rich and complex ecosystem of islands on the Atlantic edge with diverse cultures that are often as vulnerable to desecration as the range of natural habitats themselves. I will argue that such a refreshed perspective on our environment helps to ground an understanding of the ways in which the landscapes and places of the archipelago are being revisited and rewritten in a huge and progressive project of literary remapping that is currently underway. I will begin though, as many tales of exploration do, in the heart of the capital city itself.

**From the Centre to the Periphery: Timothy Drever to Tim Robinson**

On 2nd February 1967 artists Richard Long and Hamish Fulton gathered a group of fellow art students outside Central St. Martins College of Art and Design in London. The two had been through a very unconventional few years of tutorship under Peter Kardia, Garth Evans and others, now famous for their outlandish and experimental teaching techniques. Long writes in his journal:

> We announced we were going to walk (at a normal pace) [...], out of London until sunset. A few didn’t start. We went along Oxford Street to the Edgware Road – the Old Roman road of Watling Street – which we followed in a more-or-less straight line north-west out of London. A few more people dropped out along the way, leaving about six of us at the end. We had no preconceived idea of where we would end up; in fact at sunset we found ourselves in a field, not lost, but also not knowing exactly where we were. The first place we came out to was Radlett, so we caught a train back from Radlett station (quoted in Wallis 42-3).

At first glance it looks like the kind of eccentric idea we might ordinarily expect from London art students in the late 1960s. However, we can also read this walk as a performance of a certain rising mode of thought that was trying to break free of the city, of what Raymond Williams has called ‘a persistent intellectual hegemony of the metropolis, in its command of the most serious publishing houses, newspapers and magazines, and intellectual institutions’ (*Politics of Modernism* 38). This is also the first example of the walk as artwork for Long and Fulton, and those that didn’t even start the walk are testament to how odd a thing this was to call art. Clarrie Wallis has gone so far as to describe this moment as a ‘shift in consciousness [...] the end of Greenbergian modernism and the beginning of a new era’ (*Making Tracks* 38).

In the 1960s modernism was returning to the London art world reconstituted by American intellectuals like Clement Greenberg who, since 1939, had been defending abstraction and the avant-garde. For Greenberg, abstraction narrowed and raised art ‘to the expression of an absolute’ in which ‘subject matter or content’ had become ‘something to be avoided like a plague’. This led, he suggested, to ‘free and autonomous’ work, pure painting or sculpture, ‘valid solely on its own terms’ (*Avant-Garde and Kitsch* 531). But Long and Fulton were part of a new generation who had been encouraged to think beyond this to the possibility of more socially engaged work. Wallis goes on: ‘It coincided with a turning point away from technological optimism to preoccupations with ecology, conservation and a crisis of the 1970s as the British were uneasily forced to face their post-industrial and post-colonial future’ (38).
Long and Fulton’s walk north-west out of London was a walk away from the traditional, centralised metropolitan art world, but it was also a performative turning of their backs on the capital and the south-east as an administrative, economic and colonial centre of authority. The choice to take that ‘Old Roman road of Watling Street’ as their route shows something of a desire to search beneath the modern skin of the city for a world prior to the one they were surrounded by in the late 60s and early 70s. Watling Street is in fact not a London or even a Roman road but a trackway of the ancient Britons that connects Canterbury, St. Albans and Chester where sections run on into Wales and Scotland and was even an old route by the time the Romans paved it (Ditchfield, *English Villages* 44-5).

It was in the late 60s that Tim Robinson, before he was an author or a cartographer, was living in London and practising as a visual artist under the name Timothy Drever. At this stage in his career Robinson straddles these two artistic eras. His painting had been selected by Greenberg himself at a John Moores Biennial in Liverpool, something that led to a number of exhibitions and a growing interest in his work to the extent that you can still find one of his prints in the Tate collection today. But like Long and Fulton, Robinson found himself feeling a growing dissatisfaction with the association of the art world with metropolitan life and has described ‘the long abstracted country walks I used to take at that time, orienting myself by glimpses of the spires of Kilburn, Cricklewood and Neasden’ all in fact districts that butt on to that same ancient trackway of Watling Street (*The View from the Horizon* 55). Like Long and Fulton’s navigation by ancient trackway, Robinson’s navigation by church spire (and, as he suggests elsewhere, by the sun) speaks of that same search for an older, topographic orientation, suspicious of the modern urban planning that had somehow besieged it (Dillon 34).

For an exhibition in the summer of 1969, he and the artist Peter Joseph published an essay in the London-based journal *Studio International*. In it they voiced their dissent at an art world bound up with commodity fetishism, suggesting that this ‘increasingly isolates the artist from the public’, channelling work ‘at best into a museum, at worst into an investor’s cellar’, leaving the artists themselves to a ‘comfortable enervation’ (Drever and Joseph 255). They set about challenging this by holding their exhibition outdoors in the grounds of Kenwood House. ‘Consideration of the environment is essential,’ they declared, ‘the scale and dynamics of the work must relate to the area in which it is shown. Thus it seems natural that ‘environmental art’ should be not just the latest fad of the art-world, but a bridge into the real world’ (255). Robinson’s own exhibition piece even required the interaction of the public – moving flat geometrical shapes set down on the lawn – to bring it alive.

On the one hand this ‘environmental art’ was not then what we might expect it to be today. It was simply about finding, quite concretely, new environments for art. However, the decision to search for a new environment does speak, like Long and Fulton’s walk, of a frustration with the prevailing order, with that ‘intellectual hegemony of the metropolis’ that Williams describes, and particularly with modernism’s waning political antagonism (38). Alan Sinfield reminds us how easily Greenberg’s defence of the autonomous freedom of the abstract expressionist was co-opted into an ideology threading through a number of C.I.A.-funded European exhibitions that served as propaganda in the Cold War.
One of these exhibitions Robinson in fact visited when he was living in Vienna (Robinson, *My Time in Space* 40-2). By bridging the art-world and the real world, or rather by making that bridge out of the art-world and ‘into the real world’, reconnecting the gallery with wider, more democratically public, environments, and with questioning the social and economic implications of setting a work in a metropolitan gallery there are in fact the beginnings of what we might call today an ecological thought, in so far as it attains to a level of social conscience. Felix Guattari, for example, has suggested that the perspective of social relations is as crucial to a sustainable ecology as care for the natural world (27-30).

In his essay ‘Environments’ in that same edition of *Studio International* in 1969, the performance artist Stuart Brisley asks: ‘[t]o what extent does the artist maintain responsibility for the implications implicit within his artistic processes beyond production?’ suggesting that the commoditisation of art ought not to be something that the artist passively disapproves of while continuing to feed (267). For Brisley, as perhaps for Robinson at that time, ‘environmental work specifies that the artist take a positive position in relation to his own behaviour as it effects other people within the social and physical context’ (268). Environmental art at this time was a social rather than an ecological movement, though Robinson has conceded that there was also ‘the beginning of more of an artistic consciousness of the natural world and its fragility’ (Personal Interview 1).

Between Long and Fulton’s walk out of the city and Robinson’s outdoor exhibition, on the 18th March 1967, the Torrey Canyon had run aground on rocks between Land’s End and the Scilly Isles spilling 100,000 tonnes of crude oil into the Atlantic, and contaminating 70 miles of Cornish beaches in what Maurice Foley, the then Undersecretary for the Navy called ‘the biggest problem of its kind ever faced by any nation’ (‘On This Day’ BBC News). This incident is frequently cited as something of an ecological awakening nationally together with the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* a little earlier in 1962, a book warning the public of the dangers of DDT and other pesticides (Sheail 222). 1971 would see the first Greenpeace boat sail out across the Gulf of Alaska toward the United States nuclear testing site in the Aleutian Island and the founding of Friends of the Earth England, Wales and Ireland with the dumping of 1500 glass bottles on the doorstep of Schweppes in London, who insisted on using non-returnable bottles (Weyler).

It is in this climate of doubt and disillusionment, but also of activism, that in 1972 Robinson would leave London behind him and follow that north-westerly line of Watling Street all the way out to the Aran Islands in the mouth of Galway bay. This would serve as the ‘bridge into the real world’ that he was looking for, and we might consider such a move as a historically and culturally significant performance like Long and Fulton’s walk: the modernist artist stepping off the map of the metropolitan avant-garde to live and write as an active member of the remote and rural community of a former colony, in effect to search out that ‘positive position’ that modernism was becoming increasingly cut off from. But for Robinson, the commitment was total. He would not catch a train home at the end of the day, nor would he ever come back to live in England again.
In the first few years of living on the island, Robinson attended an exhibition of Richard Long’s in Amsterdam and found on the poster one of Long’s sculptures photographed on Árainn in 1975. It seems that Richard Long had also spent a summer on Árainn but they do not seem to have met at that time (Kirkpatrick). He also writes of himself and his wife catching sight of one of Long’s sculptures from a plane window, ‘an instantly recognisable mark that told us who had visited the island in our absence’ (Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage 44). In fact he actually gets into a dispute with Long when Long is ‘aghast’ to find two of his stone-works marked on Robinson’s map of the island (qutd in Robinson Connemara: Listening to the Wind 113). ‘[T]he essence of his works,’ Robinson concedes, ‘is what he brings home to the artworld: a photographic image in many cases’ which serves as ‘the entrypoint to a concept, the idea of a journey’ (115). That may be all very well but Robinson had found himself standing among the relics of these ‘concepts’ making a very detailed map, a fitting portrait somehow of his early years on Árainn and his relationship to an artworld that had been thinking along the same lines.

It is also a fitting portrait with which to begin this thesis. Tim Robinson is the author whose life and work has been, by far, the most committed to the project of re-writing the landscapes of that small part of the archipelago in which he and his wife have spent half their lives and his move to the Aran Islands suggests a beginning to the period I intend to explore here. Those cultural pressures he felt as an artist in London at that time leading up to his decision to leave in 1972 are precisely the cultural pressures that have propelled the literature of landscape across the British and Irish archipelago in a historically unique way since. They demonstrate a will to become socially engaged, to make that ‘bridge to the real world’; they demonstrate an awareness of environmental concerns; and they explore a landscape and a community of people in the wake of a failed imperial rule. It is these factors that separate the literature I will be dealing with here from the long tradition that it is otherwise also affiliated with.

A broad view of the genre of what has been called ‘nature writing’ since the end of the nineteenth century ought to begin with Gilbert White’s Natural History of Selborne (1789) as the first book of its kind to take to the fields, challenging the inherited book knowledge in favour of minute empirical observations and setting aside the demands of literary tradition out of fidelity to the living landscape. It was White who made the famous claim that ‘that district produces the greatest variety which is the most examined’, a claim that has at its heart a deep ethics of patience, attention and humility, the influence of which can be felt in and all of the authors about whom I will be writing (60). However, I hope to explain in this introduction why I separate the landscape writing since 1972 from the longer tradition of ‘nature writing’. On the one hand, drawing lines of historical periodicity is always an interpretive and subjective act and by doing so I am, to an extent, creating a period as much as describing it. On the other hand, the cultural forces that took Robinson out to the Aran Islands describe certain significant changes that are worthy of mention.

Peculiar to this move of Robinson’s is also an unlikely alignment of the modernist and the rural traditions. Robinson is emerging from the tradition of the metropolitan avant-garde, and is an artist with
distinctly modernist leanings. This is a crucially important fact in plotting the rise of an environmental literary tradition from the 1970s onward. It is all too easy to see the literature that this thesis is concerned with as stemming solely from a tradition that is opposed to modernism, an Anglocentric rural literature which conflates nature, rural life and England under the myth of F.R. Leavis’s ‘organic community’. As Jeremy Burchardt has described, this is a conservative view of the rural that, more often than not is focused on the chalk downland of the south-east for its vision of England, a vision that all too often ‘progressively eliminated conflict, modernity and tension from the field of vision’ (75). Robinson’s emergence, as one of the most significant landscape writers of the end of the twentieth century, from the modernist tradition, problematises and presents a disjuncture to the English rural tradition that it is difficult to explain without considering how these two traditions might have begun to stumble onto the same ground. To suggest that this environmental literary and artistic tradition, since 1972, emerged solely from modernism would be false too, forgetting that the High Modernist phase of the 1920s had, of course, faced any work with a sniff of the provincial or parochial with the utmost hostility. This too jars with the commitment that Robinson and others feel toward the places that they write in and about. In a sense, what is unique about the moment of 1972 onward is the way in which it becomes possible for the modernist and conservative-rural traditions to fall in under the same politically ecological masthead, but with both demonstrating some degree of compromise.

Alexandra Harris’s *Romantic Moderns* is a book that complicates this opposition with what she calls ‘a modern English renaissance’ of the 1930s, looking, with particularly illuminating detail, at the conflicts between abstract and landscape traditions in the work of John Piper, Paul Nash and others (10). The problem, for Harris, is that the authors and artists that she examines are interested in a sense of national identity, something that was quite at odds with the modernist disavowal of nationalism in favour of international, global, universal forms, a radical liberty that ‘involved the abolition of roots’ (10-11). Harris sets out to investigate whether, while the battles for modern art and modern society were being fought in Paris and in Spain, John Betjeman and John Piper’s turn to the English landscape was ‘a retreat from contemporary affairs or a particular kind of locally oriented engagement’ (12). ‘[W]hat can read as a sign of retreat,’ she argues, ‘can also, perhaps, be read as an expression of responsibility – towards places, people and histories too valuable and too vulnerable to go missing from art’ (12-14). She makes a very convincing case for the bridging of a sense of territorial responsibility and modernism’s experiments with abstraction. She describes Piper’s discovery of the Norman carvings in the church font at Toller Fratrum in Dorset and how he saw in them the primitivism, and ‘all the ‘bigness and strangeness’ of a portrait by Picasso’ (7); she describes Paul Nash’s declaration that Stonehenge ‘could be read as abstract art’ and Henry Moore wishing for a reproduction of it in his garden (211); she even describes an unlikely

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1 I have chosen to follow Tony Pinkney in distinguishing between ‘Modernism as a specific historical phenomenon (located, say, between 1880 and 1930)’ and given in upper-case, and ‘modernism as a general, often ideological, theory of what it means to be ‘modern’ given in lower-case (Williams, *Politics of Modernism* 28).

2 The example Burchardt gives of such writing is the post-war novels of Constance Holme.
collaboration between John Betjeman and the photographer and director of the New Bauhaus in Chicago, László Moholy-Nagly to produce *University Chest* (1937), a literary exploration of Oxford (48).

However, the myth of nationalism seems unshakeable from the landscape painting and literature of the 1930s and, of course, only intensifies with the onset of the Second World War. We ought to be wary of such a pressure. As Arif Dirlik has suggested, nationalism, 'a product itself of modernization, has sought to homogenize the societies it has claimed for itself, suppressing further such local encounters, and the “heterogeneity” they imply’ (‘Global in the Local’ 25). When Robinson and Long and Fulton emerge from a failing metropolitan modernism in the late 1960s, it is not with a sense of responsibility towards the nation. Quite the contrary in fact, the failure of the British Empire is one of the decisive forces that steels their resolve. Robinson, in fact, begins to remap the Aran Islands for the first time since the Ordnance Survey (who had made their own maps as a way of administering rents at the end of the nineteenth century). In so doing he soon learned the abuses to which a national and colonial survey might fall foul. There will be more on this in Chapter 4. However, the lack of nationalism to this emerging tradition does not belie the modernist lack of social responsibility, preoccupied as it is with finding that ‘positive position’. If anything, there is an intensified sense of responsibility, but to the local and the natural which, on the one hand, refuses co-option into the myth of nationalism and, on the other, refuses the autonomy of the modernist artwork. Both traditions are forced to knuckle under into a position of compromise at this moment, one that is reflected in a subsequent movement of the late 70s and early 80s.

**Common Ground and the Rural Avant-Garde**

In 1984, just a year before Robinson’s first book on the Aran Islands would be published with Lilliput Press in Ireland, a very unusual publication was launched by Jonathan Cape back in London. A series of readings and panel discussions at the ICA seemed to be addressing a very similar tension between the avant-garde and the rural in the lead up to the publication of *Second Nature*, a collection of essays and artworks edited by Sue Clifford and Angela King with an introduction by Richard Mabey (Clifford, Personal Interview 4). Mabey, who had edited the writings in the book, had, since 1972 also, achieved some popular success with his books *Food for Free* (1972), *The Unofficial Countryside* (1973) and *The Common Ground* (1980). In the introduction, he suggests that the book sets out to address the public perception of the British landscape.

Somewhere along the line many deep and widely shared human feelings – an affection for native landscapes, a basic sympathy towards other living things, a feeling of respect for our rural history – have become regarded as a devalued currency (x).

He cites Raymond Williams, who also contributes the last essay in the book, for the overarching influence of his book *The Country and the City* in which Williams endeavours to unmask the myths and stereotypes that have grown up around the convenient binary country/city. The essays in *Second Nature* explore personal relationships to the land, they challenge the distinction between nature and culture and, after
Williams, they resist nostalgia and even, in the case of Fraser Harrison and John Barrell, they begin to ask why we might have held such nostalgic attitudes towards the rural. The writing seems to be of a tradition that you could trace back to Richard Jefferies, to Hardy and, even at times to William Morris. However, the artwork that sits between the essays, selected by Sue Clifford and Angela King is much more obviously avant-garde and seems to cast the essays in such a light. Both Richard Long and Hamish Fulton are in there, as is Andy Goldsworthy, Chris Drury and even David Hockney with a photographic collage of his mother at Bolton Abbey. Prompted by the ecological crises of the time, which were the destruction of the tropical rainforests, the pollution of the oceans, the profligacy of agribusiness, and ‘even the economic connections between all these’ (but not, at this time, climate change), the book is remarkable for its variety of different approaches to common political purpose (ix).

Sue Clifford had been working as a lecturer at the Polytechnic of Central London in the Department of Architecture, Planning and Building and had met Angela King at Friends of the Earth, with which they had both been involved since its beginning in London in 1971. Angela King had been their first Wildlife Campaigner, had set up the Stop Whaling Campaign in Europe and had been involved in endangered species campaigns and in raising awareness of trade in endangered species products such as fur (Clifford, Personal Interview). How, then, had these two come to be the editors of a collection of literary essays and contemporary art?

While working for Friends of the Earth, Clifford and King had found themselves frustrated by the way in which the organisation’s agenda to designate and protect areas of Special Scientific Interest, National Parks, ancient monuments and listed buildings seemed to be leaving that which was unexceptional and ordinary – though no less vulnerable – unprotected. They were, in this, very influenced by Richard Mabey’s book *The Common Ground* (1980), a book commissioned by the Nature Conservancy Council in 1977 to ‘widen the public debate on nature conservation’ (15). In it Mabey describes a danger he perceives in the way conservation seemed to be focused on the preservation of rare and endangered species often at the expense of locally important, though perfectly ordinary features of the landscape. A species, for example, might not be nationally rare at all but might, nonetheless, become ‘locally extinct’ in certain areas resulting in, not just species loss, but also the loss of a particular ‘day-to-day intimacy and association, the neighbourliness, that builds up around a plant or animal that has lived on close terms with a human community’ (*The Common Ground* 37). Such a realisation leads him to suggest that conservation in Britain ought not to be attempting to create ‘a museum of nature’ but rather a ‘community of distinct, familiar forms that is part of our cultural history’ (26). Mabey turned then, and has turned frequently since, to the poet John Clare for an example of that ‘neighbourliness’ so important to our cultural history. Poets and artists, for Mabey, could teach us the cultural, qualitative value, as opposed to the scientific, quantitative value, of our environments and this became an important part of his report back to the Nature Conservancy Council. It was in part due to this extraordinary move on Richard Mabey’s part that Clifford’s and King’s concerns about the emphasis on the rare and unique over the ordinary and everyday
were beginning to emerge and, like Mabey, they were beginning to consider conservation from the point of view of its cultural historical value. Clifford describes their thinking as they began to ask how are we going to argue for the everyday surroundings, for the ordinary, for the commonplace? And we began to think, well there are people who have affected us, who’ve made us look and who’ve touched us, and they are... and then the stream came out, the writers, the poets, the painters, the sculptors, the music makers and the music writers and so on, and we suddenly thought, well, why don’t we see what we can do together? Not just to use the name of, or the writings of, a person – but actually to listen to them and to learn with them. So that was the idea. We said let’s challenge them to think about this, to help us (Personal Interview 2).

In 1983 Clifford and King broke away from Friends of the Earth to form a new organisation along these lines with fellow Friends of the Earth campaigner Roger Deakin. ‘Common Ground’ was that organisation and Second Nature was their first publication in 1984. In a sense Second Nature marks a beginning of sorts as well, a moment at which conservationists and environmentalists turned to authors and artists for help, not just to promote their values but, in a much more complex and interesting move, to explore those ways in which they could ‘learn with them.’ In an effort to balance the more abstractly scientific preoccupations of conservation, they were trying to ‘reassert the importance of liberating our subjective response to the world’ (Clifford and King, An Introduction to the Deeds 4). There is something deeply active and progressive at work throughout the career of Common Ground up to the present, a thread that, if not distancing it from all conservative and rural traditions of the twentieth century, certainly affiliates it only with the more radical groups such as the Ramblers Association, the National Parks Association, and those left-wing authors and artists that shared the influence of someone like Raymond Williams in thinking about nature and the rural. This is what was emerging from the new political engagement of Friends of the Earth and helping to bring the more searching and experimental authors and artists into the same field as those who were more traditional. Clifford has described their choice to combine the artists and the writers: ‘we thought, it’s no good having only challenging people because then the gentler folk won’t be drawn in, and we need them, and it’s no good having just the expected ones because then we’re not shifting anything’ (Personal Interview). This need to appeal to ‘the gentler folk’ at the same time as being ‘challenging’ and at the same time as ‘shifting’ the discourse is something that has characterised their thirty years of projects and publications so far. It is also something that leads to a certain difficulty in establishing what exactly they are: artists, authors, environmentalists, charity workers, project managers, or all of the above?

In his study of the challenges that the avant-garde posed to High Modernism in the 1920s, Peter Bürger describes a radical form of critique, not just a critique of a prior tradition or movement, but of art itself ‘as an institution that is unassociated with the life praxis of men’ (49). It is a very similar argument to that which Robinson (as Drever), Peter Joseph and Stuart Brisley were making in the late 60s in response to the end of that ‘Greenbergian modernism’ (Wallis ‘Making Tracks’ 38). Tony Pinkney has observed, however, that Bürger’s argument falls short of offering any concrete ‘positive alternative’ that might stand as an example of this desired alignment between art and ‘life praxis’, but the projects that Common Ground began to put into action in the 1980s and 90s do seem to suggest a possible avenue of inquiry
Williams *The Politics of Modernism* ‘Introduction’ 19). Bürger raises an interesting, if hypothetical, point about an art that succeeds in associating itself with ‘the life praxis of men’. When they are one, he suggests, ‘when the praxis is aesthetic and art is practical, art’s purpose can no longer be discovered, because the existence of two distinct spheres (art and the praxis of life) that is constitutive of the concept of purpose or intended use has come to an end’ (51). This is not to say that this art would lack purpose, but rather that a purpose cannot be separated out and distinguished from the economic and social status of the work as art. The means by which this art enters the world and exists in the world is in itself part of the expression of its social and political purpose. Its ‘positive position’, to quote Brisley again, is not a function of its aesthetic but of its whole existence at all, and equally its aesthetic is simply an emergent property of this whole social and economic existence. A cursory look at the work of Common Ground reveals that it has this complication at its heart in a productive and quite radical way.

Common Ground’s projects have always required getting others involved and encouraging them to engage in creative and communal ways with their local environment. One of their earliest projects is the Parish Maps project, aimed at getting people across the country to create maps of their local environments together as communities. They chose ‘the parish’ as the scale on which this would work because, on a practical level, it is ‘the smallest theatre of democracy’, but also because it is ‘where the reference is reality, indifference is unusual, [and] detachment is difficult’ (*from place to PLACE* 6-7). ‘Too often,’ they suggest, our cherished landmarks disappear before we have a chance to do something about it. By making Parish Maps and putting them in prominent position in the neighbourhood, there is a better chance that these things will not only be recognised and enjoyed by others, but respected and protected as well. (*An Introduction to the Deeds* 5-6).

Since its launch in 1987 hundreds of maps have been produced across the country and internationally too in a variety of different forms including music, books, jigsaws, ceramics, collage, video, newspapers, photography, and sculpture; there have also been over three hundred articles in national and local newspapers and a Central Television documentary film about the project. The parish is a scale where ‘values and facts act upon each other’ (*from place to PLACE* 7); ‘[i]Ts boundaries,’ as Richard Mabey suggests in *The Common Ground*, ‘are more the limits of our intimate allegiances than lines on a map’ (36). The project is very careful to simply encourage people to take their own initiative so that the community is responsible for the end product. Each map is therefore quite singular. In each case the community will have to consider where the bounds of the parish might lie, what landmarks might be of importance, what kind of internal boundaries there are and what kind of footpaths and rights of way there are. Most important of all they will have to come to a consensus among themselves as to how best to represent the parish together. Art and the praxis of life are beginning to come together here.

David Crouch and David Matless connect the project with the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, who read maps as ‘open and connectable’, fluid, performative gestures that experiment in ‘rhizomatic’ ways (237). The Parish Maps are precisely this, open and connectable, and share something in this with other environmental movements such as the Transition Towns Network. The Transition
Network is an organisation that is helping to reduce the carbon footprint of a growing number of towns across the country and to build resilience against the forthcoming oil shortages and economic instability. They do this by encouraging towns to become independent, autonomous entities, less and less reliant on the national infrastructure. The fact that they are a network, however, suggests an alternative form or organisation and communication rather than simply turning their backs on extrinsic social structures.

Professor Robin Grove-White has seen a potential in the maps to address a ‘corrosion of popular identification with institutions whose claims to legitimacy have rested precisely on their ability to ‘represent’ the public.’ The ‘reconstitution of trust’ between Westminster and local communities, he argues, ‘will be likely to emerge not from top-down pronunciamentos from central government, so much as from the ground up’ (Clifford and King 1996 13). We are a long way from the oppressive idea of the ‘organic community’ here, and the nationalistic writing of the English landscape of the 1930s. The parish as a geopolitical unit of scale seems calved from the national unit of scale as a progressive activism steps into the tradition of landscape writing and landscape art, encouraging communities to represent themselves both politically and artistically at the same time. Aesthetics and praxis come together in a nationwide project that in some sense seems contrary to the unifying enthusiasms of the 30s. Rather than collecting all representations together under the aegis of a ‘search for England’, here representations multiply, demanding acknowledgement as unique entities in a heterogeneous arrangement. Places are not represented so much as they are encouraged to represent themselves.

Peter Bürger predicted that ‘[g]iven the avant-gardiste intention to do away with art as a sphere that is separate from the praxis of life, it is logical to eliminate the antithesis between producer and recipient’ (53). He is talking here of Tristan Tzara’s or André Breton’s instructions for the making of a Dadaist or Surrealist poem, but such experimental challenges to art’s autonomy of the 1920s seem limited to critique. As the number of Parish Maps continues to multiply across the country (there are now hundreds, far more than Common Ground have been able to keep track of, though you can see a working list on their website), Bürger’s prediction seems to take on truly extraordinary proportions with a radical collision of aesthetics and life praxis. Raymond Williams has described how Modernism ‘quickly lost its anti-bourgeois stance, and achieved comfortable integration into the new international capitalism’ (Politics of Modernism, 35). By widening its focus beyond the limits of the city and by considering a scale of minutia such as the Parish, an organisation like Common Ground and a movement such as that beginning at this time might suggests a way forward for, or a relocation of, the intellectual concerns about the crisis of modernity. Both share a critical relationship toward nationality, but for Common Ground, they do so in a way that reaches out and reconnects with location, territorial specificity, the scale ‘where the reference is reality’ (from place to PL-ACE 6-7).

Common Ground’s formation in 1983 is another important beginning to match Tim Robinson’s move to the Aran Islands in 1972. In fact, in 1997 Common Ground actually republished a short essay from a booklet that accompanied a map Robinson made of The Burren in their collection of essays on the subject of Parish Maps from place to PL-ACE. It is worth mentioning as well that both Robinson and
Common Ground seem to have arrived at this decision to remap independently. Both seem to notice that colonial and nationalist projects of mapping insufficiently represent, from distant administrative centres, places that people experience locally and both seem to come to the conclusion that this is best addressed by quite pragmatically stepping outside and remapping, engaging a personal and community-based aesthetics in response to a national or international standard. In both cases this is a question of taking power back on the scale of the local.

There are two crucially important publications to emerge, not directly from Common Ground themselves, but from the cultural environment which they had generated by the late 1990s and that, in a much more overtly literary way, are also re-mappings of sorts: they are Roger Deakin's *Waterlog* (1999) and Alice Oswald's *Dart* (2002). Clifford and King had published poems by Oswald in a 1999 anthology and Roger Deakin had met them at Friends of the Earth and had helped to found Common Ground with them. Deakin had also been the driving force behind their project ‘Pulp!’, an exhibition and publication to raise awareness about trees (the exhibition catalogue served as a single issue, newspaper-size anthology of essays by media figures such as Sting, Ben Elton and Germaine Greer) (King et. al. *Pulp*). *Waterlog* is a book that really answers Mabey’s call in *Second Nature* to rethink the attitudes towards nature and culture in the British Isles in a personal way. In it Deakin set out to swim the waterways, lakes, seas, rivers and ponds of the archipelago in search of a new perspective - a ‘frog’s-eye’ view’ - that suggested a greater intimacy and that brought into question, as it closed down, the gap between spectator and landscape (1). Such a gap, implying framing, prospecting and composing, influenced by William Gilpin’s essays on the picturesque and the landscape tourism of the late eighteenth century, had played an important role in developing that opposition of country and city for Raymond Williams. Deakin’s choice of water as the medium from which to survey the country was also a way of drawing attention to the importance of the element to our lives, and of making a pressing case for protecting it at a time when pollution had been slowly getting worse since the 1950s with the result of, among other things, a drastically diminished otter population (*Waterlog* 129). As a book that works within the long traditions of chorography and landscape tourism, it also completely overhauls them with this relinquishment of critical distance and a search for new ways of looking.

Water had also been the focus of Common Ground’s *Confluence: 1998-2001*, a three year project funded by the Arts Lottery Arts for Everyone grant to help and encourage people to create new music and performances to celebrate the River Stour in Dorset. In the mid 1990s Common Ground too had moved out of London to a more rural location. Over the course of the three years a whole range of artists were involved: poets, musicians, puppeteers, dramatists, singers, even a group called ‘Pipeworks’ who played items of plumbing to draw attention to water conservation, all of them from the communities that lived on the River Stour and drawing audiences from those same communities to consider the river as a part of their cultural lives (Clifford and King, *An Introduction to the Deeds* 39-40). Alice Oswald had contributed to a 1999 anthology of poetry called *The River’s Voice* edited by Clifford and King and was almost certainly aware of their musical celebration of the River Stour when she decided to write her own
long river poem *Dart*. An ‘Interim Report’ published on the Poetry Society’s website (the Poetry Society funded the project as part of their Poetry Places scheme) suggests the influence of the project at the halfway point on her own long poem when she discusses how the initial idea for *Dart* was ‘to orchestrate it like a kind of Jazz, with various river-workers and river dwellers composing their own parts’ (‘Interim Report’).

Oswald does something very different with *Dart* in the end but the imagination and community engagement in the *Confluence* project do seem to have inspired her in working toward the poem that would win her the T.S. Eliot award. And again, the inclusion of the language of the river-workers and the river-dwellers speaks of a desire to break down that sense of a gap, that distance that Oswald attributes to a ‘lyrical, romantic, pastoral tradition of “Nature poetry”’ that, she suggests, feels ‘as if the poet was sitting on a rock on a hill looking at the world through a telescope’ (‘Wild Things’). It may also be of significance that *Dart* is a poem to emerge out of the cultural environment of Totnes, where Oswald still lives. Totnes is the most active of the Transition Towns Network and home to, until recently, the Schumacher College, two things that suggest a progressive and active involvement in alternative lifestyles. Both Oswald and Deakin were looking for a new perspective that challenged those binaries of city and country, nature and culture. In fact, Deakin is mentioned in the acknowledgements at the front of *Dart* and one can perhaps hear an echo of his ‘frog’s-eye view’ in the voice of ‘the bather’ in the poem.

**Into the Twenty-First Century: The Problem of ‘Nature Writing’**

In December 2003 Robert Macfarlane, who had recently won the Guardian First Book Award for his *Mountains of the Mind*, published something of a call to arms in defence of British nature writing. He began by defending Oswald’s *Dart* from an attack by A.N. Wilson who, in a gripe over the relationship between poetry and nature writing, had ‘blamed Wordsworth’ for the expectation that ‘poets ought to be country dwellers’ and ‘lovers of unwrecked England’ (qtd in Macfarlane ‘Call of the Wild’). We can see immediately how misguided Wilson’s attack is in attributing to Oswald’s poem a Romantic nostalgia and a sentimental patriotism, but nonetheless, it is interesting to note the almost automatically disparaging tone toward anything that takes the rural as its subject matter, and this is what Macfarlane picks up on. He describes a general sense of hostility to nature writing in Britain since Stella Gibbons’ *Cold Comfort Farm*, a 1932 parody of the rural novel. He mentions a handful of British and Irish authors post-1940 for whom landscape has featured importantly, and who have themselves featured importantly in the post-war canon (among them Seamus Heaney, Geoffrey Hill, Ronald Blythe, Gavin Maxwell and Bruce Chatwin). But, he suggests, ‘the withering away of British nature writing becomes dismayingly visible if we look across to North America.’ Is this because ‘British nature has become depleted’, he wonders? Is it because ‘an acrid mixture of the acquisitive-materialist and the secular-humanist’ self-hood has come to predominate? He is not sure, but he does suggest a change in the weather, especially in the form of literary non-fiction, and singles out Roger Deakin and Richard Mabey as examples of the resurgence.
Mabey himself, in another crucial article earlier in the year berating the ‘growing malaise’ in the British attitude to nature, had suggested quite convincingly that ‘perhaps, in our small and over-tamed island [...] nature has been too much conflated with “the countryside”, and therefore seen also as man-made property’ (‘Nature’s Voyeurs’). His observation speaks of the association of landscape with that nostalgic nationalism that Common Ground were managing so well to separate themselves from. Their achievement had been to revitalise the discourse of the local – particularly the parish - with tremendous success, reclaiming it as a site for progressive political thinking and community activism, distinguishing it from the broader picture of ‘the countryside’ as the apolitical and ahistorical Other of the city.

By this time, however, ‘nature’ was also taking on a different but equally politicised unit of scale much larger than both the countryside and the nation, a growth in scale that seemed to mirror Common Ground’s shrinkage to the parish. The issue of climate change was well and truly on the horizon by 2003, something quite new and adding weight to the environmental agenda. The UN’s Kyoto protocol of 1997, following the first two major assessments of the global environment by the IPCC in 1990 and 1995, meant that nearly all world powers were paying close attention to the problem of climate change with what was hoped to be a vital urgency (Henson 286). However, talks after talks were failing, whether deliberately sabotaged by a US agenda of neo-liberalism or whether they were simply dissolving amid the wrangling of governments unable to take the lead and commit to the kinds of targets that were being demanded by leading scientists. This was still the era of climate change denial; it wasn’t until 2011, for example, that the BBC accepted the science behind climate change after being criticised for sacrificing ‘accuracy for impartiality’ on the issue (Sample). What began to arise out of this crisis was a politicisation of ‘nature’ on a global scale, a shift from the national (English nature) to the global (planetary nature) that seemed to mirror the shift in scale that conservation movements and Common Ground had seen from the national to the local. Environmental thinking detaches itself from the question of nationalism in favour of a move in both directions given by the Sierra Club slogan ‘Think globally, act locally’. A re-politicised scale of the locally distinct parish is calved away from the national just before a total, politicised nature, the kind captured by James Lovelock’s Gaia – the planet as a single living organism – overshadows the national from behind it as well.

Macfarlane’s call for a renewed focus on British nature writing, like Second Nature’s twenty years previously, was beginning to find purchase in the popular imagination, and in the first half of 2005 The Guardian asked him to publish a series of eleven articles and reviews in what is now called, appropriately enough, his ‘Common Ground’ series. In these he reconsidered the relationship between literature and nature in the work of American and British authors such as Willa Cather, J.A. Baker, Raymond Carver, Barry Lopez and Tim Robinson himself. The series culminated in the public being asked to write in and nominate authors from each county that they considered to be of importance to the region’s

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3 Lovelock developed his theory of Gaia in a series of articles in the 1970s (e.g. ‘Gaia as seen through the Atmosphere’ and ‘Atmospheric Homeostasis by and for the Biosphere: the Gaia Hypothesis’) but the theory received little attention until his 1979 book The Quest for Gaia. Interest has been growing since with three international conferences between 1985 and 2000 and five more books on the subject since 1995.
environmental identity. Narratives of English, and certainly of British, countryside seem tellingly absent from the list, with a much tightened focus on the local, even bioregional, study of place occupying centre stage everywhere. The way the list is organised is of particular interest. Unlike the literature of the 1930s this literary map is not in search of England, nor Scotland, nor Wales for that matter. Nationalism was distinctly shouldered out of the agenda under the title ‘Mapping Nature’.

This is perhaps somewhat to be regretted as it begins to slide in a false distinction between nature and culture as a way of resisting the opposition of country and city. What Common Ground’s idea of the local recovers on the scale of the parish is something that resists this pull into binaries. It does so by orienting its sense of scale according to the idea of community. Of course, this does, however, present something of a problem for authors writing under the title and in the genre of ‘nature writing’, a term that seems to jar with the integrated nature-and-culture of the local. ‘I can remember being called a ‘nature writer’ for the first time,’ Richard Mabey writes, ‘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, echoing as it does the country/city binary and with the implication being cast that a ‘nature writer’ was somehow writing about issues less serious, less engaged, less political than a regular writer. This is a misguided and damaging preconception that this thesis intends to expose by considering an engagement with more specific terminology such as landscape and place, terms that have been renewed by recent critical and theoretical debates in cultural geography. ‘Nature writing is an unsatisfactory term,’ says Macfarlane, ‘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’). I hope that this thesis may begin to offer a description that is more satisfactory and more appropriate in describing this important literary project of re-mapping.

Kathleen Jamie has also expressed similar, if perhaps even stronger, issues with the term ‘nature’ and with what this might mean for the title ‘nature writer’, suggesting that ‘nature’, ‘natural’ and ‘wild’ are ‘almost synonymous’, and that ‘[w]ild and not-wild is a false distinction, in this ancient, contested country.’ She goes on: ‘[a]nd if we read about ‘nature’ or wild places it pays to wonder, who’s telling me this, who’s manipulating my responses, who’s doing the mediating?’4 (‘A Lone Enraptured Male’ 25) Clarifying what she meant here, she has described how in Scotland ‘[f]or historical reasons (Clearances, Industrialisation, Enclosures) ordinary people have been removed from the land’, and that now there are ‘certain ‘nature’ writers (Sir John Lister Kaye) who own lumps of land and who take it upon themselves to instruct the rest of us in its appreciation’ (‘Re: Follow up Question...’). The issue that she is raising here is one of the dynamics of power over the designation of ‘nature’ and ‘wilderness’ as somehow removed from history and culture when in fact – certainly in some areas of Scotland – there are places that are only natural and wild because they have been historically ‘cleared’ and made so by the land owners.

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4 Jamie makes this argument in a review that takes issue with Macfarlane’s The Wild Places, something which I address in Chapter 1.
This particular conflict finds an uneasy culmination in an anecdote concerning the legal language of the American National Parks. Wilderness has long been respected and protected due to the tradition of American letters developed through Thoreau, Emerson and, perhaps most importantly, the Scottish-American John Muir. However, William Cronon, writing in 2003 about the Apostle Islands in Lake Superior observes an interesting problem. The National Park Service, at the time he was writing, were making recommendations for the designation of the islands as ‘wilderness’ which, under the 1964 Wilderness Act would mean they were protected. However, exploring the language of this Act, Cronon identifies an important problem in that ‘the National Park Service will seek to remove from potential wilderness the temporary, non-conforming conditions that preclude wilderness designation’ (‘The Riddle of the Apostle Islands’). This includes ‘demolishing historical structures’. It also includes ‘implying that dramatically altered landscapes are much more pristine than they truly are’ and the refusal to interpret for park visitors ‘the human history of places designated as wilderness’ (Ibid). All of which poses a serious problem for a place with a rich history of Norwegian immigrant settlers, French traders, and a centuries-old population of Ojibwe people for whom the area served as a spiritual homeland. For the 1964 Wilderness Act ‘nature’ is something to be kept ‘untramelled’ and ‘pristine’, even if it is neither. Such an anecdote goes to the heart of Jamie’s and Mabey’s concerns about the term ‘nature writing’, as if to write about nature was to write about something not tainted with human affairs, something apart from culture and something apart from the important affairs of the city.

Raymond Williams suggests ‘[n]ature has meant the ‘countryside’, the ‘unspoilt places’, plants and creatures other than man. The use is especially current in contrasts between town and country: nature is what man has not made’ (Keywords 223). This is especially contradictory in Britain where our ‘nature’ has been so repeatedly worked over for centuries from the great deforestation of the Bronze Age to the piles of plastic debris on the beaches of the most remote of the Scottish islands. Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s collection of essays Nature demonstrates a whole range of philosophical speculations as to what ‘nature’ has meant to authors and thinkers as various as Schelling and Bergson revealing as well as anyone that nature is a construct that is historically contingent. Timothy Morton has suggested that the very use of the term ‘nature’ may in fact be preventing the realisation of a truly ecological thought insofar as ‘[p]utting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration’ (5).

All of this made for something of a problem when, in 2005, Granta released a special issue called ‘Country Life’ and in 2008 another special issue called ‘The New Nature Writing’, both featuring Kathleen Jamie and Robert Macfarlane. The editorials in both these editions seem to flounder when it comes to justifying why the term ‘Country’ and the term ‘New Nature Writing’ might work in these contexts and neither address the problems mentioned above. Jason Cowley does suggest that, in selecting work for ‘The New Nature Writing’ he was less interested in the ‘old nature writing – by which I mean the lyrical pastoral tradition of the romantic wanderer – than in writers who approached their subject in heterodox and experimental ways’ (10). However, he does show here a degree of ignorance of the highly
‘experimental’ culture that Common Ground had been helping to nurture for nearly thirty years (and indeed aspects of experimental and heterodox ‘old’ nature writing as well, some of which I will discuss in Chapter 5).

The other problem with such a term as ‘New Nature Writing’ is that is does not seem to acknowledge the specifically American heritage of the term ‘Nature Writing’. Eric Lupfer has dated the term to the end of the nineteenth century in the United States, to the tradition of essays descending from Thoreau and John Burroughs (Lupfer 177). The earliest usage I have found in England is 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 Jefferies and W.H. Hudson as examples, though as he does so he adopts the American hyphen to the term (‘Nature-writing’) that descends from the school of ‘Nature-observation’ and ‘Nature-study’ practised by the author and horticulturalist Liberty Hyde Bailey who, interestingly, was also championing ‘the commonplace’ in a series of lectures given in 1905 (The Outlook to Nature 2-49).5

The movement back and forth across the Atlantic continues right down the twentieth-century through Henry Williamson, Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, and then on to such authors as Barry Lopez, Annie Dillard and Terry Tempest Williams in the 1980s and 90s, all of whom have been a significant influence on the British and Irish ‘New Nature Writing’ today. However, the geography that, especially Lopez, is writing about, and in, is just so different in North America that it seems a crude approximation to simply lift the term and re-apply it in England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales where it has those implications of a very English countryside or an aesthetic, romantic tradition; and simply putting ‘New’ in front of it does little either to honour what it owes to its forebears or to account for the contemporary difficulties. Lupfer has even shown, following Lawrence Buell (The Environmental Imagination 397-423), that the term ‘nature writing’ in the United States, in fact, might 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, for Lupfer, even more so than to the fact that its readers were ‘concerned about the natural world’ (The Emergence of American Nature Writing vii).

The term ‘nature writing’ then seems wrong for its appeal to nature alone in a English, Scottish, Welsh, Irish, or more complicatedly regional geography, in a historically cultural landscape and in a distinctly ‘contested territory’ to borrow Jamie’s term again. And it seems wrong for the baggage it carries of an American literary tradition, though the influence of such a tradition ought to be acknowledged. And finally, it seems wrong simply because it reaches toward a cumbersome abstraction that, like ‘global’, does not really very effectively describe, with any degree of clarity, the cluster of islands, ecological niches, or the national, local and regional units, to which it refers.

5 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, or the Story of Gfermund and Sigrid by Jonas Lie that does seem to suggest that the term was in use and had the same 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. ‘Review’).
The Scale of an Archipelago

Scale, of course, is one of the big problematic issues for ecology, and somewhere between thinking globally and acting locally, nationalism gets lost. This is something felt especially strongly in Britain at this time since it had seen the partial devolution of Scotland and Wales in 1997, an actual decentering of power that ought to be seen on a continuum with the fall of the British Empire overseas. Timothy Clark has observed the ‘derangement of scale’ brought about by the issue of climate change that can be seen to unsettle a sense of national unity in such a way as we must assume could only have aggravated the already fractured sense of geographical identity in Britain (The Cambridge Companion 136). He cites Ulrich Beck who argues that ‘Globality means that from now on nothing which happens on our planet is only a limited local event [...] we must reorient and reorganize our lives and actions, our organizations and institutions, along a ‘local-global’ axis’ (qtd in The Cambridge Companion 132). The disorientation prompted by a British crisis of identity, then, might not be all bad. Such a sense of fracture and dislocation might in fact encourage a partially devolved Britain to think more carefully about relations between places and help to drive home the ‘need to think on several scales at once’ (Clark Ibid 136).

Ursula Heise has offered a potent critique of the kinds of American bioregional writing that we might associate more properly with ‘nature writing’, suggesting that ‘the focus on the local can also block an understanding of larger salient connections’ on a global scale (62). She suggests that ‘[r]ather than focusing on the recuperation of a sense of place, environmentalism needs to foster an understanding of how a wide variety of both natural and cultural places and processes are connected and shape each other around the world’ (21). There is, of course, a danger in this of ending up with the opposition of global (as open) to local (as closed) which does not appear to be what she is saying. I have made it a point of some importance to demonstrate that the archipelagic literature I am interested in here offers an open and critical form of localism that considers places and landscapes in their plural form as a way of exploring their potential for reconfigurations beyond the old order centred on London and the south east of England. The concept of the archipelago, which I shall go on to explore below, offers a critical paradigm that explores the possibility of precisely the ‘cosmopolitanism’ that Heise is calling for as a response to the fracture and uncertainty engendered by devolution. For someone like Tim Robinson, an understanding of the local on the Aran Islands leads to an engagement with stories that reach right out across the archipelago suggesting the kinds of connection between places that make a lasting impression on the cultural memory. On the night of January 7th 1881, for example, while children beat buckets and played Jew’s Harps in the nearby village of Cill Mhuirbhigh, a group of men drove twenty-one blindfolded cattle down a gully below the headland of Barr an Leathchartuir and off the cliff where they fell over two-hundred and fifty feet to the breakers below. They were the local landlord’s cattle and this the worst of a series of violent rebellions over unrealistically high rents that were being legitimated by decisions taken in Westminster. It is an extraordinary story that Robinson places carefully along his cliff-top walk of the island and one that speaks of the international embedded deeply in the local, of precisely
how ‘a wide variety of both natural and cultural places and processes are connected and shape each other around the world’ (Heise 21).

Heise suggests that her argument is specifically with the American environmental tradition, and she does admit that it might be different elsewhere, but it is probably worth noting here that Common Ground, Folding Landscapes (Tim Robinson’s and his wife’s small publishing company) and such organisations as the Transition Network are active on a global scale with connections to numerous other similar organisations around the world. The writing of landscape and place in Britain and Ireland is highly alert to its connections beyond the local, something that I will argue is grounded in its experience as an archipelago. Key to understanding how such relationships work though is understanding how important place is to the authors themselves: it is what they have in common. John Elder’s essay in Archipelago 6, ‘Catchments’, in fact about Tim Robinson, is an excellent example of this; it suggests a resonance and a relationship struck by their similar fascination with the details of two very different places. The essay serves as ‘a dialogue’ between the ‘landforms’ of Elder’s own Hogback Ridge in the Green Mountains of Vermont and Robinson’s Roundstone Bog in Connemara, and it is through such dialogues that this literature can appeal simultaneously to the local and the global (‘Catchments’ 31). I hesitate, though, to suggest that this connection is global, despite the fact that it is more than local. Heise’s term ‘cosmopolitan’ seems more appropriate, or even the more grounded and specific ‘transatlantic’ for this particular connection seems sufficient. The shift in scale that comes with the crises of global warming and late global capitalism is, as Heise rightly points out, a crisis of deterritorialisation and a new sense of ‘eco-cosmopolitanism’, critical of the ways in which the global is being represented, is required (61). But this may involve the interrogation of the term ‘global’ itself (as a metaphor for something less easily imaginable) in favour of one or multiple intersecting terms that are more territorially specific. The planet is not a smooth, geometrically precise globe; it is ovoid with a surface partially land, partially water, partially ice with huge variations in peaks and troughs and an atmosphere and stratosphere of gases that do not even conform to the idea of ‘surface’ at all.

If ecological thinking is demanding of us that we radically re-evaluate the way we understand the world we live in, then I propose that we could do worse than to take a measure of scale against a landscape that we have come to occupy, a landscape more singularly local and participatory, less generally global and objectified, than the category ‘nature’ suggests. Barry Cunliffe has explored an archaeological reconstruction of the British and Irish archipelago that predates the more modern, nationalist narratives demanding re-orientation in some quite interesting ways, beginning with the idea of cultures of the Atlantic edge and an archipelagic geography. The proposition of ‘an archipelagic literature’, then, instead of ‘The New Nature Writing’, suggests an appeal to a prehistoric, though not ahistoric, spatial description that might appeal to certain modern uncertainties of scale. Such a reconfiguration of scale answers to Timothy Clark’s call elsewhere for a shift in scale that is temporal or a shift in scale that ‘decentres human agency, underlining the fragility and contingency of effective boundaries’, especially those between objects

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6 Such a proposition comes from Macfarlane, but I will come to that shortly.
and persons and human and natural history (‘Scale’ 162). Cunliffe’s shift in scale is not quite as severe as Clark’s ‘futural reading’ prompts but the driving force behind Clark’s argument seems to be that we need to think more flexibly in terms of scale, to be able to make those moves with ease. Cunliffe’s ‘archipelago’ might not decentralise the human but it does decentralise any sense of scale anchored in a modern conception of the human as a national citizen.

In Facing the Ocean: the Atlantic and its People, Cunliffe explores the possibility of this 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 climate to a temperate one (112). Such changes made the archipelago both habitable and independent, allowing for the development of its own distinct and isolated 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) (Cunliffe 16-17). All of these paint a picture of an archipelagic culture prior to the centralised English monarchical rule alluded to in the title The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Such a spatial configuration that incorporates separateness and connection in the same gesture speaks to the kinds of networks that Common Ground, Folding Landscapes and the Transitions Towns Network have developed, networks that can be both local and cosmopolitan at the same time. The idea of a pre-nationalist geography appeals today in the search for what David Matless has observed in Macfarlane as a ‘post-national’ sense of space, or at least a space that is undergoing something of a crisis in terms of its multiple national configurations (‘Nature Voices’ 181).

Kathleen Jamie’s journey to Maes Howe, Robert Macfarlane’s fascination with the peregrini of Ynnis Enli, Tim Robinson’s chapters on Dun Aonghasa, Richard Mabey’s discussion of Grime’s Graves and Alice Oswald’s appeal to mythic and folkloric traditions are just a few examples of this literature of landscape and place’s appeal to a very old understanding of the archipelago. If they are stressing the need for a change in the way we understand the geography of this island grouping, it is with a deep sense of anchorage to the kind of interconnected space that Cunliffe describes. Sometimes a very ancient idea can have a very modern appeal.

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 rather Anglocentric terminology of 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 the confluence of a variety of factors that led to a sense of uncertainty in relation to identity:

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 and less certain. In the wake of such political activity, John Kerrigan’s study of Early Modern literature, Archipelagic English (2008), offers a conceptual and spatial framework to re-read, if not to re-map, the cultural space of the British Isles. It was, he claimed, 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 claimed, 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). Like Gordon Childe’s model of the Atlantic edge as ‘bright with Neolithic Argonauts’, Kerrigan’s devolved archipelago was about connection and communication rather than isolation.

‘Archipelago’ works for Kerrigan as a term that does not privilege any one of the political powers that occupy it; it works by reading under the national boundaries to the bedrock below as a way of refreshing the perspective on the more complex, cultural relations over, across and between the islands it describes. It works as a metaphor for what Kerrigan 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 devolutionary 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 ‘sovereigntyscape’, 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, a former literary editor of Blackwells and owner and manager of the small publishing house Clutag Press, developed John Kerrigan’s essentially devolutionary methodology in such a way as to strike a chord with the rising tide of environmental thought and writing. In 2007, at an event in Cambridge organised by Robert Macfarlane in memory of Roger Deakin, who had recently died, and at which Richard Mabey and others spoke about ‘Passionate Natures’, McNeillie launched a new literary journal called 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 millenia 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 devolved, peripheral geography; in fact that fringe and that periphery suddenly occupy centre stage on the journal’s cover with the south east of Britain fading away toward the top right. This was by quite deliberate instruction. In an email to the artist, Julian Bell, McNeillie describes what he wanted the map to 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 [a] somewhat tilting, distorted map pushed to the lower right hand frame of the picture, with south-east England chopped off by the frame (qtd 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, all of which points to a very strong feeling for the Celtic and a certain playful refusal of the conventional Anglocentric perspective. But this is an environmental agenda too that sees wild landscapes themselves as somehow marginalised with the Celtic cultures, and that sets out to speak up for both.

The post-national agenda that Archipelago sets up in 2007 chimes with the simultaneously natural and cultural agenda of Common Ground. The journal has published Roger Deakin, Robert Macfarlane, Ronald Blythe and Alice Oswald alongside Seamus Heaney and Derek Mahon, Mick Imlah, Robin Robertson and Douglas Dunn in such a way as to open dialogues across the islands on such issues as the fragility and vulnerability of our landscapes and our languages together. Such cosmopolitanism suggests repeatedly unusual connections across national and regional borders. An essay in Issue no. 4 sees a Welshman writing about a collaborations between an Englishman and a Scotsman. This is an ‘archipelagic’ moment in the sense that Edna Longley means it in her lecture for John Brannigan’s Scholarcast. In this lecture she draws on Kerrigan’s notion of ‘polycentrism’ to emphasise the ‘mobility’ of modern poets, their ‘criss-crossings’ around these islands, suggesting that critical paradigms may have some way yet to catch up (‘Poems and Paradigms’). In this essay, written by Andrew McNeillie, we see the poet Douglas Dunn and the artist Norman Ackroyd quite literally in the same boat together off the Scottish coast, one of them sketching and the other writing for their second collaborative book A Line in the Water. Dunn addresses Ackroyd and his ‘wide night-view’s nocturnal aquatint’:

For you are lovers of the East and North,
The West, and waters, and your art’s no-place,
Invention’s home, that better place to be.
You live in an estuarial embrace
And there the sea meets art, and Art meets Sea.

(A Archipelago 4 42)

Sea meets art in a ‘no-place’ that is ‘Invention’s home’, and yet here are two artists renowned for their commitment to place. It is in these ‘criss-crossings’ between the places of the archipelago and the
meetings and collaborations along the way that the landscapes and places often find themselves most fruitfully reimagined.

The archipelago as a spatial metaphor and framework is important here and I will suggest throughout this thesis that it might be a more useful metaphor with which to think about the network of international relationships on a broad and meaningful scale; one that seems to be grounded in the way that it negotiates that local-global axis. One thing missing perhaps, from the pages of Archipelago is the work of Tim Robinson, but this is not through lack of trying. In an email to Seamus Heaney, McNeillie expresses his frustration that all of Robinson’s current work is ‘promised to Penguin’ (McNeillie, ‘Letter from Andrew McNeillie to Seamus Heaney’) and in an illustration in Issue 3 many of the authors are depicted as having been caught in a net beneath the ‘good-ship archipelago’ but Robinson is floating free on his own (Gail McNeillie, ‘Netting the Catch’ 72).

The journal, like Robinson himself, has consistently refused to separate language and land with an emphasis on the local as a bastion against the carelessness of imperialism and homogenisation. This does not lead to the insular, however, but rather to a potential for resonance and relationship. Fiona Stafford, for example, in an essay on the ‘Local Attachments’ of Romantic poetry suggests that a deep, habitual knowledge of a place can ‘give rise to poetry that crosses local and national borders and speaks to those in different times and places’ (104). She recalls James Currie, who assembled the first edition of Robert Burns’s work in 1800 and praised Burns’s ability to convey his attachment to Ayrshire, ‘marvelling at the thought of his songs being sung on the banks of the Ganges and the Mississippi as well as the Tay and the Tweed’ (104). The spatial configuration of an archipelago, in a similar movement between the locally attached and the outward-reaching, suggests islands with a strong sense of cultural identity surrounded by an ocean that, rather than isolates 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 necessity of connection to other islands. Looking back to the scale of the parish that Common Ground developed, there is a case to be made for this configuration as an ‘archipelagic environment’ too, with its focus on local autonomy, a culturally and artistically driven form of ecology, but also in the sense that it describes a connected network of communities. Such a cultural form is crucially important to the argument of this thesis and I will keep returning to it.

The term ‘archipelagic’ emerges as a possible name for this literature of landscape and place in a review Macfarlane wrote for the first edition of McNeillie’s journal in the Guardian.

“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. (2007 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. I would, however, like to think for a moment about these
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 body and mind. They point us toward a very specific kind of geography, one that is pared right back, but one that is also distinctly affective and psychological. The psychological is perhaps that aspect of scale that has been missing from this discussion so far, and yet has been haunting it as well.

In an early review, Seamus Deane suggested of Robinson’s Aran writings that ‘it is not perhaps a quest for Aran but a quest to which Aran gives shape and meaning’ (‘Ultimate Place’ 9). The quest itself is psychological and literary. It is personal in the deepest sense of the word without being self-interested. It needs Aran in order to manifest itself. It needs that ‘ultimate place, the extreme form of a subject which can only be invented in writing and yet stands there as a rebuke to any attempt to represent its ageless, harsh actuality’ (9). That estranging and somehow compulsive relationship between the self and the world, intimate and yet displaced at the same time, is also an important driving factor and a scale in its own right. Martin Ryle has argued that a way out of the Romantic attitude to landscape and the myth of the ‘organic community’ of F.R. Leavis is not to endeavour to recover a lost oneness with nature but to realise that ‘this sense of loss, like the aesthetic appreciation of nature generally (to which it is related, both being partly determined by our recent material history of destructive production), is also a cultural resource’ (‘After ‘Organic Community” 22). The best writing on landscape and place at the moment does precisely this. It explores our modern condition of distance as a rich source of creative possibility, and as a spur into progressive new ways of thinking about how we can respond to a rapidly changing world.

In his essay for Common Ground’s Second Nature, Raymond Williams observes in his community in the Black Mountains a recent influx of people moved out from the city to rural areas working in a range of arts and crafts, and making a living doing so. He sees in this the restoration of ‘a genuine fabric of rural society’, people engaged in what he calls ‘the idea of livelihood’ (‘Between Country and City’ 217, 219). This is something quite different from the aesthetic landscape tourism of the late eighteenth century and quite different from the nostalgic admiration for the organic community. The idea of ‘livelihood’ is one in which people are making a living in rural areas by making and doing things that play an active part in the life and economy of a given community. Tim Robinson has done this with his and his wife’s company Folding Landscapes in Roundstone, Connemara. Common Ground have done something similar in Shaftesbury where they moved from London in the mid-nineteen-nineties. Many of the authors and artists that Archipelago publish do likewise and as a publisher’s Clutag Press is a very small organisation based in Oxfordshire. Other organisations are springing up that may have promising futures in this field. Two Ravens Press based on the Isle of Lewis have begun to publish books and a magazine on nature, place and environment. Little Toller, based in south Dorset, have been very successfully republishing rural classics with intriguing introductions and are hoping to publish a line of new, young authors responding in their own way to this tradition. These projects, dotted around the country like an archipelago themselves, offer us a way of thinking about cultures of landscape and place that seems very promising indeed. The future of this movement is of course uncertain and the fashions of the publishing
world are notoriously fickle, but there seems to have been enough serious, careful and critical development over the last few years to have lain down a very solid foundation. What we are seeing today is a complex movement that is committed in a variety of ways to the process of re-thinking our relationship to the landscapes and places of this archipelago. I hope that this thesis will be able to bring together research from cultural geography and a skill base developed in the study of English literature to play a part in helping to frame this movement clearly in relation to its wider tradition, its historical context and in relation to the critical fields of landscape and place studies today.

Part 1 will look at the significance of the excursion narrative today in which authors write about their rambles, hikes, wanders and trespasses in search of first-hand, corrective experiences of landscape. I will explore this from two perspectives, however, since landscape itself is so plagued by that problematic loss at the heart of our modern, aesthetic experience of the land. In Chapter 1 I will begin with a discussion of the gaps and framings of landscape that have a tendency to keep us from more intimate experiences, and even how certain seemingly intimate experiences might in fact betray nostalgic displacements at their heart. I will explore some of the ways in which those gaps and framings are encountered and managed by different authors, accepted by some, challenged by others, worked with and against variously. In Chapter 2 I will propose the idea of a politics of enchantment as a response to this sense of loss. What might the value be today in considering the possibility of an intimate landscape beyond its ideological framing. Drawing on the work of Jane Bennett, I will argue for certain unsentimental forms of enchantment as politically potent, intellectually and aesthetically stimulating. This tension between the distant ideological and the intimate personal experience of landscape will begin to set up what it is meant here by an archipelagic environment.

Part 2 will consider the ways in which a sense of place can be generated from the ground up in progressive and creative ways that are inclusive of marginalised others. Chapter 3 will look at a preoccupation with found objects as a way of exploring the everyday ritual of connecting the inside with the outside and of maintaining a relationship to the mute excess of the world. I will argue that such rituals signify an openness to the strange and new in approaching the representation of place in all its flux and change. In Chapter 4 I will consider remapping and how this encounter with strangeness can help to re-imagine progressive new ways of rendering place that involve whole communities and generate multiple perspectives. There are certain spatial configurations that emerge out of this that link the personal and the communal in a potent form that will draw on the idea of ‘critical localism’ inflected by the communicative tendencies of the archipelagic (Dirlik, ‘The Global in the Local’ 22).

In Part 3 I will propose that within this grounded and territorially specific vision of place a distinct aesthetic is beginning to emerge. Tensions between certain literary and scientific tendencies that have been a source of disagreement and discontent are also being read as productive and fertile sources of creativity. Chapter 5 will tackle the paradoxical problem of an environmental genre that is most recognisable when it resists the very conventions of its form as genre. I will trace this tendency back across the longer tradition of landscape and place writing in order to better understand this tension.
between the literary and scientific and to better understand this contemporary movement’s relationship to that longer literary tradition. In Chapter 6 I will consider how this tension has been resolved in a closer look at the aesthetics of a range of authors, concluding that an archipelagic aesthetics is one that is firmly grounded in the interconnection between language, place and the imagination.

Having given something of a historical account of the cultures from which this movement has emerged, it may be wise to consider that, since its peak in 2007 with the ‘Passionate Natures’ conference and its continued popularity since, there have now begun to emerge the voices of dissent. As I have mentioned, Kathleen Jamie has written with some passion of her dislike for Macfarlane’s *The Wild Places*. I discuss this review in Chapters 1 and 2, but suffice to say for now that Jamie has offered what Boyd Tonkin has called ‘a sceptical distance from her more enraptured English peers’, one that has and will no doubt continue to be an important voice in the development of the genre (‘Call of the Wild’). David Matless has added his own voice to the debate suggesting that we must be ‘subtle’ in our approach to such a form of literature, and critical of ‘the mode of presence achieved and the consequent form of cultural authority claimed and assumed’ (‘Nature Voices’ 185). He also adds that there may be a danger in this literature’s appeal to enchantment for the ‘submissive quality’ it can carry (185). Jonathan Bate too has suggested, in a review of Olivia Laing’s *To The River* that ‘the genre is ripe for parody’ (Bate, ‘To the River’). We may have seen the beginnings of such a parody in Michael Symmons Roberts and Paul Farley’s *Edgelands* which takes much of its form from Macfarlane’s *The Wild Places*, and yet the landscapes are of an industrial, post-industrial and suburban nature. The subtitle of the book is ‘Journeys into England’s True Wildernesses’ suggesting a critique of the Romantic notion of wilderness and its association with a similar class dynamic that Jamie takes issue with in her own review of *The Wild Places*. Macfarlane’s review of *Edgelands* was, as you might expect, somewhat cold (‘Edgelands: Review’). No doubt these frictions and factions will grow in the years ahead as Macfarlane and Jamie are both publishing a new book each, but I would suggest that this is far from a cause for concern. Forty years ago such subtle debates and distinctions would have been impossible to imagine, and that they are now taking place in such public places as *The Guardian* and the *London Review of Books*, that these authors are appearing on radio and even television, is testament to the status that this movement had gained since its beginnings in the 1970s and 80s and to the public’s interest in the important issues that these debates are raising. This can only be a very good thing.
PART 1
WALKING OUT
INTRODUCTION: SWEENEY'S EXILE

In Seamus Heaney’s translation of Buile Suibhne, the old Gaelic tale of Sweeney Astray first written down in the 17th century, the Irish king is exiled from human society by the Christian priest Ronan. When Sweeney throws the priest’s psalter into the sea, kills one of his psalmists and cracks the bell he hangs around his neck, Ronan places a curse upon the king, turning him from the protection of the social sphere to a life naked, mad and half bird in the wilderness of Ireland: ‘bare to the world he'll always be’ (Heaney 92). Exiled and exposed to the elements, Sweeney finds himself condemned to an awkward state of ambiguity, one that Heaney identifies with as a poet: ‘it is possible to read the work as an aspect of the quarrel between free creative imagination and the constraints of religious, political, and domestic obligation’ (Heaney 87). There are times when Sweeney berates the life of suffering that his new found freedom brings him,

shivering; glimpsed against the sky,
a waif alarmed out of ivy.
Going drenched in teems of rain,
crouching under thunderstorms

but there are times when ‘the Bann cuckoo’ is ‘sweeter / than church bells that whinge and grind’, when

I prefer the scurry
and song of blackbirds

to the usual blather

of men and women…

the squeal of badgers

in their sett

to the hullabaloo

of the morning hunt (97, 96, 104).

There is, eventually, a sanctuary he finds in his exile, a natural asylum in the watercress fields of the valley of Glen Bolcain where others, exiled and mad like himself, have come to live. Sweeney’s curse is to inhabit the intersection of culture and wilderness, his madness an outsider state belonging to the animals – he is ‘bird-brained’. In fact, he actually becomes this intersection of culture and wilderness; they are intertwined in the very flesh of his half-bird body. Jane Bennett has written of such ‘crossings’ between the animal and the human in literature, suggesting that ‘under propitious conditions, you might find that their dynamism revivifies your wonder at life’ and that ‘their morphings inform your reflections upon freedom’ (32). For early readers of the Sweeney myth, in a time when lives were hard won against the elements, such vivification and freedom might have been all too ubiquitous and seemed like a curse, but in his exile he is also open to moments of enchantment in the song of the Bann cuckoo. Bennett goes on: ‘their charm energizes your social conscience, and their flexibility stretches your moral sense of the possible,’ perhaps accounting for Sweeney’s judgements against the church and the hunt (32).
It is perhaps with this in mind that, in his chapter on valleys in *The Wild Places*, Robert Macfarlane goes in search of Glen Bolcain, and Sweeney himself becomes a character very close to his mind throughout the book. *The Wild Places* charts many Sweeney-like voyages to the outer edges of the archipelago in pursuit, initially, of what is left of our wilderness. And yet the conclusion of the book is that it might be more urgent and pressing a task to attempt to recover a wildness closer to home and that this process might have more to do with careful attention than with intrepid exploration, and that what might be more important than *where* we explore is *the way* we explore. But this is no simple task. It means recognising that those ‘constraints of religious, political, and domestic obligation’ run very deep indeed. They are a part of the way we carry ourselves in the landscape, the way we view it and the way we value what we find there. It also means recognising that the ways we have come to value a landscape have often had a material effect, have shaped that landscape somehow by a range of possible means. Agricultural ‘improvement’, clearances, enclosures, the creation of the national parks, the development of a transport infrastructure, national borders, county borders, military training spaces, the right to roam, quarrying, damming, the protection of the green belt: all of these processes demonstrate evaluations and readings of our landscapes that have materially framed it in ways that we often take for granted. And there is an interesting circularity that emerges here. The way we value the land affects the way we develop the land, and the way we develop the land in turn affects the way we value it, until the land and the value system and the way we behave in the land become strangely entwined. To begin to pick all these layers apart is also to find yourself under Sweeney’s curse, awkwardly exiled between worlds in that difficult ‘quarrel’, fighting for ‘free creative imagination’ but often succumbing to those constraints of domestic obligation (Heaney 87).

The curse is to be compelled to walk out and start again, to search for the archipelago beneath that eroded ‘sovereignty landscape’, and to find new ways of being in and thinking about the landscape since the old ways have brought us to environmental catastrophe (Nairn 125). When, for example, Kathleen Jamie goes to visit Maes Howe in the Orkneys on the winter Solstice, it is to explore the *real* darkness, the ‘natural, courteous dark’ ‘much maligned’ by Christianity with its ‘metaphor of Darkness’, the ‘death dark’ (10). As such her journey is a rereading of the world, a remapping of conventional terrain. As with the work of Common Ground, this is often part and parcel of wrestling some sense of the local free from an outside discourse imposing itself materially on to the ground. The same is true of Tim Robinson’s remapping of the landscapes of the west of Ireland in the wake of English imperialism. Such a search for somehow corrective experience, in each case, begins with the journey out, the ‘pledging’ of the body, as John Burnside would have it (*Gift Songs* 57).

In this context, Sweeney’s ‘journeying from wild place to wild place, his wintering out, his sleeping close to the ground’ make ‘inspiring sense’ to Macfarlane (Macfarlane 46). It is under his curse that Sweeney ‘became ‘revolted’ by the thought of ‘known places’, and… ‘dreamed strange migrations”

7 He cannot find it on the map but travels to the Coruisk Basin on the Isle of Skye as this is as close a landscape as he can find, topographically, to fit the description of Glen Bolcain.
Such dreams, for Macfarlane, become the necessary prerequisite for change (45). In his first book, *Mountains of the Mind*, he describes some of the ‘known places’ that he himself is trying to shake free from:

> Most of us exist for most of the time in worlds which are humanly arranged, themed and controlled. One forgets that there are environments which do not respond to the flick of a switch or the twist of a dial and which have their own rhythms and orders of existence (275).

Macfarlane sees these ‘themed and controlled’ environments as a form of ‘amnesia’ which a particular type of bodily exposure serves to ‘correct’ (275). In such amnesia, there is a loss of that meaningful space in which we are intimately involved with a world larger than us and beyond our control. ‘So many forces,’ he suggests in a later article, ‘now warp us away from direct experience of the land on which we live.’ Urbanisation, habits of travel, modern farming practices, footloose industries, the internet (‘Go Wild in the Country’ 13). But the search for that ‘direct experience’ against which we can reset our faculties and energise that social conscience is not necessarily so simple as it might seem. On the one hand, as David Abram reminds us, our bodies have a deep evolutionary tie to the outside world; they ‘have formed themselves in delicate reciprocity with the manifold textures, sounds, and shapes of the animate earth’ (22). On the other hand, our direct experience of the world has always been socially complicated, has always been ‘themed and controlled’, and to forget this is to endorse a certain nostalgia for a mythic, utopian yesteryear when life was simpler. Life was probably never simpler. And for many authors and artists today, coming to terms with the complexities of those forces that ‘warp us away from direct experience’ is simply coming to terms with the very landscapes we live in. Iain Sinclair and Patrick Keiller have both recently taken to the countryside for inspiration, but not to recover any sense of the wild. On the contrary, their writing and films respectively have emphasised the constructed nature of the landscape, bearing witness in important and surprising ways as I will show in Chapter 1.

Macfarlane is not unaware of this, of course, and has written eloquently about ways in which extraordinary ideologies have framed our experience of landscapes such as Beijing before the 2008 Olympics (‘Blitzed Beijing’) and the borderlands between Palestine and Israel (‘Walking on the West Bank’). Nonetheless, criticisms of Macfarlane’s work in *The Wild Places* have begun to emerge, suggesting a number of problems with his approach. Firstly, such a project of literary re-wilding, in embracing the non-human over the human, risks evading the precise ways in which our landscape is ideologically produced. Kathleen Jamie, for example, has mentioned the association of ‘wilderness’ in Scotland with areas of land that have been enclosed and cleared of their human inhabitants (‘A Lone Enraptured Male’; *Personal Email*). Secondly, there have been issues raised with such a project’s reliance on a particular form of first person narrative that puts the author, as an Emersonian ‘transparent eyeball’, in the centre of the frame (5). Any identity theorist will warn you of the dangers of a white middle class man feeling like a ‘transparent eyeball’, however honourable his intentions. Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts have even gone as far as to read a search for romantic solitude into Macfarlane’s search for the wild (9). Finally, DavidMatless has suggested a word of caution on the propensity for enchantment, with its predisposition towards states of wonder, to take on a quality of ‘submission’ (‘Nature Voices’ 185). Over the course of the next two chapters I aim to address these issues that have been raised, not in order to dismiss or
defend Macfarlane's work, but because it raises questions that are significant above and beyond *The Wild Places* for an archipelagic literature more widely. These are debates that explore and interrogate the methods by which our connection to landscape is being re-evaluated.

There are a number of misreadings of *The Wild Places* that ought to be ironed out in the above criticisms, but they also raise the issue of a tension that runs right to the heart of the study of landscape in cultural geography, particularly a tension between Marxist and phenomenological approaches to landscape. According to his *Autobiographical Writings*, John Clare, a poet who has been variously admired for his authentic vision of rural life, penned his first poem after a surprising occasion. On his way home from buying a copy of James Thomson's *The Seasons* he spent a morning reading the extremely popular Romantic collection in the ‘uncommonly beautiful’ scenery of the landscaped gardens of Burghly Park. He had jumped the wall as he ‘did not like to let any body see me reading on the road of a working day’ and such was the aesthetic effect of the lines of poetry and the design of the gardens that he was stirred to write his first poem, ‘A Morning Walk’ (10). So John Clare, of whom it was claimed during his lifetime that ‘he owes no debt to any dead or living author’ (*Critical Heritage* 83), was in fact quite framed within a variety of aesthetic discourses on nature from the beginning. It is an anecdote that demonstrates some of the dangers in which the aesthetics of landscape are mired. Enclosure, pastoral and social class are just a few of these hidden frames that have come under the scrutiny of Marxist cultural geographers of the second half of the twentieth century. For film maker Patrick Keiller, landscape is perpetually haunted by the economic and political pressures that shape it in ways that are often invisible to us but that very often are also guiding the ways in which we view and value it. However, as I shall argue, such a healthy scepticism towards the ways in which landscape is framed does not preclude personal, enchanting and phenomenological accounts of landscape.

On the contrary, recent work in cultural geography has stressed the importance of the practice of landscape as a form of resistance to the ideologies that construct and produce it (Jefferey *et al*.; Lorimer; Thrift). The potential for literature and art to act and to oppose and to intervene in the ideological framing of landscape is one that I hope I have demonstrated in the introduction to this thesis with reference to its roots in the ongoing Common Ground movement. *Praxis* is a crucially important part of Marxist thought and the key area in which Marxism and ecology are brought together in working against neoliberal capitalism as a common enemy (see John Bellamy Foster’s *The Ecological Revolution* for an account of what the two fields have in common). What I hope to show then, in the two chapters that follow, is the need for the phenomenological interventionist aesthetics of environmental literature such as Macfarlane’s to work together with the intellectual project of unmasking that is a part of Marxist landscape geography. These discourse allow us to develop a framework that is able to account for both the human and non-human in our landscape without leading, on the one hand, to a blind endorsement of ‘nature’ as somehow pure and untrammelled and without leading, on the other hand, to a scepticism that ends in paralysis and cynicism. There is the danger of a schism growing between landscape authors today along the lines of Marxist vs environmental, the red vs the green. This would be founded on a
misunderstanding of both the Marxist and the environmental agenda. I hope that these two chapters will address this schism as I begin to formulate a definition of an archipelagic literature and in doing so answer some of the doubts that have been raised concerning the title ‘nature writing’. In such a framework, I will argue, it is possible to see a continuum of landscape literature emerging with Iain Sinclair’s work (in *London Orbital* and *The Edge of the Orison*) at one end and Robert Macfarlane at the other, Kathleen Jamie, Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts, and Patrick Keiller’s films falling at points along the way in the middle.

This tension between the ‘humanly arranged’ and ‘direct experience’ is figured usefully in John Wylie’s book on *Landscape* as a tension between distance, on the one hand, and proximity on the other, and runs to the very heart of what is meant by ‘landscape’ itself. Distance, he suggests, drawing on Raymond Williams, is the realisation that ‘landscape is a particular way of seeing and representing the world from an elevated, detached and even ‘objective’ vantage point [...] akin to other visual technologies (microscopes, telescopes, sextants)’ (3). Such a realisation looks back to the origins of the word ‘landscape’ in painting, the framing of a particular view of land, often from a position of wealth, ownership and power, such a framing as Clare catches a glimpse of when he jumps the wall of Burghly Park. As Stephen Daniels and Dennis Cosgrove remind us ‘[a] landscape park is more palpable but no more real, nor less imaginary, than a landscape painting or poem’ (1). Jonthan Bate strikes upon a similar idea when he suggests that Central Park in New York ‘is a representation which we may experience’ (*Song of the Earth* 64). In this sense, the way of reading the land as somehow framed for us has had a significant impact on the material development of that very land itself for various social and economic uses. Such an approach will help to inform Chapter 1 as I look at the role distance has played in the work of Keiller, Sinclair and Tim Robinson.

In Chapter 2 I will consider the struggle for intimate geographies through a more extended look at Robert Macfarlane’s *The Wild Places*. Proximity, Wylie suggests, drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty, is the realisation that ‘observer and observed, self and landscape, are essentially enlaced and intertwined, in a ‘being-in-the-world’ that precedes and preconditions rationality and objectivity’ (2). In this philosophy, drawing closely on the Heideggerian notion of dwelling, Merleau-Ponty remembers our intimate involvement with the world always as prior to the enframing technologies that distance us from it. The ‘humanly arranged’ here is reclaimed as subjective, personal, corporeal and immediate prior to becoming social, economic and ideological. There is, of course, a danger in this of essentialising a ‘pure’ and ‘natural’ relationship between self/body and the land that teeters on the edge of the nostalgia mentioned above and leads to an idea of ‘oneness’ that need not be implied by the notion of intimacy. Greg Garrard has also described the danger of such essentialising of Heideggerian dwelling in reference to Nazi Germany and the ideology that stressed the relationship between ‘blud und boden’, blood and soil (*Ecocriticism* 112-13). However, viewed as an urgent means of correcting our habitually distanced view of the land, such a philosophy of intimacy in the hands of Merleau-Ponty can be powerfully instructive and can lead to a form of enchantment that is personally engaging. As Jane Bennett argues in *The Enchantment of Modern Life*:}
'one must be enamoured with existence and occasionally even enchanted in the face of it in order to be capable of donating some of one’s scarce mortal resources to the service of others' (4). I will also close Chapter 2 with a consideration of more intersubjective attitudes towards landscape that are open to certain senses of community that the image of the solitary Romantic wanderer excludes, but that are, nonetheless, just as intimate. This will look forward to a more sustained exploration of this topic in Chapter 4.

Negotiating an understanding of landscape through this tension that Wylie identifies here is a tricky business since both views seem to tell a contrasting story that is somehow complete. Remembering W.J.T. Mitchell’s suggestion that we ‘change “landscape” from a noun to a verb’, however, the tension becomes more explicit and workable. Landscape is produced – it is still being produced – ideologically (Landscape and Power 2). Our developments and constructions across the archipelago are landscaping it, shaping and producing it, in ways that are as distanced or as intimate as we choose. But as framed as these landscapes are by nationalist and industrial, economic and political narratives, intervention is not unavailable to us. One of the richest traditions of landscape intervention is in walking, walking as trespass over and transgression of the given, framed view. Walking brings both distant and intimate geographies together in an act that is simultaneously both at once and neither: walking arrives and departs in the same act. It is for this reason that Tim Robinson adopts ‘the step’ as the mythic guiding principle of his writing. He does not believe in the ‘metaphorical appendages’ of ‘roots’; they are too ‘unacceptably vegetable’ an image for human experience (Stone of Aran: Pilgrimage 364). Our connection to the land at our feet is more fleeting, complex, inconsistent and adaptable than the metaphor of roots suggests. If landscape ought to be best rendered as a verb, walking may be read as a performance of landscape, a rootless line of flight that cuts across the given order. As such the history of walking is intricately connected to a history, either of transgression, in the form of vagrancy, trespass and poaching, or of radical thought opposed to the landed and hunting classes. For Donna Landry ‘[w]alking means aligning oneself to some extent with a rebellious reclaiming of common rights, with the dream of liberal freedom, with the ideal of democracy’ (‘Radical Walking’). But it also means a kind of self-imposed exile from the more settled states of acceptance and conformism, and as such it is a curse and quarrel like Sweeney’s that keeps him in an ambiguous state of belonging nowhere. But such a quarrel is at the heart of an archipelagic literature in its struggle to rethink the geopolitical space from the ground up. The following two chapters will go on to explore the way in which walking narratives, for a number of authors today, meet the tensions at the heart of landscape, challenging the conventional framings of the archipelago and struggling to practice new ways of being in, and new ways of reading, the land itself.
CHAPTER 1
DEFRAMING THE ARCHIPELAGO: FROM LANDSCAPE TO NARRATIVE

Emerging out of the AHRC’s ‘Landscape and Environment’ project begun in 2005, Patrick Keiller’s film *Robinson in Ruins* interrogates a particular misunderstanding of landscape associated with an idealised agrarian intimacy. The research project outline suggests that the film was prompted by what appeared to be a discrepancy between, on one hand, the cultural and critical attention devoted to experience of mobility and displacement and, on the other, a tacit but seemingly widespread tendency to hold on to formulations of dwelling that derive from a more settled, agricultural past (Keiller, ‘The Future of Landscape’).

The film takes an unusual form of narrative that, like Keiller’s previous two films, uses the fictional character ‘Robinson’ as its central narrative device. Robinson is a melancholic flâneur of England’s industrial estates, dockyards, suburbs and wastelands who, in this film, turns his attention to the countryside of the south of England. His name looks to Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* as it looks to the verb coined by Rimbaud: ‘robinsonner’, ‘to let the mind wander or to travel mentally’ (Coverley 68). Together they speak of a man marooned on an island and forced to wander mentally and literally, ruminating on what he sees in his isolation which, in turn, recalls Defoe’s own *Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, a non-fiction national survey developed from several years travelling the length and breadth of Britain (1724-27).

‘A few years ago, while dismantling a derelict caravan in the corner of a field, a recycling worker found a box containing 19 film cans and a notebook,’ the film begins. ‘A group of researchers have arranged some of this material as a film, narrated by their institution’s co-founder with the title *Robinson in Ruins*.’ Robinson, it seems, shot these reels before he disappeared. Typically absent, he never speaks himself, but what we watch through the lens of an always completely stationary camera is through his eyes, and what we hear are excerpts from his journal in the voice of a narrator (in this case Vanessa Redgrave) trying to piece together what might have happened to him. Early on, Heidegger’s notion of dwelling and his philosophy of ‘the fourfold’ is satirised in a typically wry moment. The narrator speaks while the camera is fixed on a boarded up and derelict building:

Despite his increasing insubstantiality, Robinson had returned from Lidl with two bottles of Putinoff vodka and several own-brand items in illustrated packaging that recalled the dwelling of black forest farmers which, for Heidegger, let Earth and Heaven, divinities and mortals, enter into simple oneness with things. For which simple oneness Robinson began to search by visiting a well.

The juxtaposition of Heideggerean dwelling and the marketing strategies of a budget European supermarket drink speaks satirically of the dangers of a sentimental nostalgia for a past in which we were better connected with the landscapes around us. After finding the well that Robinson is inspired to go in search of, though not, perhaps, the ‘oneness’, there is a sudden change in the weather and he recalls ‘the purpose of his undertaking’: ‘The next day ten leading climate scientists published a paper warning that
then current CO2 targets were too high for humanity to preserve a planet similar to that on which civilisation developed and would lead, instead, to irreversible disaster.’ Against such a backdrop Robinson’s search for ‘oneness’ looks at best tragically helpless, at worst like an indulgent distraction that wilfully ignores how the myth of such a oneness is being framed by the marketing strategies of late capitalism.

Raymond Williams, in *The Country and the City*, describes how nostalgia for a ‘golden age’, ‘the idealisation of a ‘natural’ or ‘moral’ economy’ in the recent past often serves as a ‘contrast to the thrusting ruthlessness of the new capitalism’ (37). Such a ‘myth functioning as a memory’ (43) *can* serve as a radical call to arms against that very capitalism (often for those with little experience of rural life), though this is generally at the expense of an understanding of the actual history of feudal and pre-feudal social organisation, the ‘uncountable thousands who grew crops and reared beasts only to be looted and burned and led away with tied wrists’ (37). It is more often the case, he suggests, that ‘[a]n idealisation, based on a temporary situation and on a deep desire for stability, served to cover and to evade the actual and bitter contradictions of the time’ (45). This is perhaps what Keiller is pointing towards when he frames his ‘Black Forest farmers’ in budget supermarket packaging, when he frames Robinson’s search for oneness in a reminder of the ‘irreversible disaster’ of climate change, and when he frames the whole film itself in the absence of its protagonist. There is a thread of something absurdly irrecoverable running through each of these, suggesting that ‘oneness’ may not even be a thing of the past and certainly may not be ushered back in at the whim of a melancholic wanderer. To believe it possible at all, it seems to say, is to allow yourself to be manipulated by cheap sentiment that endeavours to ‘cover and evade’ the more pressing difficulties, those ‘actual and bitter contradictions of the time’.

In this chapter I will consider those acts of framing that distance us from landscape, indeed those acts of framing that remind us of the origin of the very word ‘landscape’ in the visual arts as a framed view. ‘The New Nature Writing’, despite claims for it as ‘heterodox and experimental’ (Cowley 10), risks that very ‘evasion’ through its emphasis on presence, on the personal and phenomenological, and on the ‘natural’ and ‘wild’ over the cultural and human. I say ‘risks’ because the truth is more complicated than that. The best ecologically driven writing on landscape at the moment is highly aware that landscape is ideologically produced and politically contested, both in the material form of the land itself and in the individual’s response to the land. Kathleen Jamie, for example, is very careful and very vocal in distancing herself from what Macfarlane is doing in *The Wild Places*, going in search of what is left of the ‘wild’ across the archipelago. I will discuss this critique at length in the following chapter. There is, as in all serious cultural movements, fracture and disagreement, much of which seems to stem from the ambiguity of the genre, and the need for various authors to distance themselves from certain class, conservative, nationalist and romantic tendencies that still cling to it; the degree to which they distance themselves appears to be one of the key issues they disagree on. However, one matter they do agree on is the use of personal narrative as a way of presenting a detailed account of landscape that begins to move out beyond the frame and to confront those ‘bitter contradictions’.
Some have concluded that there is no view beyond the frame, fascinated by the ideological apparatuses that have shaped our way of looking. Often such apparatuses have become a material part of the landscape itself: a road, a folly, a burial mound, a dam. However, a number of writers find themselves drawn to what lies beyond the frame or what lies misunderstood within the frame. For these authors the task is to generate new ways of regarding landscape that are not dominated by ideological frameworks. To do this risks repeating the ills of the past, or ignoring the seriousness with which the ideological frameworks have us at a distance from the world we inhabit, in short it risks searching out an irrecoverable oneness that might appeal, as it has before, to an urban readership.

The huge popularity of the genre currently means that there is also a market pressure on its output and a certain danger of it being seen to conform to public demand. The danger in this is that it may become less willing to ask difficult questions of those more distanced framings of landscape. On the one hand we urgently need more sensitive representations of the beauty and the strangeness of our landscape, representations that inspire us to defend it against the ‘clone town’ planning of corporate chains (Kingsnorth 106). Such writing is a form of intervention in its own right. For some, however, this runs a little close to ‘using the aesthetic as an anaesthetic’, particularly when it is employed instead of communicating a political message (Morton 10). Timothy Morton’s argument here is with John Daniel’s and Scott Slovic’s suggestion that ‘you shouldn’t teach kids about the dire straits of the rainforest. You should take kids out to the stream out back and show them water striders’ (quoted in Morton 10). Grist to the mill for Morton’s argument against nature writing but in reality none of the writers I am discussing here would advocate making such a choice just as none would seek to evade the difficult questions of our time. Obviously, we need the political message and the relationship to the world, but we should be cautious, nonetheless, of the appeal of ‘anaesthetic’ in the marketplace.

In his introduction to the 1981 reissue of Edward Thomas’s In Pursuit of Spring, P.J. Kavanagh warns of the particular dangers faced by Thomas at a time (1914) when such writing was enjoying a boom similar to that of today:

[j]It sometimes seems that no journey was too slight, no observation too trivial – so long as it contained observations of apparent permanence, descriptions of wild flowers, hills, country inns, preferably near London – not to provide a fee for some literary man prepared to pad out the requisite number of pages (3).

Today the popularity of the ‘New Nature Writing’ means that authors need to be doubly careful that they are not exploiting a similar popular demand for what Thomas called ‘the Norfolk-jacket school of writing’ (In Pursuit of Spring 3).

Tim Dee has suggested of this ‘Nature Writing’ today that there are very new challenges to be faced by the authors in their treatment of subject matter:

Country diaries survive in some newspapers but DDT, species losses, and Ted Hughes’ gore-poetics saw off the nice in the 1970s, while nature itself – under the human heel – has been pushed, bloodied, shrunken and ruined to the front of the stage ever since. There, even enfeebled, it has called for new descriptions, fresh thoughts (‘Nature Writing’ 22).
Similarly Owen Hatherly has warned that the Penguin series *English Journeys* might be ‘more about an escape from an urban country in deep crisis’ than an inquiring look at the history of our relationship with the land (48). These are perceptive and intelligent warnings that ought to help us discern between the passive mythologizing of a nostalgic country life and the urgent reformulation of an intimate, ecological and political geography that is steering itself toward those ‘new descriptions, fresh thoughts.’ However, Hatherly’s position is also in danger of condemning as apolitical and escapist any literature not decidedly urban in preoccupation. He does, perhaps, go a little far suggesting that this is an ‘urban country’ when the vast majority of it is not urban, and in doing so risks reproducing the old country/city binary in which the city holds all the cards in an ‘intellectual hegemony’ (Williams, *The Politics of Modernism* 27). The danger is in assuming that any writing that is not urban, or whose focus is not on housing, transport, industry or economics is somehow part of an escapist countryside genre, that the observations of a naturalist, say, might be somehow without politics. What Tim Dee shows is how politicised the natural world has become. That we have influenced the world we live in does not make the archipelago urban; rather, it collapses the whole opposition between urban and rural and finds everywhere a hybrid agency of human and non-human at the same time.

In *Robinson in Ruins*, Keiller’s seemingly natural scenery in the countryside very cleverly alludes to buried fuel pipelines, military spaces, histories of enclosure and a world in economic and ecological crisis. But one of the longest shots is of foxgloves in the wind with no narration to it. We watch for around three minutes with a stream of figures about biodiversity loss still echoing in our ears. The rural idyll has become untenable, certainly, but that does not mean that the only agency in the landscape is human. The silence of these long takes suggests the possibility of restraint, a meeting of cultural and biological agency as the flower blows in and out of frame, however out of control the cultural, and however vulnerable the biological, agencies. The moment echoes an interest in what has been called ‘the unofficial countryside’ by Richard Mabey and more recently, ‘edgelands’, those areas between the country and city that have the quality of being both country and city at once and that challenge the very distinction between the two. Interestingly they are seldom visited places and seldom represented. They are, in a sense, part of the frame rather than the picture of the archipelago, both in an aesthetic and an economic sense; they are incinerators, recycling depots, rubbish dumps, gas holders and big sheds that would otherwise be an eyesore in the landscape, but which the rural and urban surrounding areas both rely on.

Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts have recently set out to explore these hinterlands: wastelands, mines, power stations, industrial estates and such like. ‘Sometimes they are written off,’ they suggest, ‘as part of the urban (or suburban) human landscape that has to be escaped, or transcended, in order to discover true solitude in the wilds of northern Scotland, or on the fringes of our island archipelago’ (8). Their sights are levelled at Macfarlane with this, as when they suggest ‘there would be no tree climbing, and swimming in standing water was out of the question’ (9) and it is hard not to hear an emphasis on ‘True’ in the book’s title (alluding to Macfarlane’s *The Wild Places*): *Edgelands: Journeys into England’s True Wilderness*. It is strange that they take such an issue with Macfarlane’s approach, though,
when he too had trodden similar territory a year earlier in an episode of the BBC series *Natural World*. In this he explored the ‘Wild Places of Essex’ drawing attention to unlikely pockets of wildlife and biological diversity in a place ‘so often dismissed as England’s most run down, built up county’ (2010). The difference, of course, is in what these writers look for in such places. Farley and Roberts are interested in the significance of the human landscape: satellite navigation systems, desire paths, canal detritus. Macfarlane is interested in the remaining beauty and strangeness of wildlife in such places. He claims that:

> As a child I imagined a wild place to be somewhere remote, somewhere I could look out to a horizon untouched by a human hand. But I’ve come to realise that this innocent view of the wild just won’t hold any longer, because no pure landscape exists in modern Britain. There’s no inch of land that we’ve not influenced (‘The Wild Places of Essex’).

It should be remembered that this ‘innocent’ view of the wild is tethered to a long tradition of romantic landscape tourism and the strangely obsessive psychology of mountaineering that he explored in his first book *Mountains of the Mind*, which perhaps marks it out as less ‘innocent’ than it would seem. Nonetheless, showing his connection to that blend of art and activism emerging out of Common Ground, he is unwilling to lapse into a state of melancholy witness before the human-influenced land: ‘At first glance it seems that wildness is extinct here. But I think otherwise, and want to prove that it can still be found’ (‘Wild Places of Essex’). There is a much more complex purpose to this than simply a writer in search of ‘solitude’, but for some reason Farley and Roberts’ read into this the escapism that Hatherly mentions above.

At their most interesting, Farley and Roberts do make an excellent point, even if they are a little misguided in lobbying against Macfarlane. They quote a few lines of poetry by the eighteenth century Quaker poet John Scott who described the wildflowers clustered over an enclosure ditch. A friend of the poet struggled with the ‘shameless modernism’ of remarking on the ditch since it suggested a politically and economically constructed landscape that did not square with a pastoral or a picturesque aesthetic, and they ask ‘[h]ow would he have coped with barbed-wire fencing or the IKEA car park?’ (32)

With this in mind they set about making such ‘shameless modernism’ their project and make numerous rich and fascinating discoveries for it, though it must be said that they seem much more interested in the ditch than the flowers, while Macfarlane might seem more interested in the flowers than the ditch. The two approaches, of course, have more in common than they would like to concede and both betray the influence of Mabey’s *The Unofficial Countryside*, in which the enclosure ditch and the wildflowers are viewed with the same curious scrutiny. All are trying to challenge the ways in which landscapes have been framed, one by drawing attention to the frame, the other by looking more closely at what has been framed. It is strange and slightly depressing, though, to hear the venom directed at Macfarlane in such a statement as: ‘Letting a complacent and hypnotised hoi polloi know how we could see through the mirage didn’t interest us, not least because, the more we travelled through and thought about this landscape, the more we found we admired it’ (9). I hope that we can assume that they are not, in their contrariness, recommending that more of the archipelago be rendered into IKEA car parking. Both Farley and Roberts and Macfarlane end up admiring such landscapes from their own angle, but the
disagreement is testament to how deep the division between country and city still runs in the form of a schism today between natural and human landscapes. It is Sweeney’s curse to be caught in a tension between the two, unable to choose one or the other in the end. I will return to Macfarlane at more length in the following chapter and look at the way he dramatises this tension in a much more convincing fashion that Farley and Roberts, but I would like to turn now to consider the similarities and the differences between a pair of writers more extremely opposed along the country/city axis in an effort to think beyond this opposition to the archipelago beneath. I also want to consider their work in light of the varying attitudes to that sense of distance that is at the heart of our experience of landscape.

On 17th June 2007 the Dublin Writer’s Festival saw an interesting coupling at an event on the subject of ‘remappings’. Tim Robinson read from the first of his books on Connemara alongside Iain Sinclair, who read from his London Orbital. The festival advertised the two as rural/urban counterparts, and it is a curious and, for the purposes of this chapter, quite provoking comparison (‘Mapping the Literary Landscape’). In a sense the two writers are quite opposite, even down to the level of style. Tim Robinson’s long, ruminating clauses that breathlessly follow a fixated line of thought contrast Sinclair’s tightly wound, interrupted syntax with its dearth of active verbs. One speaks of time and space to write while other of snatched fragments and half-heard voices. And yet their projects do bear comparison in terms of genre and method. Both defamiliarise a pre-framed landscape by walking out into it with a fresh line of enquiry. Both are essayists guided by personal narrative. Both use walking and the narrative that ensues to intervene, to rewrite the places they write about. Robinson begins Stones of Aran, having recently finished mapping the Aran Islands, walking out the coastal edge of a bygone colonial administration poring over the mess that the Ordnance Survey made of it on paper and looking to ‘make amends’ (Setting Foot 3). Sinclair begins London Orbital on foot ‘at the most tainted spot on the map of London’ (Greenwich, the site of the Millennium Dome) (44). Both are oddly connected by this same oppressive heart of darkness in an archipelagic resonance that spans the width of the Isles.

The difference, perhaps, lies in the fact that, while Robinson escapes its clutches to remap what always lay beyond its grasp, Sinclair is fascinated with the centre of power itself, the impossibility of separating what has fused between its grip and what it grips. London Orbital is concerned with the edge of London, the M25 as ‘a circle in salt’ or even as ‘a security collar fixed to the neck of a convicted criminal’ (487, 11). As such it shares a liminality with Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage, though it is of a very different kind. It sees Sinclair take to the footpaths and tracks around the M25 asking after a landscape that seems to have disappeared beneath our use of it. The road simultaneously carries hundreds of thousands of us over the land every day and completely blinds us to the places that it passes through, whether by speed of
travel or the literal landscaping of verges and sound barriers. But for Sinclair it is the road itself that seems to hold the real fascination as the monstrous architecture of political discourse. It was once ‘the pride of an autocratic government’ and has become ‘a rage-inducing asteroid belt’ (11). The road slowly takes on the form of a mythic creature magnetised with superstition: ‘Nobody can decide how long the road is, somewhere between 117 and 122 miles’ (7); ‘The noise of the motorway changed from nuisance to a chorus of oracular whispers, prompts, mangled information. Which we had volunteered to transcribe and interpret’ (*The Edge of the Orison* 7). He even suggests toward the end that in the geography of *Dracula* ‘[Bram] Stoker predicted the M25’ and ‘made its physical construction tautologous’ (2003 487). The landscape Sinclair describes is post-urban and post-rural, defined by the presence of the road itself, which sits on the border between the two: ‘Landscape floats. It is there to be seen from passing cars not experienced first hand’, he suggests of the same Essex that Macfarlane works so hard at (515). Sinclair, in a much more committed, confident and angry way, was tackling edgelands long before Farley and Roberts, and without any of their indifferent acceptance.

Just as Patrick Keiller turned his attention on the countryside of the south for *Robinson in Ruins*, in *London Orbital* and in his slightly later *The Edge of the Orison*, Sinclair, a writer of urban London, feels it is timely to journey beyond the city limits. In *The Edge of the Orison*, he strikes out of the M25’s ‘security collar’ for a rural walk, retracing the footsteps of John Clare who, in 1841, left the asylum of his latter years on the edge of London to travel the 90 odd miles back to Northborough in search of his childhood love Mary. Clare’s lifetime saw some of the most dramatic changes to the land around his home in Northamptonshire as those signs of ‘shameless modernism’, the enclosure ditches, were dug and common ground was made private (Farley and Roberts 32). But the enclosure acts continued long after Clare’s life with forty per cent of the area of common land existing in 1858 being enclosed by 1958 – nothing short of one million acres in all – according to the Royal Commission on Common Land (Shoard 416). Enclosure comes under Sinclair’s eye as well as he ventures beyond the urban environment in a startling and unsettling passage that undermines and deconstructs the idea of an intimate, natural, country life. Published in 2006, just six years after the ‘Right to Roam’ act received Royal Assent and began to be implemented, Sinclair sounds a call of too little, too late:

Lurid sunshine on a red-grey road. No cars, no delivery vans, no people. Welcome to Middle England. Xanaxshire, in the wake of the Lloyds fiasco, the debt mountain, the Blairite establishment of urban fixers and spinners (no fox hunting, acres of GM crops), is the home of dolour. State-sponsored clinical depression. Valium villages under the ever-present threat of imported sex-criminals and Balkan bandits; human landfill dumped in an off-highway nowhere, an uneconomic airship hangar, a reclaimed bunker. Enclosure, suddenly, is a personal matter: you have been shrink-wrapped in your own skin and you can’t get out. That’s when the blameless horizon, that wood, those hills, begins to hurt. Immaculate properties from catalogue. New furniture under plastic sheeting. Television sets murmuring softly in empty rooms (19).

Here enclosure becomes more than the demarcation and fencing in of common land. It becomes more than distanced framing; it becomes a *geist* pervading a clean and quiet social way of being; it becomes, finally, intimate, a ‘personal matter’ of being ‘shrink-wrapped in your own skin’; ‘clinical depression’,

45
‘valium villages’: enclosure has entered the body. Essentially what we see in Sinclair is a re-complication of that ‘shameless modernism’ that sees the evidence of enclosure reach a great deal further than a ditch or a fence. As Alex Jeffrey et al. have discussed, enclosure is more than a material process of the distant past; it is alive and well today around the world, an instrument for neoliberal capitalism in rural and urban areas alike. There is an established framework of social and legal process to it, the forms it affects on the landscape just the tip of a much larger cultural iceberg. It recalls Daniels and Cosgrove’s description of a park as ‘more palpable but no more real, nor less imaginary, than a landscape painting or poem’, though for ‘park’ we are to take the whole of ‘Middle England’ for Sinclair here (1). It is precisely the palpability of ideologically produced landscapes that is their threat to the future for Sinclair. The project, then, for his walks lately, has been to intimately remap the palpable landscapes produced by the grand narratives of political administration.

Sinclair sets out to intimately explore landscapes that are formed by distant ideological frameworks. In London Orbital again: ‘The trick was to move back, step away, treat the road as a privileged entity, a metaphor of itself’ (14). However, the requisite ‘step back’ is also, in fact, a ‘step to’. He chooses to explore the M25 on foot; the step back is the step out of a car, the slowing of the pace from 60mph or faster to about 3mph, getting off the tarmac for footpaths and overpasses: ‘yes, I want to walk around the orbital motorway: in the belief that this nowhere, this edge, is a place that will offer fresh narratives’ (16). Might these be the ‘new descriptions, fresh thoughts’ that Tim Dee is asking for? In part, I would argue yes, they ought to be in the way they confront this changed and changing landscape clearly and honestly. And yet there is all too often a sense of hopelessness in London Orbital, a sense that we have lost the fight already, and in this there is something quite modernist about the project, a description of place that still rings with the richly despondent vision of Baudelaire’s Tableaux Parisien. At times it lacks the hope that is forcing other writers today into forms of activism.

However, there are ‘fresh narratives’ here that contribute to a literary re-mapping of the archipelago and appeal to a ballooning readership. Like Aran for Tim Robinson, the landscape of the M25 is considered a ‘nowhere’, an ‘edge’ to be recuperated from beneath the politicised narratives of its metropolitan administration. Sinclair’s quest, like Robinson’s, needs the ground beneath its feet, it needs material for its own ‘world-hungry art of words’ (Stone of Aran: Pilgrimage 19). But in the end London Orbital feels more like a gargantuan deconstruction of the motorway than a recovery of what it occludes. It draws our attention to the ugly truth of what we have done to the landscapes of the archipelago by being guided by one of those ugly truths. The form is given by the road, not what he finds of the land underneath. Robinson’s first book charts an orbital passage as well but his is guided by a coastline that presents its own very different questions. In this sense, Sinclair’s work is a measure of distance, however intimate that measure might in fact be and however much it might trespass over what it measures.

The enclosure acts in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries meant that trespassing was increasingly hard to avoid for the early pedestrian and that the very act of walking became associated, simultaneously, with vagrants and intellectuals. Again, as Sinclair shows, those enclosure acts have
amplified down the centuries until the walker is him or herself framed within a network of more and more distanced landscape practices: industrial agriculture, large-scale shopping mall developments, ring-roads, high-speed rail links or even sustainable resource development. Sean O’Brien, in a review of Sinclair’s recent *Ghost Milk*, noted that ‘The Lea Valley, where the Olympic site is being constructed, may be Sinclair’s equivalent of John Clare’s Swordy Well, with the Olympic authorities and the borough of Hackney’s Labour administration, led by his bête noire, the Mayor, Jules Pipe (the book’s dedicatee), as the agents of enclosure’ (11). Sinclair’s project can at times feel powerless to change what it is most angry about. This may be due to the scale of the forces it is opposing and the simple fact that it cannot change what it is most angry about; but it may also be due to the echo it has of the passive witness, the *flâneur*, or even the paranoid clue-finding of the psychogeographer, both of which seem, at times, to eclipse the interventionist practice of the trespasser or the activist.

Merlin Coverley reminds us that Patrick Keiller has criticised psychogeography for becoming ‘increasingly preoccupied with its own practices as an end in themselves, no longer the tool of any larger political or even cultural project but simply a self-contained and self-immersed movement with little significant impact on the environment whose redevelopment it has so vocally denounced’ (Coverley 28-9). It is hard to level this criticism at such angry prose as Sinclair’s, serving as it does as a mouthpiece for a growing, disaffected, voting readership in London, but there is a tendency that Sean O’Brien notices for the work to be ‘predicated on defeat’ (12). Perhaps this is a crisis of where to go next from modernism again, the paralysis of Adorno’s call for autonomy challenged by a generation of avant-garde activists who are simply unwilling to accept the diagnosis of defeat. At times Sinclair seems caught between the two.

A few miles to the east but running parallel to the route he takes in *The Edge of the Orison*, and coming off the M25 at junction 26 is the M11, plans for the link road of which were opposed with one of the largest and longest direct action protests of its kind. The development throughout the 90s had seen five-hundred houses forcibly requisitioned and demolished despite many of the residents refusing to vacate their properties. Activists came from across the country to protest against the building of the road, even, at one point, occupying the roof of the house of the then Minister for Transport John MacGregor in Muswell Hill (kriptick). The battle was lost though, and the road was built and opened in 1999. In 2003, the artist Graeme Miller created a work around a four mile walk over and under the M11 link road in East London called *Linked*. You have to pick up earphones and a map from a local library in Hackney and as you follow the route the earphones receive signals from transmitters fixed to lampposts or trees along the way. These transmitters will play you short reflective pieces from interviews with the people displaced by the building of the road. Carl Lavery describes the work as ‘a sonic memorial’ to the families whose homes were destroyed ‘so that commuters could reach the nearby City of London in time for
work’ (149). So, for example, as Toby Butler recounts, you can stand on an overpass with traffic gushing beneath you and listen to the following:

I know that if my house was still there, it would be hanging in space above the inside northbound lane. I can still feel myself in that place, that bit of air, the place where I lay down to go to bed, the place where I had showers, I feel a bit naked suspended in the air there (79).

There is an eerie sense of false-limb syndrome on the scale of a landscape here. Lavery cites Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde* suggesting that this is a work that responds to his attack on ‘the Modernist idea of art as an activity or transcendence divorced from life itself’ (Lavery 151). The work is a direct attempt to ‘combat amnesia’ or to ‘contest […] this invisibility, this erasure’ (Lavery 149), something much more closely affiliated with the kind of ‘rescue archaeology’ that Robinson had been engaged with on Aran (Robinson, *Setting Foot* 13). The problem here, of course, is that the intimate geography is, again, one of tarmac, traffic, concrete and girders; the intimate geography is one predicated precisely on that enframing distance; and beneath this is the haunting of a personal voice, poignant and intimate in itself, but fragile, all but vanished. The difference, though, between Miller’s ‘walk of art’ and Sinclair’s is that Miller takes the form of his walk from the accounts he records in interview, leading the walker as close as possible to the prior domestic geography as they are able; Sinclair takes the form of the M25. Sinclair is, again, more closely affiliated with an older modernist past of bearing witness than with the possibility of a more socially engaged, politically active form of intervention. Miller’s object is to momentarily wrestle against the narrative imposed by the M11 and to achieve a kind of communion between the walker and the displaced voice:

a kind of mutual surface for where your voice meets other peoples […] for that reason slowing things down is very desirable, because it filters out, it creates a kind of architecture of space that is the equivalent of silence actually, it is like a little church, you are creating a little church on a street corner that filters out the background (Miller, quoted in Butler 83).

We recall Keiller’s long silent shots of the wild flowers here where, by restraint, a similar ‘mutual surface’ is discovered. In a sense Miller’s work goes further still as it requires of its ‘audience’ (though the term seems inadequate here) that they in some sense create the work for themselves by walking; they are in part the agent of that ‘architecture of space’.

For Michel de Certeau, ‘space’ is what we create within an urban ‘place’ by moving across it (Buchanan 102); space is the assertion of our performative freedom within and against the restriction of such freedom by the architecture and legal discourse of streets, alleys, towers, stairways and subways. For de Certeau the walk is a creative act, an ‘enunciative focalisation’, tied to a system of signification (de Certeau, *The Practice of everyday Life* 116). Such spatial and performative signification offers us a way of opposing the framing of a landscape; it is a method of intervention and one that finds its literary form in the first person narrative, what de Certeau calls ‘the tour’ as opposed to ‘the map’: where the map frames from above, the tour describes from the ground; it is rooted in the personal and resists the institutional (118-122). This is not to say that ‘tours’ are without ideology. Early chorographers’ tours had an agenda of nationalism (and they were often accompanied with maps and atlases). Defoe’s *Tour Through of the Whole*
Island of Great Britain has a distinct economic and political agenda, and many of the authors and books I am looking at have a political axe to grind as well, but, just as early tours were used to fill out the blank spaces in our knowledge of the archipelago, such tours today are being used to challenge and interrogate what we think we know about the archipelago. Tours suggest that the map is insufficient; they set out to reframe their subject.

De Certeau is usually considered in relation to the Situationists or to schools of psychogeography since the constructed nature of the urban environment is so clearly an ideological production and is therefore legible. But Stephen E. Hunt has suggested the term ‘psychoecology’ for work like Macfarlane’s, Mabey’s and Deakin’s drawing on affinities with Sinclair and Will Self, and emphasising the ‘agency of the writer in constructing as well as describing the natural world’ (‘The Emergence of Psychoecology’ 76). In light of the breakdown of that urban/rural binary that Keiller and Sinclair have recently been prompting, we can also read de Certeau in relation to a history of non-urban pedestrianism that is equally as radical, arguably more practically interventionist, and much older. It is this history that it would serve us well to read around the work of Miller’s Linked project as it turns its audience here into pedestrians cutting across the motorway and reconnecting with the ghosts above and below it.

Donna Landry dates the rise of pedestrianism as a leisure activity to the eighteenth century and to a disgruntled, intellectual non-conformism among free-thinking undergraduates and lower members of the clergy that rejected the sporting privileges of the landed gentry in favour of a ‘levelling’ of class distinction (The Invention of the Countryside 126-7). For Miller, this distinction has amplified down the centuries in a similar way that enclosure has for Sinclair (there is, of course, a strong link between hunting districts and enclosure). What remains true is the distinction between the walker with his or her feet on the ground and the landed gentry on horseback, evolved here into the commuting motorist. The importance of linking Miller’s work, and also Sinclair’s later less urban work to an extent, with pedestrianism rather than psychogeography is in making the distinction between the passive flâneur and the interventionist trespasser.

Jeremy Burchardt, developing the history begun by Landry, has explored the rise in popularity of rambling among the working classes during the interwar years of the twentieth century, culminating in the Kinder Trespass on 24th April 1932, when several hundred labourers from Manchester set out to claim their right to climb Kinder Scout in the Peak District (Paradise Lost 71). He doubts that the trespass itself had much of a direct impact on the National Parks Act of 1949 or on government legislation relating to rights of way (the Right to Roam Act didn’t come into play until 1999 and the Countryside and Rights of Way Act in 2000) but he does also signal that this is still up for debate. Certainly the trespass itself is still celebrated as a socially and culturally empowering moment, recognised today with a ‘Trespass Trail’ that you can freely walk. On the 50th anniversary of the trespass a plaque was placed at the beginning of the trail and on the 75th anniversary in 2009 a series of popular events saw David Miliband oversee the naming of a train after the leader of the trespass, Benny Rothman, and give a rousing speech suggesting that, in his view at least, there would have been no National Parks Act without the Kinder Trespass.
(kindertrespass.com). To read Miller and Sinclair’s work, across the country/city binary, in the context of this rise of radical pedestrianism and the ramblers’ acts of trespass, is to site it in a history of interventionist action rather than surveying spectatorship. The walk becomes more than the flâneur’s gaze; it becomes an embodied act of resistance, Sweeney’s curse pushed from enervation, dislocation and suffering to social conscience and that ‘stretched moral sense of the possible’ (Bennett 32). Keiller suggests an affiliation to an even earlier form of interventionist insurrection when he calls to mind the 1596 Oxfordshire uprising when four men endeavoured to gather an army and march on London to fight the enclosure of their land. The men were soon arrested, hung, drawn and quartered, but for Keiller, the parallel is clear:

In retelling this story in the context of the current ‘revolution of the rich against the poor’ – the rise of the super-rich in the UK in recent decades has been compared with that of the gentry in the late 16th and early 17th centuries – the film appears to endorse violent insurrection, especially against Oxfordshire gentlemen (Daniel Rugo ‘An Interview with Patrick Keiller’).

In their ‘Rethinking Enclosure: Space, Subjectivity and the Commons’, Alex Jeffrey, Colin McFarlane and Alex Vasudevan describe how active and powerful enclosure still is today, but they also suggest that more light should be shed on what they call ‘enclosure’s other: strategies and practices of communing [...] which assemble more inclusive, just and sustainable spaces’ (2). Such practices depend on what they call ‘insurgent citizenship’ and creative, direct action tactics to challenge the legal tactics of enclosure (10). They do not give very many examples of this ‘commoning’, and the majority of the article is dedicated to identifying strategies of enclosure, but there is what Gramsci called ‘the optimism of the will’ to accompany ‘the pessimism of the intellect’, one that is all too often missing from such attacks on neoliberal capitalism; a desire for praxis as well as critical distance (Gramsci, *Letters from Prison* 299). Jeffrey et. al. go on: ‘we are interested in rethinking the relationship between the “creativity of common living” and “a phenomenology of revolutionary praxis”’ (16). It is such a relationship that is alive in the more ecologically driven literature that has been emerging from 1972 onwards. It challenges the pessimism of intellect in the work of Keiller, Sinclair, Farley and Roberts, to act, to develop its own ‘phenomenology of revolutionary praxis’ just as they challenge the work of Macfarlane and Deakin not to ignore the signs of a constructed and produced landscape. Here we can look back to Peter Bürger’s argument with High Modernism’s autonomy and Tim Robinson’s move to the Aran Islands as a way to rethink how, as an artist, he could find a positive position in terms of social relations. This was also something very close to Graeme Miller’s mind when he was creating *Linked*: ‘Artists are meant to be that bit more resourceful, that bit better at lateral thinking, quicker to react, and they could have a useful role to play in the tiny acts of micropolitics that make a difference to the macropolitics that make a difference’ (quoted in Lavery 148). What I am hoping to show with this and the next chapter is that these two projects are in fact necessary and complimentary, and even that they each have within them their other: Macfarlane on the wastelands of Essex (*Wild Places of Essex*); and Keiller’s images of the foxglove (*Robinson in Ruins*).

What I want to challenge here is the notion that one group of authors and artists reveal the framework of our landscapes while the other evades it. This is simply not what has been happening. As
such, for the rest of this chapter I will be looking at Tim Robinson’s orbital walk around the Aran Islands as a kind of counter to Sinclair’s *London Orbital*. As I have said, and as the Dublin Writer’s Festival suggested, both are engaged in a similar project of literary pedestrianism that, in a sense, challenges the ways in which we frame our landscapes, and for both there is an inevitable distance in our experience of land, but instead of taking a man-made construction to guide him (like the M25), Robinson takes the coast of the Aran Islands. Such a simple methodological difference forces him to confront the geological as an agency that influences his own, and the Aran islanders’ own, agency. This also makes it easier for him to contemplate the possibility of seeing beyond the distancing technologies that frame our experience of landscape and to writing something that challenges and corrects the way in which such framings have misunderstood this landscape. One of the first ways in which he does this is through the remapping of the islands in the wake of the Ordnance Survey’s botched nineteenth century attempts that betrayed an insensitivity and contempt for Irish culture. Far from being an escape from a socially engaged and politically active life in search of something simpler, Aran becomes a complicated site through which Robinson endeavours to recover a landscape on the brink of being lost. It is, of course, often already lost like those people Miller interviews who used to live where the M11 link road now runs. This is a process riddled with self-doubt and self-correction, much of which he writes into the body of his prose.

At the behest of the island post-mistress, before he had begun work on *Stones of Aran*, Robinson began to make this map of the island, something that meant meticulously recording all the place names he could on foot, talking to the locals and finding that the Ordnance Survey maps were not just out of date, and did not just anglicise the subtle music of the Gaelic place names, but were often simply wrong topographically. It was a task that threw him right into the wreckage of colonial administration, political contestation and the complex social and economic history of the islands, not to mention the depth and intricacy of the ecological and natural history of the area. I shall describe the process of remapping at length in Chapter 4, but for now I want to focus on the walking that would give the first book its form. The ‘Pilgrimage’ of Robinson’s first volume of *Stones of Aran* marks a real turning point for the rural essay in the twentieth century, published a number of years before Sinclair and Keiller venture out of their cities, dockyards and industrial wastelands. It simply bears no relation to the very ‘English’ countryside tradition of the likes of Adrian Bell, H.J. Massingham and Henry Williamson. Robinson’s move, and the environmental radicalisation of a certain cultural thread of the avant-garde in the late 60s, early 70s, had begun to make it impossible for such writing to be fuelled by nationalism, especially in a landscape that had been so culturally vandalised by the English, of whose stock he himself had descended. Similarly, the urgency of its feeling for ecology and social engagement separates it from an Irish tradition too, either that of J.M. Synge’s *The Aran Islands* (1907) or even Robert Lloyd Praeger’s *The Way That I Went* (1937), both of which it, at times, resembles. Robinson’s commitment to pace out every square inch of the islands with such a fastidious attention to detail and, in his own words, to ‘make amends’, puts it in quite an unprecedented and historically singular category (3).
In a sense that first pilgrimage of Robinson’s around the perimeter of the island is the definitive example of an intimate geography intervening — to potent political effect — in the enframing of the island by a culture some several hundred miles and a whole language distant. And yet, under no circumstances do we get a geography of a mythologised ‘oneness’. Too great is his capacity for self-doubt. It is also this self-doubt that separates the book from the tradition of walking literature that it bears comparison to.

From Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Les Rêveries du Promeneur Solitaire* in 1782, through William Hazlitt’s ‘On Going a Journey’ in 1821 and the long tradition of walking essays that follow, there is an association of walking with radical thought and action that echoes the tradition that Landry identifies, so much so, however, that it risks becoming a literary trope: the breaking free from restriction/commitment/tradition, the return to nature/Nature/Wilderness, the love of solitude. Rebecca Solnit has noticed that, swiftly after prizing its unfettered liberty, the walking essay as genre has a habit of laying down some firm ground rules in the form of a litany of modal verbs as to precisely how one should/must/ought to behave while walking (120–22). She even notes that today on the isle of poplars where Rousseau is buried the visitor is instructed ‘not only how to walk through the garden toward the tomb but how to feel’ (22).

The self-doubt and characteristic humility of Robinson’s every step mean that he never falls foul of this kind of didacticism. *Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage* is a laborious documentary record of years spent walking the remote southern cliffs and the sparsely populated northern beaches of the island, bringing together accounts from the lives of fishermen, kelp-burners, farmers, folklorists, visitors, map-makers, botanists (the list goes on) in an effort to better understand the place itself. The term ‘pilgrimage’ is an interesting one here in relation to the pedestrianism and trespass I have already looked at, especially seeing as he is openly an atheist (*Personal Interview* 7). ‘Imagine,’ he asked an audience at the Cumman Merriman in 2003, that in a few hundred years time humanity has put aside all its misguided supernatural beliefs and turned its religious instincts to the Earth, the true author of our being. Then a rite will be called for to celebrate this thoroughly realist and romantic-materialist cult of the Earth. This rite will be the Visiting of Places, to contemplate them in all their particularity (2003 51).

In turning those ‘religious instincts’ to the Earth, he shows that he retains a qualitative valuation of the religious instinct and suggests rather a redirection of them. Don’t be enchanted with something transcendental, he suggests, something over and above this world. This world is valuable and significant in its own right, without the validation of a Christian philosophy. Robinson’s ‘pilgrimage’ is not a religious one; it is a pilgrimage ‘with eyes raised to this world rather than lowered in prayer’; it is not at a ‘penitential trudge but at an inquiring, digressive and wondering pace’ (25). That said, Robinson’s particular style of walk does retain something of the humility and self-doubt that a pilgrimage might. It has at its heart a grave uncertainty steered by that tension between distance and intimacy that is so central to the argument of this and the following chapter. For Robinson though, we do not need evidence of the way in which the land has been shaped to feel a distance from it. Distance is at the heart of the human experience of land for him. It is a tension described early on in his philosophy of ‘the good step’:

52
I was on a summer’s beach one blinding day watching the waves unmaking each other, when I became aware of a wave, or a recurrent sequence of waves, with a denser identity and more purposeful momentum than the rest. This appearance, which passed by from east to west and then from west to east and so on, resolved itself under my stare into the fins and backs of two dolphins (*Stone of Aran: Pilgrimage* 19).

Seeing these dolphins engenders a moment of epiphany when he realises that ‘their unity with their background […] was an intensification of their medium into alert, reactive self-awareness; they were the wave made flesh, with minds solely to ensure the moment-by-moment reintegration of body and world.’ Here we can recall the intimacy that David Abram describes as the body’s ‘open circuit’ ‘comple[ting] itself […] in things’ (62). Robinson sees how both their bodies and their consciousnesses are intimately connected to the water and the water’s movements. The dolphins seem to emerge from it both as a long-developed species and ‘moment-by-moment’ with an intimate reciprocity. The moment takes on a utopian visionary quality that helps to guide the rest of the book, and many other books since. Whether or not we agree that this is a dolphin’s experience of the world, we can see how it might appeal to Robinson where he is stood on the edge of the human continent. However, it is a cause for melancholy as much as admiration. ‘[A] dolphin may be its own poem,’ he goes on but we have to find our rhymes elsewhere, between words in literature, between things in science, and our way back to the world involves us in an endless proliferation of detours.

Let the problem be symbolised by that of taking a single step as adequate to the ground it clears as is the dolphin’s arc to its wave. Is it possible to think towards a human conception of this “good step”? (*Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage* 19)

In that ‘single step as adequate to the ground as the dolphin’s arc’ we can see something of the desire for a careful and considered ethics of intimacy in the landscape. Remembering Williams’ warning though, he is careful to tell us that the good step is not ‘nostalgia for imaginary states of past instinctive or future theological grace’ (19) It is something more pragmatic, driven by the need to search out that ‘positive position’ of his days as an environmental artist, moment by moment, socially, economically and artistically. In a sense the pilgrimage of this first book is one in fact questing after this good step, one adequate step out of the many that make up the journey around the perimeter of the island. It is an (admittedly utopian) attempt at trespass over, not so much the history and architecture of land development here, as the psychological sense of distance that is at the heart of our experience of landscape as the seed of such development.

However, this ideal, he suggests, is ‘inconceivable’, making the goal of the pilgrimage, step by step, infinitely deferred (*Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage* 363). Robinson cannot escape the framing of landscape and attain to that ‘oneness’ any more than his namesake in Patrick Keiller’s *Robinson in Ruins*. Even on the outer edge of Europe with nothing but limestone cliffs behind him and an Atlantic sunset ahead, he finds himself inhabiting Sweeney’s curse, haunted by a sense of not belonging either to a human world or a natural one. He is unable to walk himself out of the grip of our distanced relation to the land because that distance lies within us too. Far from evading the sense of loss, John Wylie has read into this ‘a
displacement of land and life from each other – a displacement which is *originary* (‘Dwelling and Displacement’ 2).

Does he then turn his attention, like Sinclair, to the encumbrance itself, mythologizing the distance with a certain degree of paranoia? Or does he, like Miller, memorialise what is lost beneath the imposition of our human readings of the land? In a sense, neither. That the step to the world is inconceivable for Robinson is no reason to stop trying. The ideal of the good step serves as a metaphor and a measure against which he tests what he writes. It becomes the transcendental signifier that he refuses to acknowledge in God. Robinson’s becomes a literary pilgrimage ever seeking – in the words of that other great Irish author of the infinitely deferred – to fail better: ‘Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better’ (Beckett 81).

For Robinson, the intimacy of the ‘the good step’ might be impossible, exposure, proximity and contact never leading us to a mythical ‘oneness’ like the dolphin. However, what is discovered is that ‘endless proliferation of detours’ that, while distancing us from the land, leads us into multiple thoughts about, engagements of, and relations to it nonetheless. As Wylie suggests, it is precisely because the good step is impossible ‘that we have something to say’ (32). In this proliferation of detours, step by infinitely deferred step, failure by failure, the place becomes landscaped anew in the mind of the walker, rewritten and remapped. And walking is the perfect metaphor for this quixotic work, each step trying anew what the last step was unable to achieve.

Robinson takes another step, though he knows it will be consigned to failure, and for him this is out of a deep commitment to the places he writes about. He will come again, try anew. ‘[O]nce again I have failed to be in this strange place,’ he comments, walking away from Dún Aonghasa, ‘this knot of stone from which the sky has broken out. So I promise to come back and try again, to approach it from a different angle, take it by storm or moonlight, bring a measuring tape or a bottle of wine.’ (*Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage* 109) This is walking as a restless, intimate performance of landscape, haunted by the inadequacy of our present understanding, hoping that, though the totality may be beyond reach and unknowable, by walking out and seeing for ourselves we might bring our understanding into a number of better alignments, actively challenging the lazy eye of an industrial or colonial reading of the land.

But the difference here is an important one: Robinson is guided by the forms he finds beneath the administrative framework; geological, folkloric, botanical, historical forms; Sinclair is guided by the very form of that administrative framework, in the instance of *London Orbital*, the M25, in other instances the Millennium Dome, the Olympics site. Robinson is searching for an intimate geography with which to correct the popularly accepted one. Many of the places he names on his map of the island are being mapped for the first time. I do not mean to suggest that Robinson is successful where Sinclair fails here, but rather I hope to have demonstrated the different ways in which the two of them negotiate their ways around remapping. Robinson’s acknowledgement of the distance in play at the heart of our experience of landscape leads him to a proliferation of self-confessed ‘failed’ geographical intimacies. Sinclair does something similar but their intimacies are with two different aspects of the landscape of the archipelago,
Robinson’s with an island group, Sinclair’s with a motorway. We need both of these literary geographies that wrestle in their different ways with our condition of distance from the places we live. Both explore the various ‘proliferations of detours’ we find ourselves in, enjoying the replenishing complexities of the never-quite-arrived-at world. Though they may never arrive at oneness, in their distance they do achieve an intimacy which I will explore further in the next chapter. Unlike oneness, intimacy requires a distance if it is to mean anything at all. Intimacy is about closing the gap rather than sealing it over; it is about the relationship of distinct things in close proximity.

On the south west coast of Arainn, at the foot of its two-hundred and fifty foot limestone cliffs, about three quarters of the way up the island, there is a cave called An Poll Dubh, or ‘the black hole’, in which a piper is said to have wandered, never to be seen again. The folklore of the island has it, though, that inland under the village of Creig an Chéirín his music can still sometimes be heard. Robinson absorbs this story into a personal mythology, suggesting:

Thus: the artist finds deep-lying passages, unsuspected correspondences, unrevealed concordances, leading from element to element of reality, and celebrates them in the darkness of the solipsism necessary to his undertaking, but at best it is a weak and intermittent music, confused by its own echoes and muffled by the chattering waters of the earth, that reaches the surface-dweller above; nor does the artist emerge; his way leads on and on, or about and about (Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage 129).

That one can ‘find’ ‘deep-lying passages, unsuspected correspondences’ and ‘unrevealed concordances’ in the darkness of ‘solipsism’, and for that solipsism to be inspired by so real a place, and by a story that he discovers due to an interest in the local culture seems a curious contradiction that goes to the heart of that tension between the humanly arranged and our direct experience of the world, and to the heart of the sense of displacement and distance that make intimacy meaningful. We have worked the world over in our image, producing landscapes that emanate from a distance, the seed of which lies within our own psychological condition like the double exile of Sweeney’s curse. But it is precisely this flaw and this distance that leaves us free to re-imagine, remap and rewrite the world anew. This distance and the impossibility of any kind of oneness ought not to paralyse us but rather to liberate us into a realisation of the imaginative and creative possibilities of a way that cannot help but lead ‘on and on, or about and about’, turning Sweeney’s flight from a curse into an empowered emancipation. This stance will help as a starting point from which to move on and approach the idea of landscape from the point of view of an intimate geography.
CHAPTER 2
ENCHANTED CROSSINGS: TOWARDS A POLITICS OF INTIMACY

I have explored several ways in which our relationship to the land has been figured by a number of authors and artists as a way of countering the evasive nostalgia that Raymond Williams has warned us against. I have shown how these authors and artists draw our attention to palpable ideological frameworks within the landscape, within the land itself and within the way we regard it culturally. I have demonstrated that this process works right across a culturally produced boundary between urban and rural landscapes revealing this boundary to be much less useful as our impact on the environment becomes more apparent and more acknowledged. Finally, in a discussion of Tim Robinson, I have shown that, even at the heart of the search for an intimate sense of geography on the very edge of the archipelago, there is still an insurmountable distance that sends us off into that ‘endless proliferation of detours’ (Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage). But I hope that I have begun to demonstrate that this is also what liberates us to re-imagine the world, and to re-imagine it in a way that need not be an exercise in solipsism, that it can rather be led by a sensitive and responsive creativity that is able to make something intimate out of the distances we feel. Far from being opposed, intimate and distanced understandings of landscape can contribute together to an experience that accommodates both that pessimism of intellect that stems from the more Marxist view of landscape and an urgent optimism of the will that calls upon the social conscience to develop that interventionist stance. In what follows I intend to move on from an understanding of the framed landscape to what Antonio Negri has called ‘a phenomenology of revolutionary praxis’ and the ways in which this might offer up the possibility of an artistic ‘commoning’ of the land (Antonio Negri, qtd in Jeffrey et. al. 16).

In this chapter I will explore how this tension between the intimate and the distant is mapped from the point of view of Robert Macfarlane’s The Wild Places where he explores the potential of intimate landscapes as sites of personal and communal cultural resource. Such narratives become, for him, reasons for conserving and protecting those landscapes and contribute to a philosophy that endeavours to locate thought and culture as an emergent property of our interactions with our environment. I will also consider Kathleen Jamie’s critique of Macfarlane and, later, her own very different exploration of landscape as intimate. Out of the friction between Jamie’s and Macfarlane’s two very different approaches I will end the chapter with a discussion of landscape as phenomenon less often thought about in relations to community than perhaps it should be, drawing on the way that both writers have employed narratives of intersubjectivity to avoid the trap of the Romantic wanderer’s solitary experience of nature. Such an understanding of landscape rooted in community is vital to an archipelagic agenda as it struggles to explore ‘landscapes and environments that exist, after nature’ (‘Until the End of Days’ 4).

Excursion narratives are similarly crucial to these authors as a means of trespass over the conventional framing of landscape, but more in the quixotic tradition of ‘fail better’ that emerges from Robinson’s notion of ‘the good step’ than in Sinclair’s scouring and paranoid flânerie. The pressing sense
of urgency and the vital importance of hope here drive Jamie and Macfarlane to re-read the land for an intimate geography in times when such a sense is particularly vulnerable to desecration. Sinclair’s work centres on London but, as Robinson shows, the project of remapping can be re-centred on the periphery too, can in fact endorse what John Kerrigan calls ‘polycentrism’, the proliferation of centres of cultural authority across a network, or the archipelago, in a call for recognition from the bottom up rather than the top down (3). London falls away as a centre of authority and there is a proliferation of forms that can arise, each with its own internal gravity and its own fluid sense of centre and periphery; but this rising of the archipelago out of the ruin of its administrative ‘sovereignty’ can only take place through an active, politicised belief in the recuperation of multiple intimate geographies (Nairn 125). What follows should not be read in opposition to a reading of the land as framed but as supplementary to it, as a constructive project that begins to piece together multiple new narratives in the aftermath of the deconstruction of the dominant ideological narratives. Both are urgent projects that arise in the wake of modernism and working together they point a way forward in understanding and critically remapping the archipelago. The enchantment that comes with an intimate geography, as Jane Bennett suggests, might even be ‘more ethically valuable than scepticism’ in energising our social conscience (88). At a time when both such approaches to landscape are vitally important it seems unnecessary to debate which is in fact ‘more ethically valuable’ and to rather acknowledge that the tension between them is crucial to an understanding of an archipelagic landscape instead.

The poet John Burnside has suggested that ‘[a] walking human – or, for that matter, any human being standing in the open, exposed, aware, at risk, untrammelled – is able to attune him or herself to the rhythm of the earth, the feel of a place, the presence of other animals, the elements, sidereal time, the divine’ (‘A Science of Belonging’ 101). It is an imaginative and creative capacity within us that enables us to believe in an idea of ‘the divine’, but this is here, for Burnside, very closely affiliated with faculties that we would otherwise associate with a perceptual sensitivity: words such as ‘aware’, ‘attune’ and ‘feel’. Such a paradoxical association between the imaginative and the empirical recalls the contradictions in Robinson’s passage about the piper, how he is led through the darkness of his own solipsism by an unquenchable thirst for knowledge of the world beyond him. Both of these instances point to a common confusion that arises when talking of intimacy: what is mine, what is yours, what is ours? What have I given, what have I received? Intimacy, by its nature, blurs the agency presiding over these questions as it blurs the distinction between creativity and perception. David Abram, drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty, has suggested that:

one perceives a world at all only by projecting oneself into that world, that one makes contact with things and others only by actively participating in them, lending one’s sensory imagination to things in order to discover how they alter and transform that imagination, how they reflect us back changed, how they are different from us […] that perception is always participatory (276).
Far from being the reception of sense data into an empty receptacle, perception is precisely a creative and participatory faculty, a building of representations of the world with the body, at that highly perforated interface of body and world.

In an essay called ‘Nightwalking’ that forms part of an early version of the chapter on ‘Ridges’ in The Wild Places, Macfarlane writes of a night spent in the snow under a near full moon, quite literally exposed to that ‘sidereal time’ of Burnside’s. But there is another kind of exposure that Macfarlane’s nightwalk calls to mind as well. Lying on his back on a frozen tarn, watching the hail fall ‘like pills, then like tiny jagged icebergs’ he remembers August Strindberg’s experiments with night photography when he ‘laid large photographic plates, primed with developing fluid, out on the earth, hoping they would take slow pictures of the stars’ movements’ (220). There is, in this photographic exposure, a resonant metaphor for Macfarlane’s particular method of ontological landscape research, similarly guided by an almost naïve commitment to the material elements of a place. I say ‘almost’ because Macfarlane seems more knowing than Strindberg here, both of the chemistry of photographic processing and of the psychology of a writer’s own private processing of perception. Both Strindberg with his plates and Macfarlane on his back on the tarn are seeking out a means to pare back the methods of representation, to take the measure of events in their most raw form before the processing in a dark room (whether this is the darkroom of photographic development or that of the more authorial Wordsworthian ‘emotions recollected in tranquility’ (Lyrical Ballads 12)). However, Macfarlane reminds us that, in fact, the photographs Strindberg took were not pictures of the stars but were strange chemical reactions brought about by frost. It was a coincidence that they looked like stars, the outcome of a complex and unpredictable series of reactions precipitated by the temperature of the exposure (221). Strindberg’s experiment is an excellent example of what Merleau-Ponty suggests about perception: it does not receive a perfect image of the world, it creates one through a mutual agency acting at an interface.

When he is outdoors, Macfarlane, or Macfarlane’s narrator, is settled very carefully in his body, and his body equally carefully in the land, just like those large photographic plates primed with fluid; walking becomes a balancing act through the landscape, carefully maintaining a receptivity to the strangeness of the place. But unlike Strindberg, Macfarlane is not expecting the landscape to lay its image onto his mind. He is looking for precisely those unpredictable instances of physical reaction that throw the conventional pictorial image out the window in favour of haptic and ontic configurations. The method recalls Rebecca Solnit’s claim that ‘[w]alking, ideally, is a state in which the mind, the body, and the world are aligned, as though they were three characters finally in conversation together, three notes suddenly making a chord’ (5). Note the key word ‘ideally’ here though, reminding us of the actual ‘inconceivability’ of Robinson’s ‘good step’, but also note the interesting musical metaphor of a ‘chord’ contrasting the idea of receptivity with one of emergent creativity, like that piper under Creig an Chéirtín finding his way in the dark by music alone. Macfarlane’s interest in the Strindberg experiment is in the creative, energetic reactions at the level of the chemicals’ response to temperature rather than as the reception of an image. What we see here is a realisation that the ‘direct experience’ that he calls for in
those early articles is not simply a matter of breaking free of the ‘humanly arranged’; that in fact it might be a more confusing matter of attuning oneself, with no small amount of care, to interact with things, to play a responsive part in their combined music.

In the twenty years between Robinson’s first volume of Stones of Aran and Macfarlane’s The Wild Places, the damage to the environment that was beginning to come to light in the 1970s had only grown more severe and more public. In this sense we ought to read around The Wild Places a public sense of urgency that had not only grown but also matured and found its place in the mainstream, indeed the very mainstream that Robinson had turned his back on in 1972. It is a very different historical moment that allows Macfarlane his position as a fairly well known public figure writing for the TLS and The Guardian, appearing on the radio, and making his episode of the BBC’s Natural World. Rather than distance himself from the culture he wants to criticise, he places himself at its heart. He has, of course, denounced our wasteful behaviour and repeatedly called for a redress of our attitude to the planet in the national press, but The Wild Places takes a different tack, absorbing its politics into its aesthetics.

It is interesting to consider, then, some subtle changes that take place between the writing of this essay for Granta in 2005 and The Wild Places in 2007, changes that I think relate to an experimentation with a particular radical form of intimacy. One of the most notable things about this ‘Nightwalking’ essay in Granta is the total absence of any place name. We are told it is the north east of England; it appears to be mountainous, so we assume it is the lake district, but we are not told so, and we are certainly not told whereabouts in the lakes. In The Wild Places there is more room to elaborate and we are informed it is near Buttermere in the mid-western fells, but in this essay we are given only the cardinal directions long after an eerily rich and lucid account of the immediate orientation:

there was the moon, fat and unexpected above the mountains. Just a little off full, with the shape of a hangnail missing to black on the right side, and the stars swarming around it [...] Snow perpetuates the effect of moonlight, which means that on a clear night, in winter mountains, you can see for a distance of up to thirty miles (218).

It is as if Macfarlane is suggesting that we have all the orientation we need in the immediate, intimate account, as if the perceptual field was enough. This is not completely unprecedented. He has suggested how influential he feels J.A. Baker’s The Peregrine has been, and ought to be, on himself and a host of other authors writing today. One of the techniques he admires is Baker’s stripping away of place names from the Essex landscape and his use simply of ‘the South’, ‘the North’ and so on: ‘He inhabits a cardinal landscape […] he steers himself only by landform and feature’ (The Peregrine xiv). Baker does this out of distaste for the human world. ‘My pagan head shall sink into the winter land and there be purified,’ he claims early on (41). The sins he is searching to be cleansed of are those of environmental damage, in particular the use of DDT in agriculture, which reduced the peregrine population in Britain to just sixty-eight pairs between 1939 and 1962 (v). So when Macfarlane withdraws the place names in this early essay we might read in this an experiment with Baker’s ‘pagan’ anger. As Macfarlane suggests ‘Baker hopes that, through a fierce, prolonged, and “purified” concentration upon the peregrine, he will somehow be able to
escape his human form and abscond into the “brilliant” wildness of the bird” (viii). Here too, of course, we find the flicker of the memory of Sweeney.

The same technique has been employed more recently by Thomas A. Clarke in his exploration of the Western Isles of Scotland. Each of his short poems paints an extraordinarily vivid and weirdly magnified view of the flowers on a cliff-top, say, or the parting mists on the sea, but never discloses a place name. Macfarlane does include place names when he comes to publish The Wild Places and each chapter is very carefully situated and named on the map. Not to do so would be to launch that pagan anger not at the human world but at various rather too specific human communities, for some of whom the prospect of an Englishman erasing their place names may be all too familiar. But in the chapter titles – ‘Island, Valley, Moor, Cape, Summit, Ridge, Tor’ – we can hear an echo of Baker, that close eye on the ‘landform and feature’ that a bird might steer by, something ‘purified’ of a too human corruption. For Macfarlane though, this is not in response to mere agricultural pollution, but to the gathering catastrophe of climate change. Though he may not have a ‘pagan head’ charged with quite the same misanthropy, he nonetheless does seek to ‘sink’ his head into a perspective of scale below the conventional human one, and he does that through his highly responsive form of exposure, walking out after that phenomenological ‘alignment’ as a search for an archipelagic carte blanche of sorts. In this Macfarlane is also showing the influence of Christopher Tilley’s book A Phenomenology of Landscape (cited in the bibliography at the end of The Wild Places).

Drawing on both Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, Tilley explores the way in which landscape occurs somewhere between objectivity and subjectivity in a way that places an emphasis on the body and its presence in the land. From Heidegger’s example of the Black Forest farmers, the notion of ‘dwelling’ emerges as the way we bring locations into being through work and a daily life lived on the land, the routines of a simple farming existence somehow creative, somehow producing the place they live in. Precarious ground, as we have seen, that somewhat conveniently idealises such a way of life. However, Merleau-Ponty’s idea of perception itself as creative and participatory does seem to endure with a potency that might more readily be developed in terms of a ‘phenomenology of revolutionary praxis’ (Antonio Negri, qtd in Jeffrey et. al. 16): ‘[p]erceptual consciousness is not just a matter of thought about the world, but stems from bodily presence and bodily orientation in relation to it, bodily awareness’ (Tilley 14). Key to this is what David Morris calls ‘the crossing of body and world’, crossing serving simultaneously as a location and an activity, something to be sought after through the practice of landscape (as opposed to the representation of it) (26). For Tilley ‘Subjectivity and objectivity connect in a dialectic producing a place for Being in which the topography and physiography of the land and thought remain distinct but play into each other as an ‘intelligible landscape’, a spatialization of Being’ (14). This conflation of ‘land and thought’, their crossing as both an ‘intelligible landscape’ and simultaneously ‘a spatialization of Being’ is really the ultimate goal of The Wild Places when Macfarlane realises that ‘certain landscapes might hold certain thoughts, as they held certain stones or plants’ (115).
But how, in practice, might this crossing work? It is not as simple as it might initially seem. In a chapter on ‘Space’ from *The Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty begins to locate an experience of the world that is prior to the occurrence of subjectivity as we conventionally understand it: ‘my history must be the continuation of a prehistory’, he suggests (254). There is an interesting shift in pronoun here from ‘my history’ to ‘a prehistory’ which seems to echo Solnit’s suggestion that walking is an ‘alignment’ of mind, body and world, a point at which possession gives way to belonging. However, we may also read in this a shift in scale from the narrow human to the wider non-human in which the human becomes just one of numerous objects, agents and forces in a lively world. He goes on:

> My personal existence must be the resumption of a prepersonal tradition. There is, therefore, another subject beneath me, for whom a world exists before I am here, and who marks out my place in it. This captive or natural spirit is my body, not that momentary body which is the instrument of my personal choices and which fastens upon this or that world, but the system of anonymous ‘functions’ which draw every particular focus into a general project (254).

In this ‘prepersonal tradition’ with its ‘system of anonymous ‘functions’’ we find a sense of estrangement coupled with a contrary sense of recovery, a sloughing off of the familiar self coupled with the discovery of a deep anchorage to an indifferent world. It is completely alienating as it is completely intimate.

This is a familiar experience for the wilderness author, or an author in search of wild experience. The day after an excursion on the slopes of Mount Ktaadn where he does not feel entirely welcome, where, in fact he feels like Milton’s outcast Satan, Thoreau describes a similar realisation coming down the side of the mountain.

> What is it to be admitted to a museum, to see a myriad of particular things, compared with being shown some star's surface, some hard matter in its home! I stand in awe of my body, this matter to which I am bound has become so strange to me [...] Talk of mysteries! – Think of our life in nature, – daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it, – rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! The solid earth! the actual world! the common sense! Contact! Contact! Who are we? where are we? (The Maine Wood, 71)

Thoreau describes a similar loosening of the personal to the pre-personal by way of that material ‘Contact!’ This is a sense of landscape intimacy taken to its Romantic extreme in the sublime where the body is recognised as a part of all the ‘anonymous functions’ and the self is thrown into a sense of vertigo. We see this same searching for ‘contact’ in *The Wild Places* as the antithesis to the ‘humanly arranged’, but we only see it in the first half of the book.

It is little acknowledged that *The Wild Places*, though a collection of non-fiction essays, draws on the form of a *bildungsroman*, a novel through which the protagonist undergoes a life-changing epiphany in a coming of age, if not of wisdom. In a sense, because of this, Macfarlane is two different characters throughout. He is the boyish mountaineer looking for edges, wilderness, contact!, ultima thule, the aptly named ‘Inaccessible Pinnacle’ (*The Wild Places* 155); he is Thoreau on the side of Ktaadn, finding an alienating sense of intimacy with a sublime indifference that may equate to a sense of wilderness. It is this side of Macfarlane’s narrator that Kathleen Jamie has no patience for. For Jamie, what is ‘humanly arranged’ about Macfarlane is accentuated, not escaped, by this pursuit of the wild. She cannot see his
‘being-in-the-landscape’ as neutral in its phenomenological brokering of physiographical and
topographical thought spaces. Reading The Wild Places for a long piece in the London Review of Books, she
asks: ‘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). Her review problematizes the supposed neutrality of the
‘archipelago’ and reminds us that John Kerrigan coined the term in order to ‘strip away modern
Anglocentric and Victorian imperial paradigms’, the very likes of which she reads in the book (2). There is
a danger that in trying to step out of the human world in search of moments of intimate contact with the
inhumanly wild that Macfarlane is in fact assuming that his rather privileged and empowered position is a
neutral one. The Emersonian ‘transparent eyeball’ that, at times, Macfarlane seems to occupy is only ever
transparent to the person looking through it and one can hear the voices of identity theorists reminding
us that it is much easier to be ‘transparent’ as a white middle class man (Emerson, Nature 5). In a sense
this is a literary problem of scale. Macfarlane’s narrator sets out to try and move beyond the scale in
which he is a white, middle class Englishman and into a ‘post-national’ (Matless 181), almost post-human
scale where he is just a being, a series of ‘anonymous functions’ (Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception
252) in the landscape. However, he is still bounded by his first person narrative and sounds like the
Romantic wanderer regaling us with a tale of expedition and adventure. The form clashes with the
objective here and we are reminded that the archipelagic cannot be about the self brushing up against all
nature, it cannot be about wilderness and the sublime: ‘[w]ild and not-wild is a false distinction, in this
ancient, contested country’ (Jamie, ‘A Lone Enraptured Male’ 25).

However, we must remember the structure of the book as a bildungsroman, and that there are two
Macfarlanes here, the one of the beginning and the one of the end. As much as he is under the influence
of the sublime idea of wilderness, he is also under the tutelage of Roger Deakin throughout the book, an
essayist of a very different tradition. Deakin’s is the perspective that Macfarlane, or perhaps more
properly, Macfarlane’s narrator, is moving towards. The major turning point in the book comes in the
chapter on Ben Hope, one of the most northerly and one of the ‘least accommodating places’ that he
travels to (156). ‘There could have been nowhere that conformed more purely to the vision of wilderness
with which I had begun my journeys,’ he suggests. ‘This place refused any imputation of meaning’ (157).
The contact and the exposure become intimidating and the search for the body’s unmediated connection
to the ‘anonymous’ becomes an encounter with the ‘gradelessly indifferent’ (157). It is as hostile and
alienating as Thoreau’s experience of Ktaadn. Dawn cannot come quickly enough to begin the descent
and the return south to the more ‘humanly arranged.’ Intimacy is finally not, in this narrative, about
escaping the human.

In the following chapter, he visits the Burren with Deakin and the epiphany begins to take its
purchase that teaches him how wildness might be something closer to home, something that permeates
our domestic lives and something upon which they rest. Wildness here diverges from wilderness in a very
important way. Wildness is left behind as a concept associated with the sublime and, as William Cronon
shows us, a concept that can also be associated with a violently constructed simulation of the ‘pristine’ and the ‘untrammelled’ (‘The Riddle of the Apostle Islands’). Wildness becomes something more subtle connected with a manner of looking rather than a geographical location. Laying belly-down on the limestone pavement staring into one of the flower-filled grykes, Deakin seems to steer the ‘lone enraptured’ mountaineer’s gaze into his more developed realisation: ‘This, Roger suddenly said as we lay there looking down into it, is a wild place. It is as beautiful and complex, perhaps more so, than any glen or bay or peak. Miniature, yes, but fabulously wild’ (168).

Deakin’s wildness is about changing the angle of vision – lying belly-down and gazing over an edge – and it draws on a very different tradition to that of Thoreau. Rather than journeying to the outer edges, his talent lies in exploring the more familiar with fresh eyes; he is, as Macfarlane has suggested, borrowing a phrase from John Hanson Mitchell, an ‘explorer of the undiscovered country of the nearby’ (‘The Wild Places of Essex’). I have mentioned Deakin’s 1999 Waterlog: A Swimmer’s Journey through Britain, in which he explored the landscapes of the archipelago with a ‘frog’s-eye view’ (1). In this he poses something of a challenge to a conventional notion of landscape tourism with its emphasis on the picturesque prospect of the Romantic wanderer. Like walking, he says, swimming offers itself up as ‘a subversive activity’ because it breaks out of the ‘signposted, labelled, and officially ‘interpreted’ […] virtual reality of things’ (4). Swimming appeals to Deakin because it offers a radically intimate perspective: ‘You are in nature, part and parcel of it, in a far more complete and intense way than on dry land, and your sense of the present is overwhelming’ (4). There is, of course, something of the trespasser in this and indeed, after swimming in a river near Stockbridge he is chased off by two figures described in Dickensian caricature as ‘a portly porter with a beard and Alsatian, and a gangling figure on a bike with binoculars, strawberry pink with ire’ at whom he quotes Cobbett, defending his ‘rights as a free swimmer’ (31).

Whereas Thoreau is searching for contact between himself and ‘some star’s surface’ as if such contact were the meeting of two distinct entities, Deakin is seeking to confuse that original distinction by beginning from a point at which one is submerged within the other. David Matless has offered a word of caution about these ‘Nature Voices’, suggesting that they, and especially Deakin, risk an uncritical ‘human attunement’ to the world as ‘wondrous and awesome’ (184) when what we should be watching for is the particular ‘mode of presence achieved and the consequent form of cultural authority claimed and assumed’ (185). I would argue that, certainly in Waterlog, the innovative ‘mode of presence’ that Deakin develops throughout his journey in fact lends him quite a refreshing and surprising point of view that is able to challenge cultural authority as much as assume it. Like Sweeney, looking back critically at the human world, Deakin is observing the land from the water, carefully defamiliarising the known world at a time when we are in need of fresh perspectives. This intimacy based on immersion rather than contact, fascinated as it is with the ‘miniature’ rather than the vast and sublime stems from another landscape tradition entirely that I would argue begins with the naturalist and early field scientist Gilbert White.
White’s own capacity for wonder at the ‘undiscovered country of the nearby’ meant that his life spent in the one parish of Selborne yielded quite a number of new scientific discoveries both in botany and ornithology. But that for White ‘that district produces the greatest variety which is the most examined’ is as much a testament to the means by which he examined as it is to the plentiful district itself (60). Richard Mabey here describes White’s method and the remarkable sense of intellectual and practical intimacy with which it is developed:

the patient, inquisitive watching, the changes of focus as questions multiply; the answers dawning, from flashes of intuition or plain hard reasoning, and these forming a framework to test against yet more watching. And all these processes not rigidly ordered but advancing together in a kind of continuous feedback loop (Gilbert White 81).

White’s approach is a form of careful scientific study laced with moments of anarchic improvisation. It allows itself to be guided by the object of its inquiry. Its fidelity is uncompromising and as a methodology, quite reckless and chaotic. It is, in this sense, an archipelagic way of reading the land, drawing its particular style of perspective from an increasingly local authority. It recuperates its form and method bottom up, rather than foisting them top down. Contact is not something to be made because we are always already involved. Rather, there is an intimacy generated through the multiple and innovative ways in which it approaches the fluid asymmetries of observer and observed. Thoreau too prefers this form of observation and it should be added that his experience on Ktaadn is remarkable and unusual in a life preoccupied with writing a landscape much closer to home.

In his late work, Merleau-Ponty embraced an ontology informed by a Heideggerean ‘Being-in-the-world’, the idea that we are always already involved with the world, that to behave as a spectator, to reach out to make contact, is to abstract one’s actual position which has already begun with, and which is always preceded by, what he calls a ‘perceptual faith’ (The Visible and the Invisible 3). The difference is a subtle one, but important. As Eric Matthews argues, for the late Merleau-Ponty, ‘philosophy’s task is not to explain what he here calls the “perceptual faith” that all our experience is rooted in a direct and pre-reflective contact with Being, but to elucidate it and explore its meaning’ (169). What we begin to see in Macfarlane as The Wild Places continues, is this very leaning towards ‘elucidation’ and ‘exploration’ rather than that desire to ‘discover’ that Kathleen Jamie so dislikes. In doing so he is beginning to adapt the fugitive and experimental techniques of Gilbert White filtered through Roger Deakin and it is in this method that he is encountering those ‘thoughts’ in the landscape.

Each journey looks increasingly to be guided by the place it is immersed in. Each journey can, in a sense, be said to be guided by its ‘elucidation’ of that place. What is learned is not a quantified series of facts but certain new ways of being, looking, thinking, as the body finds itself developing forms that begin in forests, coastlines, holloways. Macfarlane explores this ‘perceptual faith’ that arises out of the various ways in which certain landscapes prompt certain ways of being to see where it will take him. For example:
Limestone, I found during my time in the Burren, demands of the walker a new type of movement: the impulse to be diverted, to wander and allow the logic of one’s motion to be determined by happenstance and sudden disclosure. We learned, or were taught by the ground, how to walk without premeditation (166).

By recognising that wildness (as opposed to wilderness) is something we are already inherently involved with, Macfarlane begins to explore what can be elucidated through the body’s negotiation of space, and from this, what can be learned. These are the thoughts that ‘certain landscapes might hold’ (115).

This conclusion of Macfarlane’s is a personal realisation that grows into a much more developed and consistent philosophy (or perhaps always was) and tries to draw a deep connection between culture and environment as a way of arguing that the conservation of environment is crucially important as a cultural resource, almost as an extended part of our thinking selves. ‘Woods inspire thoughts and feelings that can be had nowhere else,’ he suggests in an episode of *Natural World* (“The Wild Places of Essex”). But this is a personal aspect of landscape and a much more broad cultural aspect as well. In a later essay for *Archipelago* he examines the landscapes that Heidegger and Wittgenstein chose to go to in order to write. The essay spends some time discussing the two philosophers without mentioning their names. Rather it describes in meticulous detail the ways in which for both of them, in the Black Forest and in Connemara respectively, ‘the place of thinking and the work of writing were intimately connected’ (Way-rights’ 19). In some sense it is a slightly problematic conclusion that could be read as essentializing thought, but there is something more sensitive, more creative going on here as well. In a review article of the same book on Heidegger that Macfarlane is drawing on, Adam Sharr’s *Heidegger’s Hut*, Timothy Clarke looks very critically at the way thought can be seen to emerge from a place in Heidegger’s philosophy. He suggests that this is difficult process that ‘troubles the fragility and contingency of the human cultural sphere’ (108). Meaning cannot be found and thoughts cannot be discovered. Nonetheless we can work with a kind of opaque ‘limit-concept’ that, though it ‘cannot itself be fully conceptualized’ can still makes its impression on us, especially through the kind of physical exploration that Macfarlane engages with, a kind of performative elucidation of meaning that is never instrumental or appropriative.

Such a conclusion to *The Wild Places* aligns it with the tradition descending from Common Ground who, for nearly thirty years now have been calling for us to reconsider the cultural value and significance of the locally distinct. This is a way of recuperating the aestheticised landscape within the frame, exploring and elucidating new ways of apprehending it that are experimental, intimate and meaningful. Such writing makes landscape personal in the face of various forces that depersonalise and distance us from it. There is the seed of a project of ‘commoning’ land in this, helping people to realise we are invested in certain landscapes, that they are invested in us, and that if those places are damaged then something valuable is lost to all of us, a common psychological territory is enclosed and fenced off. In all this phenomenological landscape study, Macfarlane does not evade the traces or the encroachment of the human though – he also gives a vivid and horrifying account of the history of imperial oppression in the Burren – but rather struggles with that paradoxical combination of attentiveness and creativity to explore the possibility of a culture or a nature or a nature-culture of mutual agency, a personal narrative.
guided by the lay of the land. Perhaps it is an unattainable goal like Robinson’s good step but it is in the failing that we have startling, beautiful and strange new accounts of the landscapes around us and with them new ways of thinking about and seeing the world.

As I mentioned in the introduction to this part on Walking Out, David Matless raises an interesting point about this method of pursuing ‘questions of affect, enchantment and animation’ suggesting that ‘for all its joy and elation, [it] can carry a submissive quality’ (185). He suggests setting out a continuum of wonder with ‘Wonderful!!!’ at one end and ‘I wonder???’ at the other, proposing that maybe the latter can help to stave off the more submissive aspects of the genre (184). These seem wise words and are, in a sense, why I balance this chapter with the previous one on frames and distance. However, enchantment need not preclude critical distance and might, in fact, work very well with it. In fact, for Jane Bennett, a renewed attention to enchantment can form a very knowing and political response to modern life. Indeed, one of the most significant anthologies of work to have come out of this ‘new nature writing’ movement so far is in fact called *Towards Re-Enchantment*. Bennett would argue that we do not require the ‘re-’ of re-enchantment since it is perhaps a myth that we have become entirely disenchanted in the first place. Disenchantment, of course, refers to Max Weber who proposed that capitalism, the enlightenment, industrialisation and the rise of atheism led to a presiding rationality that has steered the history of western culture for the last two hundred or so years. Bennett offers a shorthand version of disenchantment, paraphrasing Weber in the form of a magazine questionnaire:

Do you long to be released from “the cold skeletal hands of rational orders[...]”?
Do you lament the fact that it’s a dog-eat-dog world, where the more “the modern capitalist economy follows its own immanent laws, the less accessible it is to any imaginable relationship with a religious ethic of brotherliness?
Are mystical experiences and erotic adventures appealing to you because they seem to be gates “into the most irrational and thereby real kernel of life, as compared with the [lifeless] mechanism of rationalization?” (56)

‘The higher your score,’ she suggests, ‘the more you are living out the story of the disenchantment of the world’ (56). But for Bennett, the historical power of disenchantment has never been as total as Weber and those he influenced seem to assume. The possibility of enchantment remains, not just available to us, but essential as that which bestows upon us the capacity to care deeply about things. We are enchanted when we lose a part of ourselves to an experience, when we become involved, implicated, when we become a part of something bigger than ourselves, when we become meaningfully inside a landscape and its community, and not just a spectator. For Bennett, enchantment is possible even within the heart of a disenchanted culture and today more than ever we urgently need to struggle to find it. Interestingly she makes a claim for enchantment as ‘a state of interactive fascination, not fall-to-your-knees awe’ (5). The charge or ‘naive optimism’ that is most often raised against it supposes ‘links between enchantment and mindlessness, between joy and forgetfulness’ that seem to touch on the same doubts that Matless raises, but, she argues, ‘a certain forgetfulness is ethically indispensible’ (10), especially in pulling us out of ‘ennervating cynicism’ (13). It can also be particularly liberating in terms of its effect on agency, prompting the kinds of human/non-human crossings that Sweeney points toward and that Macfarlane
seems to emulate, the charm of which ‘energizes your social conscience’ and the ‘flexibility’ of which
‘stretches your moral sense of the possible’ (32).

One thing that all of the writers in this vein seem increasingly keen on challenging is the link
between enchantment and solitude. That Macfarlane, in The Wild Places, is all too often the ‘lone
enraptured male’ is, to some degree, the problem of a highly male oriented and highly Romantic tradition.
But he does seem to resist the solitude as well when, for example, he travels with Deakin and more
recently in essays that almost all involve visiting friends or working with communities. At these moments
we get a glimpse of a different kind of writing that builds on the idea that our sensual experience of
landscape is participatory to include others in that sense of participation. In such a vision the experience
of landscape can be a social thing to be shared rather than an ascetic thing to be endured or mastered, and
is no less enchanting for it. Kathleen Jamie takes pleasure in travelling with company too; much of the
material that Robinson writes about comes from long conversations and long walks with his neighbours
and Iain Sinclair almost always walks with others in London Orbital and in The Edge of the Orison; all of
which challenges the notion that a personal narrative needs to be solitary. Paul Farley and Michael
Symmons Roberts write as a pair and completely avoid the form of a personal narrative in favour of
anecdotes and ruminations, short fragments composed into chapters. They claim that ‘in the back of our
minds there was a sense of letting the terrain speak for itself, rather than framing ourselves within it as
intrepid explorers’ (9). For the remainder of this chapter then I will consider the idea that others,
community, family, offer us a way of preventing enchantment from becoming too ‘forgetful’, as Bennett
suggests, or ‘solipsistic’, as Robinson warns us.

In his essay for Toward Re-enchantment 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 40% of its energy from sustainable alternatives
by 2020, AMEC filed an application in 2004 to site Europe’s largest offshore 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 ‘improvers’, as ‘a vast dead place: dark brown moors and black locks under a grey sky
all swept by a chill wet wind’ (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. In fact 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).

The idea of a ‘Counter-Desecration Phrasebook’ becomes an important one to Macfarlane and
suggests the importance of a literature that sustains and pioneers sensitive ways of writing about the land
as a means of intervention. 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’. As words such as ‘catkin’, ‘conker’, ‘brook’, ‘minnow’ and ‘bray’ are eroded from the Oxford Junior Dictionary, his argument goes, so gradually is our ability to see and hear such things (116). 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’; ‘eig’ 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’ (109–10). But such a glossary of terminology offers more than just nomenclature. It suggests a sensitivity to the stories of the land itself, or to stories struck between the land and those working it, or living in it. This is the point at which, as MacLeod suggests, ‘conservation becomes a natural form of human awareness’. What is particularly interesting about this essay is that it begins as personal narrative before opening out into a multitude of voices, never returning to the narrative. The essay is really about MacLeod and the islanders as an intersubjective network of authorship behind that Counter-Desecration Phrasebook. Like Farley and Roberts, perhaps Macfarlane is experimenting here with a form that goes beyond the generic constraints of first person narrative but it remains personal in its feel for community.

For Kathleen Jamie, the first person narrative is an interrupted genre anyway. In an interview on Radio 4 she suggested, with a certain sense of humour, ‘so many relationships, women of a certain age, its all we seem to do, manage relationships, a part of our own ecology if you like’ (Jamie, Woman’s Hour 2006). In her poetry and prose a certain enraptured solitude is forever complicated by relationships and the ties that bind in quite an interesting way. She is as critical of her own tendencies toward romantic wanderings as she is of Macfarlane’s, careful always to make poetry out of what is there rather than what she would like to be there. In this sense Jamie can be seen to really bridge these two chapters and the productive tension between them. In the poem ‘The Buddleia’ when she pauses ‘to consider / a god, or creation unfolding in front of my eyes’, she describes how her close attention begins to evoke

the divine
in the lupins, or foxgloves, or self-seeded buddleia,
whose heavy horns flush as they
open to flower, and draw
these bumbling, well-meaning bees
which remind me again,
of my father … whom, Christ,
I’ve forgotten to call (The Tree House 27).

For Jamie, landscape never fully unravels itself from the complications of family, community, work, the home. That comma before ‘of my father’ brings the syntax to a peak before dropping it into the bathos of the ordinary domestic experience of forgetfulness. The god of the beginning of the poem is lost to the expletive blasphemy of the penultimate line. Such a move makes us question why we would find this bathetic. It plays across the boundary of genre, making us realise that we have certain expectations. As far as she tries to wander off and as far as we expect her to wander off into the ‘lone enraptured’ experience
of the natural world she is pulled back elastically by familial connections ‘without whom’, she suggests in the title poem of the collection, ‘we might have lived / the long ebb of our mid-decades / alone in sheds and attic rooms, / awake in the moonlit souterrains / of our own minds; without whom // we might have lived / a hundred other lives’ (42). The romantic notion of solitude hinted at in those ‘moonlit souterrains’ is a myth for Jamie, her desire for which she slightly parodies in ‘The Buddleia’.

In ‘The Tree House’ she speaks of ‘our difficult / chthonic anchorage’, but she is speaking of our relationship to family and our relationship to the Earth interchangeably (41-2). She hoists herself up into a tree house in the poem while her children and husband are out and feels a ‘complicity’ with the tree ‘like our own, when arm in arm / on the city street, we bemoan / our families’ (42). But by the end of the poem we see things from the perspective of the tree, and we are the family that it makes sacrifices to sustain. Our home, our ‘dwelling of sorts’ is ‘a gall / we’ve asked the tree to carry / of its own dead’ (43). The poem negotiates its way around an intersubjective web of relations. It does not project a human subjectivity onto the tree but, rather, it considers what we ask of it with our dwellings. We certainly cannot imagine Jamie going in search of ‘Contact!’ That contact is already there in the home and garden.

In her 2005 book Findings, Jamie explores Scotland with a keen eye for dwelling places in the landscape whether the nest of peregrines, the burial mound of Maes Howe or upland shielings. She refutes the term ‘wilderness’ as it seems ‘an affront to those many generations who took their living on that land’ in an effort to hold her idea of landscape open to communities who were all too often physically removed, if not encouraged though absurd hikes in rent (126). The absence of signs of human existence in the landscape, for Jamie, immediately brings to mind both highland and lowland clearances by wealthy land owners and the agricultural improvement of the land for increased profits. Such a class dynamic of land ownership permeates the idea of wilderness as aesthetised by land owning authors such as Gavin Maxwell and John Lister Kaye in a way that she finds impossible to ignore. When walking in search of the braan salmon she encounters a photography workshop and coins the term ‘Wildscapes’ for the kind of effortless, highly mediated images that both he, and she in her creative writing courses, promote. But how can such images allude to the absences in the land, preoccupied as they are with ‘natural’ (for ‘natural’ is always in inverted commas for Jamie) presences and aesthetic form. Her anxiety over the term ‘wilderness’ even comes to haunt the term ‘nature’ itself: ‘For historical reasons (Clearances, Industrialisation, Enclosures) ordinary people have been removed from the land, and thereby from ‘nature’ (Personal Email).

Jamie’s way of rewriting then is to search for human community, to walk that overlap between the natural and the cultural, appealing to landscape as an intersubjective experience that intimately blurs the aesthetically convenient lines that make framing a landscape so pleasing. For example, the central chapter is on a family emergency. Her husband Phil gets pneumonia and is hospitalised and Jamie’s fear and horror at the prospect of losing him are written as carefully and as sensitively as her earlier explorations of peregrines or corn crakes. She does not distinguish between domestic and natural environments: ‘to give birth is to be in a wild place, so is to struggle with pneumonia.’ (A Lone
Enraptured Male’ 27) ‘Nature isn’t just daffodils and trees and birds,’ she explained on Radio 4. ‘Growths and cross-sections of the brain, this is also nature. We are incarnated, we are natural creatures, and so I guess if I take nature at its widest definition what else is there?’ (2006) In a passage coming to terms with the medical information she has been given about her husband’s lungs there is a kind of landscaping of the human body that explores a beautiful but unnerving state of intimate, imaginative interconnection:

The alveoli, we’re told, if they were unpacked from our lungs and spread out, would cover an area the size of a tennis court, 78 feet by 27. Or from the wall to the hedge breadthwise, and the bench to the shed longways. An area the mellow sun was now casting with long afternoon shadows. I stood with my back to the shed and surveyed the area, tried to imagine, what? [...] A fine, fine cobweb, exchanging gases with the open air? And what of our nerves? There are hundreds of miles of neurones in our brains. I tried to imagine them, all that nerve, all that awareness and alertness spread out around me. All that listening (104-5).

The lungs, the nerves, the marriage, the garden, the sunlight, are all revealed in such close quarters here, interpenetrating and interdependent. This is not a morbid image but one of total vulnerability and exposure, one of frightening intimacy. Her imagining it is unsettling, but also a healing prayer of sorts (‘Isn’t that a kind of prayer? The care and maintenance of the web of our noticing, the paying heed?’ (109)). It is a recovery of a wildness within us, one that lies a little close for comfort beneath our usual domestic life.

In a later chapter she turns to Playfair Hall at the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh to look at the specimens in jars as an antidote to the idea of nature ‘out there’ and finds ‘the forms concealed inside, the intimate unknown’ just as compelling and mysterious (141). In an essay for Granta’s The New Nature Writing she describes being shown various human body parts under the microscope at the pathology lab in Ninewells Hospital in Dundee. Looking down into a human liver she comments:

I was admitted to another world, where everything was pink. We were looking from a great height down at a pink river – rather, an estuary, with a north bank and a south. There were wing-shaped river islands and furthermore it was low tide, with sandbanks exposed. It was astonishing, a map of the familiar: it was our local river, as seen by a hawk.

‘It’s like the Tay!’ I said’ (‘Pathologies’ 41-2).

The movement in this short passage is one from estrangement (‘another world’) and distance (‘a great height’) to a metonymic familiarity and intimacy (‘our local river’). The body becomes as far reaching as a familiar landscape, the landscape as close as the organs inside us. These two passages, one a projection of the inside of the body onto the land and the other a projection of the land onto the inside of the body, speak of a deep intimacy we share with the world.

Jamie’s intimacy is worlds apart from the Macfarlane we meet in the early chapters of The Wild Places. And yet by the end of the book there is something really quite comparable. Macfarlane ends The Wild Places with the lines from Eliot’s ‘Little Gidding’: ‘And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time’ (313). For him this is the realisation that ‘[t]he weed thrusting through a crack in a pavement, the tree root impudently cracking a carapace of tarmac: these were wild signs, as much as the storm wave and the snowflake’ (316). The urban and the wild are
folded over each other in a kind of playful, almost harmony. Both Jamie and Macfarlane are reworking the idea of the wild, bringing it home and remoulding it into a more useful modern description. Macfarlane senses what Gary Snyder calls ‘a ghost wilderness’ that ‘hovers around the entire planet’ (317). It is not so very different from the wildness that comes out for Jamie in ‘our difficult / chthonic anchorage’. It precedes us and hampers us with the loving encumbrance of a family. Our relationship to it is one of negotiation, compromise, responsibility, whether we travel to the outer reaches of the Hebrides to find it or sit meditatively on the back steps. The landscapes of the archipelago are, of course, ideologically shaped and produced but there are phenomenological landscapes and intersubjective communities that can challenge or intervene in such ideologies in interesting ways. The personal narrative as walked out by the author is one such way of writing back to the road atlas or the blinkered geography of the M25. Such interventions resist the conventional aesthetic prefiguring of landscape as empty and as framed from a metropolitan point of view and read it closely for languages, cultures, communities, wildlife, meanings.

For Tim Robinson, the move to Aran back in 1972 might have been to a remote place on the edge of Europe, but it was also to the centre of a community and he has described that what held his fascination about the islands was the sheer ‘plenitude of material’ in both the culture and nature that such a place offered (Personal Interview). One person’s margin is another person’s centre, a truth captured neatly in the paradoxical title of a small publication of his: The View from the Horizon. Centres and peripheries, homes and horizons seem to overlap in these intimate geographies. What is lost is recovered in the most familiar places through a careful appeal to agencies beyond the human, but this often requires literary forms that seem to echo more literal acts of trespass or commoning. There is, however, a danger, that we come away from this with the suggestion that it is enough to intimately engage with the places around us, that to combat the homogenisation of capitalist land-use, motorways, mass agriculture, deforestation and development, all we need do is phenomenologically connect with our environment, and this is hinted at in Jamie’s final critique of The Wild Places. Whilst she acknowledges the book’s realisation that ‘wildness can be small and is better described as a process than as a place’ and that this might be both ‘sensitive’ and ‘courteous’ she adds that it is also ‘comforting’, comforting to an English readership as Macfarlane returns home to the south, but ‘politically comforting too, for landowners: there will be no revolution’ (‘Lone Enraptured’ 27). As intimate as our practices of landscape might be, is there a danger that such intimacy stands as a meagre and becalming compensation for crimes that only seem to show signs of worsening? Whilst I am not sure that Findings necessarily does call for a revolution itself, the question is an interesting one: to what extent does this literature becalm and to what extent does it offer a call to arms? It is for this reason that I have offered the two sides to this argument in these two chapters. We need both that ‘shameless modernism’ that is unafraid to confront the more damaged aspects of our landscape, asking difficult questions that it may not be able to answer (Farley and Roberts 32). And we need the more ecologically driven work that tries to sustain and pioneer certain modes of being within the landscape that can listen for an agency beyond us. It is possible that these two factions will continue to
argue and that a gap will perhaps widen between them, but I would propose that, at a time when we so urgently need both sides at once, this would be an unfortunate and frustrating loss.
PART 2
FINDINGS

INTRODUCTION: AN UNUSUAL ACCOMMODATION

On August 4th 1767 Gilbert White began the first of many letters to Thomas Pennant and Daines Barrington that would, in 1789, be published as *The Natural History of Selborne*. As W.J. Keith has confirmed, and indeed as the letter itself suggests, however, there was accompanying it in the mail an unidentified dead falcon (Keith 52). The recipient of this bird – and half of the other letters – was the renowned zoologist Thomas Pennant, in the hope that ‘it should appear familiar to you as it is strange to me’ (White 39). As White confesses ‘I cannot make it answer to any of our English hawks; neither could I find any like it at the curious exhibition of stuffed birds in Spring-gardens’ (39). The renowned naturalist of Selborne is faced with an instance in which his knowledge, and the culture of natural history, insofar as he is familiar with it, appear to be insufficient to account for this particular bird. Out of a fidelity to the singular form he sees before him, White goes to extraordinary lengths to counter the inadequacy of his language. His failure to classify the bird (which turns out to be simply a peregrine falcon) leads him to forgo linguistic description in favour of the material thing, ‘strange’ in itself. He makes a literal accommodation where, he feels, his culture cannot make an epistemological one.\(^8\)

This ‘assemblage’ of both the bird and the letter presenting the bird (and I use the word after Deleuze and Guattari, who define it as an ‘imbrication of the semiotic and the material’) offers a form in which the material world intrudes upon the ordering language and discourse, refusing its reduction and simplification with an obstinately complicated presence (*A Thousand Plateaus* 337). Where perhaps others might have read natural history as the ordering of the world according to given laws, White is in the business of re-ordering of the given laws according to the world before him. *The Natural History of Selborne* offered something of a break with a kind of knowledge inherited from book to book that was typical of natural history as it was then read and favoured instead patient, hands-on fieldwork, a genuine and physical interaction with things. As such, it is one of the earliest and most influential texts of the tradition of what in the nineteenth century came to be called ‘nature writing’. Its personal tone and its unsystematic treatment of material steer the work in this direction rather than toward the more purely scientific study of natural history writing emerging at the same time. This then, with its dead bird accompanying it, serves to remind us of the genre’s preoccupation with fidelity to the world beyond cultural representation. It shows, in a sense, the purpose of that ‘Walking Out’ of Part 1 in search of that corrective experience.

Rather than lending either the bird or the manuscript ultimate authority, the material thing and the text find themselves literally bound together, mutually supplementing each other’s weaknesses: one too mute, the other too talkative. We are, in a sense, called out of literary convention to recognise what

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\(^8\) Whilst it is tempting to dwell here on the brutality of killing and sending a bird for examination we ought to remember that this is forty years before ‘cruelty to animals’ became a parliamentary issue and that, by the standards of the day, White’s most violent endeavours were restrained and never wasteful (Keith Thomas 149, 109-10). In fact, White also did not shoot the bird himself but found it nailed to a barn door where local farmers would leave specimens like this for his examination.
Robert Macfarlane has called ‘a world that exceeds us, that is greater than our capacity and our knowledge’ (‘The Wild Places of Essex’ 2010). The true natural historian is interested in a systematic knowledge of the world but also fascinated by the oddities that blur the lines with strange and inexplicable facts: the herring gull that imitates a black bird’s song, the stag that eats rabbits, the hedgehog that squeals ‘like a good-sized pig’ (Parker 98, 9, 104). Such oddities remind us of the importance of diligent care in seeing with our own eyes. It was not entirely extraordinary to send a specimen like this between zoologists in the eighteenth century (though it was usually from abroad), but White’s particular anxiety lends this moment a special resonance for a number of authors today, preoccupied as they too are with material findings, mute excesses and with pushing imaginatively at the limitations of language to represent.

Kathleen Jamie, a keen bird-watcher herself, describes here her own encounter with a bird she does not immediately recognise:

Like some medieval peasant granted a vision, I was kneeling in a field, fixated by this uncanny cross in the sky. Then, as it moved slowly out of sight, I raced for home excited as a child, holding its image in my head like a bowlful of blue water – mustn’t spill a drop (Findings 42).

Unpacking the extraordinary metaphor of the ‘bowlful of blue water’, we see that it is a description of the unwieldiness of an ‘assemblage’ like White’s that maintains a double existence, part readable sign, part unrecognised excess. It is ‘uncanny’, both familiar and unfamiliar, both within perception but beyond knowledge at the same time. The ‘– mustn’t spill a drop’ seems to be a resistance to the pull of false certainty, the struggle to preserve the strangeness of the moment. She goes on:

This is what I want to learn: to notice, but not to analyse. To still the part of the brain that’s yammering, ‘My god, what’s that? A stork, a crane, an ibis? – don’t be silly, it’s just a weird heron.’ Sometimes we have to hush the frantic inner voice that says ‘Don’t be stupid,’ and learn again to look, to listen. You can do the organising and redrafting, the diagnosing and identifying later, but right now, just be open to it, see how it’s tilting nervously into the wind, try to see the colour, the unchancy shape – hold it in your head, bring it home intact (Findings 42).

Teetering on the outer edge of a more confident, though perhaps less acute, recognition, Jamie implores herself – and us to an extent – to allow the memory of the bird to retain the unfamiliar. There is a whole cognitive process being explored here, one that begins in the last chapter with walking the body out into the environment to see afresh, to find that urgent moment of enchantment. The process continues though; it has to apprehend and carry home its findings until they begin to affect the writing process, ‘the organising and redrafting’ in new and unusual ways. The following two chapters will look at the question of ‘Findings’: firstly the crucial moment that Jamie dramatises here, finding in all its cumbersome strangeness; and then secondly the kind of adjustments and accommodations that are involved with ‘bring[ing] it home intact’. How do we place something so new and so strange within our familiar frame of reference?

On the one hand we have to be willing to look again, pare things back to Andrew McNeillie’s ‘unnameable archipelago’ in all its immediate strangeness, a geographical space not determined by its political administration. Chapter 3 then will look at the idea of encountering the ‘unnameable archipelago’
through the treatment of found objects, balancing that strangeness like Jamie’s ‘bowlful of blue water’. On the other hand, there is another narrative that involves a creative new approach to the act of representation itself, one that responds with the utmost fidelity to new material findings. Chapter 4 will consider two very different approaches to re-mapping. This is a creative process, not in the sense that it is originary or fanciful, but rather in the sense that it is occupied with how best to accommodate what is found. ‘Precision,’ Macfarlane suggests, quoting Marianne Moore, ‘is a thing of the imagination’ (‘A Counter-Desecration Phrasebook’ 118). The authors I will be looking at in both these chapters are seeking their own creative solutions to this double problem of findings, not perhaps by literally binding material object and text, as White does, but by somehow creatively answering to this practice as metaphor.

Gilbert White’s own anxiety stemmed from his commitment to ‘watch narrowly’ and to record and account for the findings that this threw up (White, qtd in Mabey Gilbert White 117). To ‘watch narrowly’ is to look harder, to focus the attention more acutely on a single spot and to see that, for example, what was considered to be a single species of flower might in fact show the characteristics of two closely related species. Therefore to ‘watch narrowly’ comes with a certain duty to uphold the difficulty and complexity of your findings. The ‘Counter-Desecration Phrasebook’ of the islanders of Lewis in the last chapter, showed how watching narrowly today can be a tool and technique to employ as a challenge to the conveniently short-sighted gaze of industry. In this essay Macfarlane describes how the psychology of looking is tied to the structure of language, harking back to the structuralist argument that ‘[t]here are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language’ (Saussure 856). Developments in language can help in leading us to new ways of looking, or can help old, marginalised cultures and their ways of looking achieve wider or more formalised recognition. Such a realisation empowered the Lewisians to present their own ‘phrasebook’ as evidence of a culture of practices vital to their sense of place. Macfarlane’s essay, and much of Tim Robinson’s and Alice Oswald’s work (both of which I look at in Chapter 4), remind us that the dialects, stories, place names, lore and history of local cultures are precious for holding within their language experiences of our common world, experiences that are valuable but that are also vulnerable to erosion. The surest way to prevent that erosion is to use, speak, and publish that language. This is part of what Tim Robinson has called ‘rescue archaeology’ and serves as an instructive methodology in understanding how we might think about place in a progressive fashion (Setting Foot 13). To understand place in this way is to be involved in a continuous process of finding anew and remapping, or building on and developing what is known from the ground up, working with or living with the local communities themselves.

If the last two chapters took ‘landscape’ as the lens through which to explore their walking out beyond the pictorial frame, the two chapters that follow will take the study of ‘place’ to be their own lens for exploring the question of findings. Place has been conventionally understood in geography to be ‘the human-wrought transformation of a part of the Earth’s surface’ (Gregory 539). It is instituted and developed, often from the more abstract ‘space’, and thereby enters into a continuous process of
becoming something other than it is. It is agreed that a place is also in possession of certain cultural meanings, though how those meanings are created is subject to debate. At one end of the spectrum some, like Yi Fu Tuan, drawing on phenomenology, have suggested that the meaning of place is tied to the experience of the individual, an idea in which a degree of human agency is preserved (Space and Place). A place such as Thoreau’s cabin at Walden Pond might fit this description. At the other end of the spectrum, and throughout the eighties predominantly, the meanings associated with place were considered to be controlled neither by the consumer nor the producer of a place but as a part of the ideological apparatus of culture itself (McDowell, Undoing Place?). Iain Sinclair’s descriptions of such places as Bluewater and Lakeside shopping centres might fit this framework better. 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 (Space, Place and Gender 143). As the precariously balanced identities of places become threatened there is an attempt to protect them by fixing them. Unfortunately, the result of this move, she suggests, 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). She describes such an understanding of place as ‘reactionary’ (147). This can lead to the kinds of essentialist narratives that Ursula Heise is very critical of in her more recent Sense of Place and Sense of Planet. What is most interesting about Massey’s writing on place, however, is that she manages the scales of the local and the global in such a fashion as to offer a way of thinking about place as ‘progressive’ and open. For Massey, place

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).

Such an open, porous and, what she later calls, a ‘progressive’ understanding of place chimes well with the tradition of place writing that has emerged from Common Ground (Massey 147). For Common Ground, rejecting homogenising development whilst at the same time ‘demanding the best of the new’ has always struck an important tension (Local Distinctiveness 17). The philosophy and practice of Sue Clifford and Angela King has consistently endeavoured to ‘err towards the inclusive and welcoming’ (Local Distinctiveness 17), the festival of Diwal, for example, finding an entry in their encyclopaedia of local distinctiveness, England in Particular (131). This progressive, proactive and, above all, creative attitude towards place has led to such forward thinking projects as the commissioning of a very popular series of modern sculptures in rural areas (‘New Milestones’) and has influenced the likes of Macfarlane and Oswald who I will be looking at again in the next two chapters.

An understanding of place then, as open and porous and as creative and progressive, will be a common thread running through the next two chapters. I hope to demonstrate that the very life force of place as it is being written today has, at its heart, a desire to look again, to find new and interesting things that challenge any understanding of place as something static or prefigured. That the very act of writing place should be a careful process of listening and of ‘watching narrowly’, but that it should also be an act
of imaginative improvisation. Place, for the authors that I will be looking at in the following two chapters, is always about finding anew and mapping anew. Such a progressive view is a crucial part of the way a sense of place keeps going, and certainly of how it will survive in face of increasing homogenisation.
CHAPTER 3
‘THE UNNAMEABLE ARCHIPELAGO’: STRANGE NEW THINGS

John Elder and Robert Finch’s Norton Book of Nature Writing, despite its bias toward American authors, begins with Gilbert White. The tradition of ‘nature writing’ itself, they suggest, ‘grows out of the entrancing letters’ of this southern English pastor (22). The appeal of White to authors today is also the appeal of a particular tradition of scientific thought that grew to prominence in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. James L. McClintock has described ‘the stream of eighteenth century science’ as ‘divided’ between, on the one hand, a ‘mechanistic tradition’ that descends from Bacon, Descartes and Newton to the categorisation of the natural world by Linnaeus and, on the other, what he calls an ‘arcadian tradition’ that descends from Henry More and John Ray to White himself, one that ‘envisioned nature as organismic, imbued with spirit, knowable through subjective experience in addition to rational thought’ (10-11).

Elder and Finch explore White’s leaning toward ‘the arcadian’ through an analogy with another significant English literary figure. White finds his closest methodological and psychological ally for them in the playful curiosity of Winnie the Pooh: ‘Well, he was humming his hum to himself, and walking along gaily, wondering what everybody else was doing, and what it felt like being someone else, when suddenly he came to a sandy bank, and in the bank was a large hole. ‘Aha!’ said Pooh’ (qtd in Finch and Elder 23).

The analogy is more serious than it seems at first glance. White retains in his scientific method a sense of wonder and a humble curiosity for the immediate environment. Richard Mabey identifies in the way White inquired after his subject ‘what was to become the classic model for field-studies’, that ‘watching narrowly’, a form of meticulous observation that allows itself to be led by its own subject, curious and careful to preserve the complexity of its findings (Gilbert White 81).

It was this emphasis on fieldwork that led White to dispel certain popularly held myths about natural history, such as those surrounding hirundines – swallows, swifts and martins – who, it was thought, hibernated in the winter at the bottom of lakes. White kept a careful journal of field notes marking the annual appearance and disappearance of the birds and corresponded with his brother, living in Gibraltar at the time, who noted when he saw the birds too. In 1774 and 1775 White published one of the first theories on migration, and one of the first detailed studies of a single species, to be taken seriously by the Royal Society (Mabey Gilbert White 138). In The Natural History of Selborne he reflects:

When I used to rise in a morning last autumn, and see the swallows and martins clustering on the chimneys and thatch of the neighbouring cottages, I could not help being touched with a secret delight, mixed with some degree of mortification: with delight to observe with how much ardour and punctuality those poor little birds obeyed the strong impulse towards migration… imprinted on their minds by their great Creator; and with some degree of mortification, when I reflected that, after all our pains and inquiries, we are yet not quite certain to what regions they do migrate (White 67-8).

The phrase ‘secret delight, mixed with some degree of mortification’ captures something of the importance of the duality of that ‘arcadian tradition’. As a scientist he is ‘mortified’ by what he cannot
explain, by the challenge such a small bird can present to the discipline; as a man he is ‘delighted’ by bearing witness to the plain workings of a process that he does not fully comprehend. But why ‘secretly’? Certainly his faith in the ‘great Creator’ plays a part in this. He has a capacity for wonder at a world that remains in excess of his knowledge (‘I am seized by wonder’ is a familiar phrase in The Natural History of Selborne); it betrays a theological humility that seems quietly to underlie White’s scientific ambitions (White 74). But it is also secret because it is simply difficult to communicate such a personal moment of enchantment in such impersonal forms, genres or traditions as he was used to working in; it does not translate easily. In fact, translated, it mortifies. The sense is that White is witnessing something with his own eyes, quite intimately, that challenges the prevailing science and knowledge of the natural world.

The first review of The Natural History of Selborne (1789) observed that a custom ‘which has too long and too generally prevailed of compiling books from books has proved a great hindrance to the advancement of science’ (‘Item 37’ The Gentleman’s Magazine 144) and admires White for the ‘sagacity of his observations’ and for being ‘minute in his researches’ (‘Item 11’ The Gentleman’s Magazine 61-2). The natural history books of the mid-eighteenth century were a strange combination of scientific observation, fables, folk tales and entertainment, like the nightingales discussing the European wars in Willoughby’s Ornithology (1678) (quoted in Richard Mabey Gilbert White 11), advice on the extractions and distillations of various animals that might cure cancers or the falling sickness, or indeed, tales of swallows hibernating at the bottom of lakes (Allen xxxi). Grant Allen has even suggested that ‘zoology and botany formed just at that date, indeed what one may venture to call the growing-point of science as astronomy had formed it in the age of Copernicus’ (xxxi). It is well known, for example, how influential White’s work was on Charles Darwin whose theory of evolution is still too mortifying for ‘creationists’ today (Mabey, Gilbert White 6).

The ‘arcadian tradition’ has become increasingly vocal about the importance of our personal connection to the natural environment and the ‘secret delight’ that it engenders. Thoreau too had a copy of The Natural History of Selborne in his small library at Walden Pond (Elder and Finch 22), where he argued for the importance of re-grounding our culture on the essentials of a life lived ‘deliberately’ (Walden 8). Since Thoreau a protective care has begun to show itself in the tradition as that very natural environment has been put under increasing duress. Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson and, in England, Richard Mabey have all, throughout the twentieth century, questioned how we understand the world around us and now how we behave in that world too; and by addressing the way we understand it they have hoped to change the way we behave. Movements like Common Ground, Folding Landscapes, Archipelago and The New Nature Writing are the natural successors of this tradition of increasingly political practices, rooted as they all are in the ‘secret delight’ of personal fieldwork.

As we saw in the last chapter, an important way to defend against a commercial exploitation of land is by going out and brokering an intimate connection to the landscape, one that is culturally

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9 Richard Mabey takes a great deal of care to acknowledge the influence of physico-theology on White, as practiced by John Ray and William Derham, both of whom were motivated scientifically by theological beliefs.
meaningful on a personal level, individually and as a community. White’s ‘secret delight’ can be seen to take on a political dimension here since, by watching narrowly, it encounters what Sue Clifford and Angela King would call the ‘locally distinct’ and, like Thoreau and Leopold and Carson it demands recognition for just such a complexity at the larger levels of political scale above the local. Such is the politics of an enchanted intimacy that I argued for in Chapter 2.

In this sense the local is forced to speak back to the national and global configurations of space into which it is absorbed. New practices on a local scale that refuse to take part in a destructive infrastructure – what Ulrich Beck calls ‘organised irresponsibility’ (149) – are the contemporary results of this tradition; they are life lived ‘deliberately’ (Thoreau, *Walden* 8). New green technologies, ethically and locally sourcing food and clothing, a renewed interest in handicrafts and recycling, reducing carbon footprints as streets and communities, getting involved with conservation projects, local currencies, engaging with practices and customs that strengthen a sense of local distinctiveness: in their emphasis on restraint, resourcefulness and self-reliance, these things are movements away from the global and national infrastructure. They face the difficult questions and grave uncertainties of our age, dispensing with the reassuring myths. They allow themselves to be ‘mortified’ by our limitations, but also to discover the secret delight of new ways of being that connect a community with its place rather than with its national and global infrastructure. This is the ‘arcadian tradition’, politicised in the modern world, developing a critical sense of place, what Arif Dirlik has called a ‘critical localism’ in that the local is ‘a site of resistance to capital, and the location for imagining alternative possibilities’ (’The Global in the Local’ 22).

Such ‘critical localism’ is not searching for a devolved autonomy in the sense of the bounding and isolating of a place. On the contrary, such alternative choices are reliant on complex networks of communication that are both local and global (though rarely national). A place such as Totnes, perhaps the most progressive of the ‘Transition Towns’ (towns intent on reducing carbon emissions and building up local resilience) has inspired thousands of transition initiatives globally, shares partnerships with 25 other organisations and regularly welcomes people from all over the world for training in its initiatives (’What Has Transition Town Totnes Ever Done for Us?’). The ‘secret delight’ of the local, whilst resistant to more over-bear narratives that attempt to reduce or simplify it, is, in its own way, developed across a cosmopolitan network. As Dirlik emphasises, such movements ‘must be translocal both in consciousness and action’ (’The Global in the Local’ 41).

There is a relationship between such local environmental movements and the archipelagic politics that Andrew McNeillie seems to draw on for his journal *Archipelago*. When he refers to these islands as the ‘unnamable archipelago’, it is in an effort to hold our more imperial languages and dwellings, our infrastructure and our industries, at bay for a moment and to imagine correcting them in relation to the bedrock beneath. Referring to this space as an ‘unnamable archipelago’ prompts the consideration of alternative relationships between and across its islands or its regions other than that of national unity dominated by the south east of England. This is not a politics of devolution with the idea of isolation in mind but rather with the idea of cosmopolitan reconfiguration. In a sense the network of Transition
Towns across the archipelago can be read as precisely the kind of reconfiguration of spatial relations that is being imagined by an archipelagic agenda, each region liberated from its subordination to a cultural perspective that is often unable to recognise its complexity.

How small a scale though, and how secret a delight, can practically be brought to act upon the larger scales above it? Though not, perhaps, the place of this thesis to measure such, we are beginning to see research being done into how the government can be made better aware of and be made to answer such demands on a local level. One such project with an emphasis on ‘participatory democracy’ has been run at the Centre for the Study of Environmental Change at the University of Lancaster by Robin Grove-White, a professor who has also served for a number of years as a director for Common Ground. But this and the next chapter will be more concerned with literary explorations of this idea and its theoretical argument, with how such political perspectives are being handled culturally at the level of language. *Archipelago* has consistently and quite originally aligned its ecological agenda with its agenda of a suppressed Celticism to great effect. In Mark Williams’s essay on contemporary Gaelic language poetry in the first issue of *Archipelago*, for example, the following few lines are translated by Fearghas MacFhionnlaigh’s long Scottish nationalist poem *The Midge*:

I am a small thing, and like the small things:  
the buried seed that splits the sidewalk;  
the water-drop that devours the stone;  
the grain of sand that inters the pyramid;  
the first bird that welcomes the sun;  
the little country, the little language;  
the word of truth that is heavier than the world (‘The Old Song’ 1 81).

‘The little language’ is associated with the buried seed, the grain of sand and, of course, the water-drop, all of which, figured deliberately at the smallest possible scale, appear to have the potential to overwhelm images of empire and the metropolis.

For Tim Robinson, the scale is similarly small in the metaphor of that ‘good step’ which has to it a ‘momentary congruence between the culture one bears and the ground that bears one’ (*Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage* 364). But as I have shown this is an ‘inconceivable’ and utopian congruence of scale, as we have seen, between the infinitely minute detail of place and the infinitely expansive possibilities of human global culture. As an idea though, and as a quixotic aspiration, it is powerful and addresses the same question as to how we can make that move from the scale of the personal ‘secret delight’ and the more daunting scales above it. In a moment of sudden anarchism Robinson suggests that the step must be ‘stateless’ as it ‘claims a foot-long nationality every second’ (*Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage* 364). An ‘arcadian tradition’ indeed then, but one that draws its resources critically from the richly intimate environment of the local.

This archipelagic politics of devolved reconfiguration offers us a way of understanding the motivation behind a strange idiosyncrasy of the genre: its interest in the found object. I have described a current emphasis on politics, ethics and aesthetics from the ground up rather than from the top down and it is this emphasis than I will analyse in the proliferation of found objects being written into the narrative.
and appearing as illustrations across such a wide range of authors today. The use of such objects as a literary device – and they are a literary device, however extra-literary they may in fact be – at one level suggests an appeal to something beyond the ordinary semiotic properties of language, something exorbitant. It suggests that language has failed to adequately account for the world as, for example, when White sends his falcon to Thomas Pennant. However, to say that such gestures remain beyond the semiotic would be wrong. They are also a making of meaning performatively. Objects that are brought inside become encoded with meaning as they cross the threshold. However, part of the point of the ritual in the first place is that such objects bring a meaning with them too, or at least that an agency is recognised within them, and that this agency is met with a self-restraint on the part of the author. Today the archipelagic tradition is struggling to find and relate to that ‘unnameable’, to wrestle it free of the names we have buried it under and to re-imagine it with a more patient and inquisitive regard; in short to watch it more narrowly. It is just such a politics that I will read into a series of performative gestures that recur in various ways in numerous books published in the last 10 years.

There is a long tradition of fascination with found objects that has counterparts in many movements, histories and genres from modernism and surrealism to collecting cultures and Wunderkammer, and this is something that authors today seem wary of. In Jamie’s appropriately titled Findings, upon leaving the island of Ceann Iar, after taking notes and recordings of birdsong for the BBC, Jamie, Tim Dee and their Austrian companion Donald each take with them an object: a bleached whale’s scapula, an orb of quartz and a two-foot-long plastic duck (60). Remembering a monastery on the island, Jamie comments ‘To the seals who watched from the water, we must have looked less like monks than cheapskate Magi, the three of us in waterproofs, one behind the other, bearing these peculiar things’ (61). There is a pang of conscience and a tone of judgement here, Magi not giving but taking from a hallowed ground. And yet she still feels compelled to do it. This anxiety and even its Biblical tone is seconded by Andrew McNeillie in his essay ‘Words from Stones’ (2006):

> Despite the Old Testament warning that ‘Thou shalt not remove thy neighbour’s landmark’, and against all current principles of conservation, I have on my windowsill a small cairn, a minilith, of rocks and stones, pocketed from four locations (Wales, Scotland, Ireland, and America’s Walden Pond) (44).

McNeillie is clearly concerned that his ‘pocketing’ of stones is a crime against both his neighbour and the land itself, and yet the impulse to connect and to mark that personal connection is too much. When Macfarlane ‘pockets’ his first stone too, on Ynys Enlli, in The Wild Places, he follows the act by an interesting sleight of hand that seems to address some of this same anxiety:

> On a rock ledge, I found and kept a heart-sized stone of blue basalt, beautifully marked with fossils: coccoliths no bigger than a fingernail, the fine fanwork of their bodies still visible. I set a thin shell afloat carrying a cargo of dry thrift heads. As I placed it on the water, it was sucked out away from my fingers on an invisible black eddy, bobbing with the gentle swell (34).
The thrift heads are a performed offering, a recompense, somehow, for his own theft that seems to address the problematic colonial tradition of collecting. It is possible that the apprehension about pocketing these things comes in the act of writing rather than the act of finding. Writing about the process somehow anxiously formalises it as a cultural practice, makes it public, bringing it closer to the dubious practices of those collecting cultures.

Russel W. Belk has tracked the history of collecting back to the Greeks and Romans and observes its growth into a signification of power and status within the development of consumer ideology (1-22). However, from the collection of religious relics to the fourteenth century Wunderkammer, and from the later European curio cabinets to the taxidermists of the nineteenth century, there is very little that this pocketing of stones seems to draw on. Tim Dee’s carrying home of the plastic duck seems almost ironic, and Jamie’s orb of quartz as humble as Macfarlane’s and McNeillie’s. McNeillie’s Celtic arc of ‘Wales, Scotland, Ireland’ looks out toward Thoreau rather than back toward their imperial coloniser, and England is as absent from his collection of stones as the south east is from the cover of his journal. In fact, the qualities that Belk lists as appealing to the early collectors on their colonial expeditions are almost the antithesis of the qualities sought today by these authors: ‘novelty’, ‘rarity’, ‘exoticism’, ‘bizarreness’, ‘the unusually large and the unusually small’, ‘supreme technical skill or virtuosity’ (11).

Macfarlane does find a flint arrowhead of ‘technical skill or virtuosity’ on Orford Ness but only takes it home with the proviso: ‘I would keep it, I thought, for a year or two, before returning it to the same shore’ (245). What is prized about the sticks, stones and bones that appear in these books is in stark opposition to the mainstream of traditional collecting cultures. They are prized for being ordinary, overlooked and close to home. The tradition Macfarlane affiliates himself with is precisely ‘a family one’, part of the ‘humdrum, everyday rites, practised by millions of people’ that help to connect them to the places in which they live (88).

This is a culture of the local and the personal, a culture tied to the meaningful practice of place, not in a national or standardised way that confirms an ‘authentic’ identity but, rather, as a practice that personalises a place on the scale of an individual, a family or a community. In fact, I would argue that, as these findings become public in the act of writing, such practices are being opposed to national, industrial or commercial practices of place. They are associated with other performative practices such as ‘beating the bounds’, in which walking the boundary line of the parish annually helps to set it in memory rather than on a map. Such practices suggest an attention to the distinctive and communal assemblage of place as reiterated annually. As the rise of the road atlas and google maps (they are now by far the two most popular forms of map) has led to an ever more sparse and abstracted rendering of place, there has been a counter rise of local practices that looks back to the public fascination with particularity and

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10 There is an interesting tradition of literary offerings to be considered here as well in relation to findings, for which see John Elder’s pouring out a jar of maple syrup on the Hogback Ridge in the Green Mountains in Vermont (‘Catchments’ 33) or David Abram’s discussion of a village in Bali leaving rice out for the ants (11-13).

11 I had the opportunity to ask Macfarlane if he did take it back. He did not, though he did pass it on to another friend suggesting that keeping it in circulation was at least a way of echoing the rhythms of shingle distribution along Orford Ness.
distinctiveness. The popularity of Richard Mabey’s *Food for Free* (1972 with editions in 1989 and 2007 as well) is another example of this tendency. It is a guidebook to what Edward Bunyan called ‘ambulant consumption’, instructions for foraging in the most ordinary of British environments. In his preface to the 2007 edition Mabey asks ‘why should twenty-first century eaters-out, with easy access to most of the taste sensations on the planet, choose to browse about like Paleolithics?’ He concludes that it is (for him) the sensual surprise, awakening the forager to a certain strangeness and richness which they might never normally have been aware of:

> ‘I relish the shock of the new taste, that first bite of the unfamiliar apple. Reed stems, sucked for their sugary sap. Sun-dried English prunes, from a damson bush simmered while it was in fruit [...] I’ve found apples that tasted of pears, fizzed like sherbert, smelt of quince. But it’s the finding of them, the intimacy with the trees and the places they grow, a heightened consciousness of what they need to survive’ (emphasis original) (9-10).

As Bill Brown asks in his essay on ‘Thing Theory’: ‘How does the effort to rethink [material] things become an effort to *re*-institute society?’ (10) I would suggest that this ‘rethinking’ and here re-*experiencing* of the material object or the material thing in these acts of foraging and finding speaks back to the industrial, global and national representations of place, representations tied up with what Ted Hughes called ‘the Technosphere’ (128); and with what Robert Crawford has, since the spread of the internet, called a technological society’s virtual ‘deincarnation’ of place: ‘Gaelic names, flora, rainfall // So close, the tangible spirited away, / Cybered in a world of light’ (87).

When we bring objects such as twigs with catkins on them indoors, rocks, drift-wood, shells and fossils, we are connecting with a tradition that has its roots in seasonal celebrations such as ‘bringing the May’. But it is an even less organised custom that this. Nobody has agreed on this, and yet thousands of people do it every time they go for a Sunday walk. Bringing the May itself is a custom that involves going out and collecting new foliage and flowers to be hung in the church and in the home to celebrate the coming of summer. It ritualises and performs the crossing of a seasonal date by enacting the crossing literally, receiving the new growth and bringing it indoors. It is a tradition that Ronald Hutton has dated to the fifteenth century, though he suggests that the records he has found are likely to have represented ‘no more than the official peak of a mountain of private observation’ (227). It is the ‘private observation’ that I think authors today are alluding to with its ‘secret delight’, one that is secret not because it is guarded but because it does not translate well into anything other than the ritual that it is. Like bringing the May, found objects are a way of connecting the home to the life and to the processes that go on just beyond its walls. They are part of a meaningful, everyday ritual of local attachment that connects people with the wider processes of the planet, from deep geological time (an orb of quartz, blue basalt, coccoliths) to the migration of animals (whale scapula), to seasonal tides or to the jetsam washed ashore from a passing ship (a plastic yellow duck). Far from being an insular ritual and practice of place they

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12 Google maps have the functions to do more complex and interesting things but the way in which they are more frequently used is as a road map.
celebrate it as ‘open and porous’, feeling for global rhythms and orders such as Doreen Massey describes (5).

When Macfarlane requested in The Guardian that readers send in recommendations of authors and works of literature that best represent the places they come from, a number of readers sent objects: ‘a feather, and a hoop of grass combed from a Carmarthenshire field’ or ‘a folding of a bark-rubbing from a Strontian oak tree’ (‘Where the Wild Things Were’). Such objects or rubbings are offered up as intimate maps, but not maps that represent the places they emerge from in any scaled visual way; rather, as representations of a moment’s connection, evidence of a certain creative and meaningful act of finding. Their message is one of occasion as much as it is of place. In the case of the author and musician Richard Skelton, such objects accompany the purchase of a text (or even serve as part of the text). When you buy from Skelton’s own website he has incorporated twigs, bark, feathers, brook water, husks, shells, and numerous other artefacts, into what he calls ‘thing-poems of the [West Pennine] moors’. Interestingly, he alludes to Kathleen Jamie’s description of poetry as a ‘connective tissue’ on his website (though he doesn’t cite her) (‘An Archive of the Work of Richard Skelton’). It is in an interview that Jamie uses this term, describing something akin to White’s ‘watching narrowly’:

The older I get I think [poetry’s] not about voice, it’s about listening and the art of listening, listening with attention. I don’t just mean with the ear; bringing the quality of attention to the world… For me, poetry is a sort of connective tissue where myself meets world, and it rises out of that liminal place (Scott).

There is an attempt to thicken the process of listening and of paying attention here, to illuminate it as an involved, physical, creative action rather than passive reception, as a finding rather than a receiving, and this too is something that the bringing indoors of objects seems to call to mind.

In an edition of Granta in 2005, Jamie describes finding some flakes of stone when she is revisiting the old mining landscape where her family lived for several generations before she was born. All the mines are decommissioned, she finds, most of the houses have been demolished and there is only farmland, moorland and an opencast site filled with ‘sullen green water which looked almost ashamed of itself, as if it couldn’t help but gather there’ (92). She is shown the site of the house of her great-great-grandparents, No.41 Darnconner, by a local farmer and she feels a strange ‘astonishment’ at its near disappearance into ‘the open moor of dun-coloured grasses and moss’ (94). On the way around she describes how ‘[m]y foot slipped and released a few flakes of coal slag, so I put them in my pocket, with a notion to take them home to my mother’ (95). The act recalls both her family tie to the place and Jamie’s partial estrangement from that life. But it also addresses this estrangement in an intergenerational act of remembrance and reconnection and in doing so begins a series of resonances between past and present. The place is soon to be buried under a ‘biomass’ willow plantation to be cropped for fuel for power stations (97). Such a use recalls the mines which similarly provided for power stations and as it does so it recalls our choice to move from coal to biomass, something that reflects a move towards renewable resources as the price of non-renewable resources rises (willow is an increasingly cheaper alternative).
Those few flakes of coal slag at the moment Jamie finds them, in her own very personal context, seem to do more than direct her, and her mother, and us, to this place and the family history soon to be buried — the essay itself serves that purpose — they seem also a response to the ‘astonishment’ itself, the astonishment at the present state of the place, the strange complex of narratives that are running across it in difficult, heterogeneous, but concrete ways. The moment looks back to that ‘bowlful of blue water’ that we see in Findings that she tries to ‘carry home’, but this is almost too poetic an image, too beautiful, to express the awkward strangeness of Jamie’s experience at Darnconner. These flakes of coal are a raw material that her family broke their backs for and here she is, a poet of Scottish nationalism at this early stage, and of women’s writing, shifting her focus to a concern for the environment, but critical nonetheless of lyrical and picturesque views of the land (Fraser 15). It all seems condensed into the act of finding.

We never get the feeling that Jamie is finding what she expected to find. Earlier in the essay, on her way up to Darnconner, she describes ‘[n]ow that was a turn-up for the books. Hen harriers and busted tellies; a liminal place, the edge of the moor,’ and it is liminal in a number of senses: on the cusp of old and new certainly, natural and unnatural, definitely, but also liminal in the sense of being caught somehow between what we expect of a landscape and what we actually find. She recalls Burns to herself looking around the opencast: ‘Ye banks and braes,’ I thought, ‘how can ye bloom sae fresh and fair?’ But ‘I’m Forever Blowing Bubbles’ had installed itself in my head instead.’ (92) From somewhere, we are told, the West Ham football anthem arises; perhaps an ice cream van on a nearby estate, she guesses later, but we are never told definitively. A snatch of song that haunts the place like the ‘busted telly’, it intrudes on the romantic experience of place in a way that has become characteristic of Jamie’s writing.

This was a working place for her family, the site of a tough, poor existence in conditions that had prompted the union men to recommend closure of the mines, so this unidentifiable song hanging in the air to disrupt the lyric does not seem out of place. The song is never fully placed and she leaves it receding from us in an interesting way. We are refused a composed prospect as she is refused a poetic daydream by this tune from London and the south. But this is not a story of modernisation. It does not seem to be forcing home a point. It is just lifting the found flakes of coal and the song up to the light, allowing us to make of them what we will. As I mentioned in the last chapter, what makes Jamie’s writing of place most interesting is its intertwining of the natural and the cultural, its placing of the home in the natural world and the natural world within our very organs. The writing practices a kind of dwelling, a making home that is simultaneously an unmaking of home. Her astonishment at the moor has something of the uncanny to it again, the unhomely, that draws her in with its promise of family connection but that unsettles at the same time where the moor seems almost to erase it, inflecting Burns’s ‘how can ye bloom sae fresh and fair?’ with a shock at a world that grows over all traces of our lives in it. She has a care and attention for aspects of the place that are non-human, and aspects of the place that are all too human. Jamie has a very keen eye for strangeness, for preserving the ‘unchancy shape’, however much it might unbalance the present order (Findings 42). There is a new intimacy in this, a suspect closeness to the
present state of the places she visits and this is a key part of what thickens attention to that ‘connective tissue’.

Jonathan Gil Harris, writing of the material culture and historical objects of the Elizabethan period, coins a useful term for the dual nature of objects and artefacts. He calls them ‘staged’, reaching after the double meaning of the word. On the one hand they are ‘staged’ in the sense that they are performed ‘on a stage’ with a synchronic aesthetic and social significance. On the other hand they are ‘staged’ in the sense of having a providence of various significances that can be traced diachronically ‘in stages’ (490). He reminds us that, for Aristotle, as for Marx, matter itself denoted ‘potentiality’ rather than ‘actuality’ (which was denoted by ‘form’) (483). Such a reminder of matter’s fluid and diachronic significance is particularly useful in an understanding of the found objects of this archipelagic writing.

Jamie’s collection of those flakes of coal – and her writing them up – is a performative gesture that stages a certain connection to the place, but it also reveals a historical layering through which the significance of the object – the coal – has changed. Her finding tries to bring those different layers into communication with one another.

When Macfarlane finds the flint arrow head on Orford Ness, again it marks a particular performative means of connecting with the place. But it also alludes to the layers of history that are encoded in that object, that place and the relationship between them. We think of the Stone Age flint mines of Grimes Graves some forty miles inland and the manufacturing of this ballistic weapon. But we also think of its journey through time to the Ness which, Macfarlane tells us, after the Second World War was the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment (1953 - 1971). It is also difficult not to be reminded of W.G. Sebald’s extremely different account of Orford Ness in The Rings of Saturn, a dark and apocalyptic climax in the book that brings to mind the planes flying out overhead to bomb Dresden during the Second World War (227-37). It is a landscape tainted by weaponry. But it is rare that these found objects are so designed by humans as this flint arrowhead is. More often they are objects more reticent, sculpted only by the passage of time and the slow-working hands of weather or geology, objects upon which we attempt to hang our human readings over and over again.

Tim Robinson, in Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage, finds a boulder on the north coast of the island, too large and too culturally significant for him to bring home perhaps, but nonetheless a found object of sorts. Among the grey, porous, brittle limestone that breaks in angular ways on Aaráin, here and there you find a pinkish stone of smooth, round granite. Knowing very well that the granite had come from Connemara some 10 miles over the sea, but unable to explain how, local legend has it that these boulders served as boats aboard which the saints had travelled to the island. By such miraculous defiance of the laws of physics they proved their holiness. Today we have a different explanation for their mysterious migration. In fact, as Robinson points out, during the Ice Age these boulders were carried from Connemara over the sea inside glaciers and when the glaciers melted they were deposited wherever they landed. This adds a whole new narrative to the scene, its origins in a pre-human geography of extreme conditions. But for Robinson the modern geological explanation does not discredit the older folkloric
explanation so much as add to the repertoire of ‘stages’ through which the boulder makes its meaning. As he says later of the Connemara area, ‘the geological system of explanation was hardly less dubious that the hagiographical one’ (Setting Foott 27). One particular boulder on Aran is called Mulán Cholm Cille, or Colm Cille’s boulder, Colm Cille being the saint who rode over on it. Sat on this boulder, Robinson suggests that ‘it has often carried me faithfully to Connemara’ as he gazes over the sea, but ‘what is required to float it into the miraculous is not an act of faith, but an act of recollection’ (Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage 254). The imaginative, historical explanation of the boulder’s movement is drawn on here as a complement to the more recent geological explanation. His own written word and its particular quality of attention form what Jamie called a ‘connective tissue’, a creative and imaginative aspect of the act of finding (Scott).

Many of these objects today are being ‘staged’ precisely for all the ‘stages’ that they represent, human and non-human. Such a boulder as Robinson finds himself drawn to helps to correct our very anthropocentric sense of time with a reminder of prehistoric glacial drift. Elsewhere, the erosion of Aírn’s limestone cliffs or Macfarlane’s fascination with various types of rock speak of an understanding of materiality, like Aristotle, as potentiality, as an ongoing process somehow beyond our ability to experience but always being grasped at nonetheless, with folklore, poetry, geology, physics, art. In this sense these objects can also be ways of contemplating the unrepresentable, those aspects of time and space that exceed our imagination but that draw us to them nonetheless. In a 1934 poem ‘On a Raised Beach’, contemplating the indifference of stone, Hugh MacDiarmid wrote:

Deep conviction or preference can seldom
Find direct terms in which to express itself.
To-day on this shingle shelf
I understand this pensive reluctance so well,
This not discommendable obstinacy,
These contrivances of an inexpressive critical feeling,
These stones with their resolve that Creation shall not be
Injured by iconoclasts and quacks (167).

The poem empathises with the ‘reluctance’, ‘obstinacy’ and ‘inexpressive critical feeling’ of stone, but even in so doing it is exploring that inexpressiveness imaginatively. It cannot help but do so. Timothy Clark has discussed this same ‘opaque’ and ‘resistant’ nature in relation to Heidegger’s notion of the ‘earth’, an idea that Heidegger also conveys through an image of stone (Clark 57). Clark argues that nothing can ‘even be mentioned without, by that very act, becoming part of the discriminations and significances of a human cultural world’ (58). To ‘think the ‘earth’’, he continues, ‘becomes no kind of ‘return’ to nature, but an emptying out of given concepts against the element of a chastening opacity and refusal’ (60). It is that opacity and refusal that MacDiarmid is aligning himself with here. It is the same quality that Robinson is compensating for above. Both turn to an unusual form of literary geology as an aesthetic of restraint that is yet by no means without creativity. There is an emptying out of their own more personal and poetic idiolect as MacDiarmid draws on an extraordinary geological vocabulary throughout, one that would not come easily to a layman, or even a simple enthusiast. It is a professional vocabulary and one that, to most readers, will be as opaque as the rock itself is to him. Robinson too,
elsewhere, relays an almost Joycean passage from a work of geological science precisely for the opaque vocabulary:

In the field both pillow and massive metbasites are hornfelsed and now comprise an equigranular mosaic of plagioclase and hornblende [...] that parallels the axial surface of small-scale folds in the metasediments. In thin sections there are ragged poikiloblasts of hornblende and occasionally plagioclase, idioblastic horn-blende, needles of ilmanite and irregular granular aggregates of pyrite (Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage 248).

‘All is lithogenesis’, MacDiarmid’s poem begins, meaning the production or origin of minerals, and it refers to the poem as much as the minerals themselves, a language reserved for those with a very close alliance with their object (MacDiarmid 166).

In an essay called ‘The Blinded Eye’ from Common Ground’s anthology Second Nature, John Fowles raises an interesting argument against a more ‘humdrum, everyday’ collecting as ‘one of the great heresies of man’s attitude to nature’, his ‘hatred’ of which was the fuel behind his novel The Collector (78). His argument is that it employs a box-ticking mentality towards ‘nature as hobby’ that blinds the human eye and, for him, led to a violent ‘black period’ of shooting and fishing (78). This is the obsession that collectors often have with collecting them all, in which the nuances of the thing itself are overlooked for the fact that it represents one of its kind. In this system what is really sought is a satisfactory confirmation of the system’s authenticity. Interestingly, the establishment of many of the systems that this kind of collecting seeks to authenticate was, again, in the eighteenth century, but issuing from that other scientific tradition that McClintock calls the ‘mechanistic’ tradition, particularly that of the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus. Writing of this period of natural history, Michel Foucault has suggested that:

The documents of this new history are not words, texts or records, but unencumbered spaces in which things are juxtaposed […] the locus of this history is a non-temporal rectangle in which, stripped of all commentary, of all enveloping language, creatures present themselves one beside another, their surfaces volatile, grouped according to their common features, thus already virtually analyzed and bearers of nothing but their individual names (131).

It is interesting to note that Linnaeus refused to acknowledge any early theories of evolution as well as any other dynamic scientific principle or law that might threaten the integrity of his emphatically static system, its ‘non-temporal rectangle’ (Holmes 48-9). Gilbert White, however, perceived no problems with challenging the closure of the established system with his personal findings. For White, Foucault’s ‘non-temporal rectangle’ is ever opening out; he is temporalising it and re-temporalising it with more and more minute discoveries, no end in sight. The rectangle is never closed, never non-temporal. Here, he says, we don’t have a place for this. The postal line of communication between Selborne and Thomas Pennant jams the rectangle open, preventing its will to the kind of homogeneity that Anne Fadiman has associated with colonisation (19). The same is true of these stones that Macfarlane, Jamie, Robinson and McNeillie find. They are not collected but found. Here, they say, we don’t have a place for this. Their ambition is towards White’s assemblage, towards something that jams the door open between the symbolic system
and the ‘unnameable archipelago’ itself. White’s intention was never to demonstrate the complete status of natural history but to challenge it, to make it answer to new material evidence, not in the hope that one day it would be a complete knowledge, but to prove that prescient belief ‘that that district produces the greatest variety which is the most examined’ (60). Likewise, with the prevalence of these found objects there is a vernacular resistance to the idea that place is prefigured and that our experience of it is predetermined. Look again, they demand, the world is in excess of what we thought, always in excess. There have been criticisms recently that suggest that the writing of place risks being insular and essentialist (Heise 17-67; Massey 125-146). Heise is referring to a particular strain of American environmentalism, and Massey to a particular form of British locality studies in the 1980s. These are refreshing criticisms with an eye on the mobility and globalisation of our changing world. The archipelagic, with its emphasis on relations, connections, networks and their reconfiguration does not risk the same kind of insularity. It does, however, as I have said, resist the more footloose forms of globalisation in favour of something grounded. I use the term in the sense that Arif Dirlik does 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’ (155). Grounded is not the same as rooted. It involves an ongoing engagement, creative and inventive like the ‘Counter-Desecration Phrasebook’. We must not confuse this aesthetic and this politics that demands representation from the ground up with the essentialist claim of an eternal and unchanging sense of place. Dirlik continues:

> What is important about the metaphor [of groundedness] is that it calls for a definition of what is to be included in the place from within the place – some control over the conduct and organization of everyday life, in other words – rather than from above, from those placeless abstractions such as capital, the nation-state, and their discursive expressions in the realm of theory (155).

The ‘groundedness’ of place makes thoughtful and responsive use of the boundaries that a place suggests, their particular form, the temporal and material resistances that they offer. Places can be explored with all kinds of different narratives that might be connected with other places across a variety of networks, but like all narratives they are to be explored and asserted creatively, individually or as a community. The ‘matter’ of a place is a personal and intersubjective phenomena and its groundedness is a question of creative activity rather than reduction to an essence.

This recuperation of the creativity, the difficulty and the strangeness in the intimacy of objects or things or places is in stark contradiction to a line on subject/object relations that Bill Brown describes:

> To declare that the character of things as things has been extinguished, or that objects have been struck dumb, or that the idea of respecting things no longer makes sense because they are vanishing – this is to find in the fate of things a symptom of a pathological condition most familiarly known as modernity (10).

The passivity of such subject/object relations rests in a state of melancholy loss and longing, but finds itself challenged or playfully breached by thing theory here in the dynamic struggle for a different way of
relating to and representing the world around us. Peter Schwenger’s study of the modernist attitude to objects, *The Tears of Things*, explores this state of Freudian melancholy as ‘a kind of longing toward something that continuously recedes into dimensions of loss’ (6). The object is raised from a background and casts us in a light of alienation: we are in possession of it as it appears for us, but cut off from the object as it is for itself. The moment of bearing witness mutually constitutes both subject and object, putting them in frozen opposition as they come together. Schwenger quotes Merleau-Ponty, who suggests in *The Phenomenology of Perception*:

> Our perception, in the context of everyday concerns, alights on things sufficiently attentively to discover in them their familiar presence, but not sufficiently so to disclose the non-human element which lies hidden in them. But the thing holds itself aloof from us and remains self-sufficient… a resolutely silent Other (qtd in *The Tears of Things* 3).

However, key to this statement is the phrase ‘in the context of everyday concerns’. Schwenger’s study of objects in literature is a study of the objects we encounter in and on the margins of a certain mundane drudgery. He cites Virginia Woolf’s ‘Solid Objects’ in which a politician on the brink of a great career finds himself missing meetings and taking something of a professional nose-dive as he obsesses over pieces of stone and broken china that he finds in the flowerbeds of his central London neighbourhood (Schwenger 82). He also cites Franz Kafka’s ‘The Cares of a Family Man’ in which the mysterious ‘Odradek’, which ‘at first glance looks like a flat star-shaped spool’ but ‘is not only a spool’, appears in different places around the house and speaks with a voice ‘like the rustling of leaves’ (81). These are objects as they come to us, on the margins of a normative existence, objects that threaten and disconcert an urban, domestic and conformed subjectivity with their ‘resolute, silent, Other[ness]’. In this kind of environment, perhaps it is true that ‘The death of the thing, then, is the price we pay for the word’ and perhaps really paying attention to the object does lead to a kind of haunting (Schwenger 2001 100). Perhaps we can only long after the late thing, the object in itself, from such an isolated idea of humanity, what Ted Hughes would call ‘the mind exiled from Nature’ (129). Woolf’s politician must choose between his career or the world of things. He chooses things and the price is his professional life. But in an age when our professional lives have led to that ‘organized irresponsibility’ of Ulrich Beck, such marginal subjectivities and such uncertain objects might in fact offer us a way out (149).

Jane Bennett has also found her attention captured by Kafka’s ‘Odradek’, but rather as an example of the capacity for things to take on an agency and a ‘becoming’ rather than a static and objectified ‘being’ (*Vibrant Matter* 8). This forms part of her argument for what she calls ‘vibrant matter’, a recognition of matter’s ability to act on us that challenges ‘the habit of parsing the world into dull matter (it, things) and vibrant life (us, beings)’ (vii). Agency, Bennett argues, ought better to be ‘distributed across a wider range of ontological types’ (10) but the very possibility relies on our ability to recognise the agency of an otherness within things that are normally perceived precisely as ‘resolute, silent [and] Other’ (Schwenger 3).

Altering our understanding of objects, allowing them to recede at the outer edge into the stickiness of their backgrounds, and attain to more lively and potent formations, is by way of a strange
sense of symmetry, also to alter our understanding of subjectivity. For Macfarlane, it is precisely an urban
and domestic subjectivity that he is trying to leave behind. Beyond longing, and challenging the notion of
melancholy, a new subjectivity is being searched out, ‘defraying the city’s claims on me’, one that is open
to the particular material agencies of landscape, however silent (6). McNeillie actually passes ‘Mynydd
Hiraethog (the mountain of longing or loneliness)’ on his way to a platform cairn near Brenig in North
Wales. It is only after this that he observes the change that brings him into closer alignment with the place
itself, its deep sense of time:

[...]
you need to settle into it, to acclimatise on re-entry to the earth’s inscape and
simple atmosphere. Even one unusually gifted in the art of wilderness haunting and general
mooching, such as I am must take time to find his feet again, if he is to make good his escape [...] in
the wake of wage-slavery, at the manic vortex that is postmodern, globally networked, so-called life [...] So I pottered round, orientating myself like a lost soul, the wind about my ears
helping to hold eye to object by muffling the world with a tide of sound, the very noisy stuff of
silence (‘Words from Stones’ 49).

The silence helps to bring on a loosened sense of subjectivity – one ‘acclimatised’ ‘to the earth’s inscape’
(inscape’ that was so dependent on personal perception for Hopkins) – a new type of contact with place
and materiality. The object is not threatening to such an open, porous, fluid sense of self. It is rather him
that is doing the ‘haunting’ this time.

I often contemplate them and stare into them when, as now, in mid-sentence, lost for words to
write,’ McNeillie tells us of his small cairn at home (44). In such acts of patient contemplation ‘No answer
is also an answer’ (52). Unlike the objects Schwenger draws on, objects whose identities are assumed lost
or objects that threaten in their uncertainty, for Macfarlane and McNeillie, and for Robinson, these
objects serve as a lively connection to real places, their ‘no answer’ a chord tugged towards a new (or old)
way of listening, one that suggests the kind of possibility for agency that Bennett sees in matter. Patience
repays: ‘Bread from stones is a wilderness story about temptation resisted’ (McNeillie, ‘Words from
Stones’ 51). The answer to all his questions, as he reaches the platform cairn near Brenig, is almost in the
asking: ‘stones that had been so skilfully placed there by other hands, how long ago, at what bidding, on
what principles, by what co-ordinates, in what unsure, uncertain hope, to entomb what corpses, in what
name? No answer is also an answer... like a refrain’ (52). McNeillie is finding stones that others had found
before him, stones multiply ‘staged’ again, matter receding into the past as it recedes into the presence of
the place itself as well.

The difference here is that this is an endeavour to reach beyond what Merleau-Ponty calls ‘the
context of everyday concerns’ and to pioneer new ways (or ‘a tradition belatedly renewed’ (McNeillie
‘Editorial’ iii)) of relating to place and of writing about and representing it. The truth is that the place itself
is an answer for McNeillie as he looks out over the thirty-mile panorama of Snowdonia and the Berwyns
wondering what those who stood there a thousand or two thousand years previously had been thinking.
It recalls White’s untranslatable ‘secret delight’ again. For McNeillie, the meaning of the place to those
who came before remains a secret, but it is a secret he can reach for, if not grasp, with his own personal
meditation. The past remains in excess of him as the place and the view do also but this does not leave
him the less for it; it does not prompt a melancholic longing for an impossibly distant world. It is by writing that he begins to bridge some of the gaps, to imagine his way into the place, its ‘inscape’, which is perhaps the only way of knowing a place; partially, provisionally and personally. Writing becomes the careful layering of that ‘connective tissue’ that Jamie describes, both imaginatively and materially inspired.

Part of the difficulty, but also part of the playfulness, of place writing is that the temporal is such a dominant part of the assemblage. Alice Oswald has spoken in interview about her anxiety of returning to the river Dart, having written her long poem about it. She was afraid that she might have somehow spoilt her enjoyment of it through such an elaborate, two-year study, but was relieved to find ‘that it would always be ‘so much bigger’ than anything she could write, that it would never be over and done’ (Kellaway). Place exceeds us in all manner of ways. Likewise we might like to consider the nature of the objects Macfarlane, McNeillie and Jamie have pocketed. Commonplace as they are, they are, more often than not, sticks and stones: chips of…, shards of…, pebbles of… and splinters of…; though classifiably basalt, ancient pine, quartz or flint, they are just a small part of a much bigger picture. The individual stones themselves refer outward to the non-count noun ‘stone’. And more specifically, they are pieces of a landscape, of a place that carries something that will always remain excessive to the ‘prose map’ (Macfarlane 17). Their collection is a way of remembering that excess, not a way of domesticating it.

Jean Sprackland has described working with objects in preparation for her forthcoming book *Strands: A Year of Discoveries on the Beach*.

Here on my desk they just sit there, stripped of context and therefore less exciting to me than my memory of their discovery […] Thinking about this now, it seems to me that context matters very much to me – that the place, the time, the weather, the sounds and textures and smells present at the moment of discovery are key somehow to my engagement with the object – and that having the object itself at home can sometimes help me re-engage, get back in touch with the moment and what it meant (Sprackland, ‘Re: Found Objects’).

John Fowles’ hatred of collecting leads him to suppose that ‘We know quite enough facts now’, from which he begins to set up an awkward distinction between the poet’s ‘emotional and aesthetic relationship to wildlife’ and the collector’s ‘accurate scientific knowledge’ (84). But finding, unlike collecting, sits squarely between art and science. Less about facts themselves than about delaying the establishment of facts. Sprackland, here, is less interested in the fact of the object than in the moment of finding that it refers to and how this can mean in its own way. It is as if she wants to hold off the establishment of it as an object, and then once it has become an object for her she begins to lose interest. What is so challenging and interesting about the likes of Gilbert White and other more scientifically minded environmental but literary writers such as Rachel Carson or R.J. Berry (*Islands*), for example, is their ability to occupy a space squarely in the middle of this distinction between science and art. Taxonomy need not be the end of the sense of wonder. In the hands of John Burnside, taxonomy can only be shared,
like a waltz,
or a trust
this commonplace affection singles out
a hairstreak,
or the pattern on a leaf,
leaving the rest untold;
the world
unspoken (The Light Trap 6).

The found is always haunted by the ‘unspoken’, the ‘unnameable archipelago’. The truth is we need more facts, but facts like field notes that take us back again and again to the places that they refer to. Facts are not final and Foucault’s rectangle is not closed. The ‘world / unspoken’, the ‘unnameable archipelago’, is only experienced through the facts that it momentarily wears, but our attention is being drawn to the momentary, provisional and ongoing nature of this process.

Bill Brown considers an interesting dynamic between ‘the thing’ and ‘the object’ that reveals the spaces left by such oddities and that chimes with Burnside’s metaphor above:

The semantic reducibility of things to objects, coupled with the semantic irreducibility of things to objects, would seem to mark one way of recognizing how, although objects typically arrest a poet’s attention, and although the object was what was asked to join the dance in philosophy, things may still lurk in the shadows of the ballroom and continue to lurk there after the subject and object have done their thing, long after the party is over (3).

Here, as in the Burnside poem above, the metaphor of a dance is used again, an ongoing process of mutual constitution, a shared space with one eye on the world beyond. But unlike the systematic collector whose objects put the things themselves under erasure, ‘blinding’ their eye as Fowles suggests, Sprackland’s, Jamie’s, Macfarlane’s and McNeillie’s affect the opposite result. The object is a means of dancing with the wider thing which is the place itself. Sprackland’s objects are ways back into the moment of their finding, and McNeillie’s stones come trailing their origins in parenthesis ‘(Wales, Scotland, Ireland, and America’s Walden Pond)’ (‘Words from Stones’ 44).

Macfarlane describes his method of collecting sticks and stones as ‘a way both to remember and to join up my wild places. Fifteenth century mapmakers,’ he goes on, ‘developed the concept of the ‘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 […] The objects seem to hold my landscapes together without binding them too tightly’ (88). Place is the ‘thing’ behind the object then, materially and culturally located, but the objects resist being read as a map in the conventional national or imperial sense. Their materiality refuses the overview, the summary, the shorthand and abstract; they speak themselves, like Skelton’s thing-poems, or nothing at all.

This use of the metaphor of the isolarion is perhaps the most overtly political aspect to the aesthetics of The Wild Places. It suggests that the book is an attempt to both resist and rethink the conventional understanding of the space of the archipelago. Macfarlane is endeavouring, not just to find new ways of carrying himself in the landscape, and not just to watch more narrowly, expanding our vocabulary and culture of landscape and place, but also, and crucially, he is attempting to intervene in the conventions of representation, to rethink the methods and philosophy of mapping more generally. It is, in a sense, an attempt to start again. In the following passage from the final chapter of The Wild Places we see him begin to think through the spatial and temporal possibilities of the isolarion.
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 (313).

This flexibility that the isolarion offers him prompts an arrangement according to temporal relations as well as spatial. As we will see in the next chapter, the assumption that a map must be primarily a spatial document owes much to the history of imperial practices and the suppression of more vernacular, aboriginal readings of a place, more grounded, personal readings. But the temporal here is less about presenting a living geography (though the isolarion has that to it as well) than about searching for new relationships across the archipelago. It recalls Macfarlane’s colleague at Cambridge University, John Kerrigan’s argument for a post-devolution reconsideration of an ‘Archipelagic English’:

Devolution matters because it has encouraged the peoples of the islands to imagine different relationships with one another, and with the peoples of Europe [...] but also because of the opportunity it gives the Anglophone world as a whole to reconfigure its understanding of where it comes from. (2)

A spatial order liberated from central organisation around a distant colonial or national authority reveals new and fertile ways of connecting up its disparate parts. Far from becoming divided and isolated, such an archipelagic configuration positively encourages the infinite possibilities of relationship offered by a network and, most importantly, that can have the added attribute of permitting recognition of certain movements from the bottom up. Both moves are possible at the same time. In the first issue of Archipelago there is a translation of Osip Mandelshtam’s ‘Ode on a Slate’ by Andrew Kahn. Kahn tells us that readers who do not know Russian should recall the ‘associative density and dream-like effects’ of Dylan Thomas; and the poem chimes with Welsh landscapes elsewhere in the issue, whether in Roger Deakin’s visit to David Nash’s studio in Blaenau Ffestiniog or Angharad Price’s story of Tynybraich (Kahn 73). The poem reaches out across national borders by being completely grounded where it is, connecting two places by a stone common to both landscapes. As Fiona Stafford suggests in a review of the first issue for the TLS ‘a literary island often symbolises individuation and isolation but an archipelago suggests clustering and analogy’ (‘Review’ 24).

This search for analogy is at the heart of Macfarlane’s isolarion as well, a search for new relationships between places that is drawn from a careful engagement with them:

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).

Macfarlane’s ‘new logics’ are geological, arboreal, fluvial, coastal and archipelagic. Each object in his map represents a personal narrative, a finding that he tries his best to bring back intact. This is not a geography
of places that is reactionary or that seeks to wall off, protect and retreat. What emerges from his findings is this exploration of reconfiguration. Macfarlane’s is a progressive understanding of place that is interested in relationships between and across the archipelago, but he wants to explore how these relationships can be generated from the bottom up.

The metaphor of the isolarion is perhaps the next logical step on from the kind of material fascination that I have described in this and the last chapter. New ways of carrying ourselves and new findings prompt a preoccupation with remapping, absorbing what we have found anew and somehow accommodating it without compromising the things themselves, avoiding being the ‘iconoclasts or quacks’ that MacDiarmid rebukes, and rebuilding our own culture around what we find rather than making what we find conform to the cultural resources we already have (167). In the following chapter I will explore this idea further in relation to two particular projects of remapping: Tim Robinson’s first foray into mapping the Aran Islands and Alice Oswald’s ‘sound-map’ of the river Dart.
CHAPTER 4.
‘OUR GARDEN NORTH’: REMAPPINGS

In 1996 Tim Robinson was asked to take part in an exhibition at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin. It had been nearly twenty-five years since he had left the world of visual art behind him in London and turned to cartography and the literary essay. Nonetheless, the work he chose to exhibit brought together his earlier visual art with his mapping and writing in a surprising and interesting way that demonstrated a certain coherence of thought. In the middle of the room, scattered on the floor like large pick-a-sticks were what seemed to be surveyors’ rods, some with equidistant black and white stripes, some just white with a single inch painted grey at different points on the rods, and above them, suspended by a splayed rainbow of thread, was one more yard-long white rod. On the walls were two of his intricate, hand-drawn maps of the Aran Islands and of Connemara, and between them were some twelve extracts from his books *Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage* and *Setting Foot of the Shores of Connemara and Other Writings*. Together these works show a remarkable adaptability and, perhaps most importantly, an ever more attentive search for a form to best capture the human experience of a place in all its particularity and complexity (Robinson *The View from the Horizon*).

After visiting the exhibition, a friend described the surveyor’s rods on the floor as ‘measure become organic’ (quoted in Robinson *The View from the Horizon* 11). It is an interesting phrase in which there is a sense that the measure has somehow lapsed or that it has been overcome from the inside. The phrase has an echo of ‘gone native’ to it, since what use is measure if it is not answerable to a universal standard? There is something absurd and paradoxical about these surveyors’ rods, each with its own measure and none of them bound by the same proportions. The white rods with a single inch painted grey at different points were called ‘Inchworm’, a name for the caterpillar form of the geometor moth, so called because its movement in small loops seems to ‘measure the Earth’ (Robinson *The View from the Horizon* 57). Again there is something absurd about the idea of an animal that might measure to no purpose other than travel. The measurement is not recorded or abstracted but performed. Life as lived is the only measure of which these rods speak. They are a standard rather than appealing to one.

There is something oddly prescient in this installation – which was created originally before Robinson left London in 1972. They seem to have within them the kernel that would grow into his remapping of the Aran Islands, the Burren and Connemara, correcting the nineteenth century Ordnance Survey maps of the areas and resurrecting the Gaelic names. The standard that they seem to refuse is a top down, English imperial standard centred on London. The standard that they seem to set is one negotiated *in situ*, from the ground up. Such an idea risks essentialising that standard of place in such a way as to set out what Massey calls a ‘reactionary’ boundary but, as I shall argue, ‘organic’, in this context, suggests two things. Firstly, the idea of ‘measure become organic’ here suggests an awareness of a non-human agency to the geology of the place that comes with its own sense of deep time, a sense that Aran is a provisional and vulnerable landscape slowly eroding on the edge of the European continental shelf. And
secondly, on top of this deep sense of time, ‘organic’ conveys a keen responsiveness to the old and ongoing social, historical dynamic of the islands. The result of working with such a responsiveness and such an awareness is not a steeled protectiveness towards place as authentic but rather the realisation that place is a part of various continuous, creative processes of becoming: place realised, as Massey suggests, as ‘progressive’, rather than as ‘reactionary’ (147).

In their early years on the island, Robinson and his wife planted a potatoe field outside their house, orienting it by the lines of the paths and the field walls. These paths and field-walls in turn followed the fault lines in the limestone underneath which run parallel along an almost, but not quite, north/south line. That ‘almost’ is a key to understanding the particular human experience of working the land on the island though, and so significant, in fact, that he has preserved and published the original map of the potato field as a limited edition four-colour offset and letterpress print that you can buy from Coracle Press. The whole island is a grid of walls enclosing thousands of tiny fields that are, generally speaking, all in alignment with the limestone faults underneath. Such an alignment obviously appeals to Robinson in search of his mythic good step, that moment of congruence between a culture and the earth that bears it. Highly aware of and fascinated by this local orientation, he suggests, ‘nevertheless the unchanging abstractions of official cartography insensibly penetrated the time-bound little domain, and I was always conscious of the angle, the argument, between so-called True North and our Garden North’ (foldinglandscapes.com). ‘True North’ here carries the connotations of imposed north and the north of the English cartographers while ‘our Garden North’ suggests a deviation from the standard that is more locally useful. You find many similar reorientations in the Common Ground Parish Maps as well, where communities have remapped their own locales from perspectives that respond to the singular topography. In this chapter I will be looking at precisely that ‘argument’ between the ‘True’ and ‘our Garden’ north in the work of two key authors, Robinson himself and the poet Alice Oswald. I will propose here that ‘Findings’ are as much about recording and adjusting – in short re-mapping – as they are about the preservation of all that mute excess and strangeness of the ‘unnameable archipelago’, and that making room is precisely that process of ‘argument, between so-called True North and our Garden North’, a process of ‘measure becoming organic’ (Robinson, The View from the Horizon 11). If the last chapter was devoted to exploring the changes in the quality of the attention that we bring to the world then this chapter will be given to exploring the changes in the quality of our response to what we find.

In a sense this notion of ‘our Garden North’ is, like the collection of found objects, an everyday and commonplace experience shared by millions of people. We each have a personal and particular sense of the place in which we live that may be slightly out of step with the national standard but which is more useful to us in situ. In fact it is just such singular orientations with their own inner standards that give our place a sense of the locally distinct and prevent them from being absorbed into a homogenising global narrative. But key to both Robinson’s and Oswald’s sense of place is an imagination and a creativity that is culturally progressive. Roger Deakin makes an important point on the matter of place in the proceedings of a conference organised by Common Ground in 1993. ‘Meaning,’ he suggests, ‘is
something that is experienced from the inside. It has lodged itself in the memory, which, different from recall, becomes part of the person – part, in a sense, of an imaginative process. For appreciation of the essential character of a place is always apprehended in the imagination.’ There is an important and intriguing paradox here centred around another seemingly essentialist idea, but again, figured ‘imaginatively’. This is something I will keep coming back to. ‘Comprehending, by contrast,’ he goes on, happens from the outside. It is possible to comprehend something without it ever being felt or allowed to become part of us. Were the comprehenders – the surveyors, managers, civil servants, governments – to be able to apprehend, they would know that the character of a place bears on all the senses at once in mysterious ways (‘A Local Habitation and a Name’ 3-4).

Perhaps the most important question I will be asking here is: how can the organic standard of meaningful experience be brought to bear on the standards of measure that ‘comprehend’ it from the outside? It is one thing to privilege and protect the strangeness of what one finds of a place, as we saw in the last chapter. It is another thing entirely to begin to adapt cultural forms to accommodate this strangeness. It requires disruption, improvisation and creativity. The ethics of such disruption answer to and assert their own meaningful ‘Garden North’ by arguing with the standards of an externally imposed authority.

Alice Oswald originally advertised her long poem Dart as a ‘songline from source to sea’ (‘A Note on the Text’ Dart). A songline is an Australian Aboriginal form of geography first recorded by anthropologists in the 1960s and 70s (Moyle 227; Tonkinson 1974 70-74 and 1978 88-110) and popularised by Bruce Chatwin in his novel Songlines. Songlines are journeys that the Aborigine’s ancestors are thought to have taken in the Dreamtime and which are remembered in song by those who live along its routes. They are part of a pre-colonial, oral culture that does not separate history from geography and that is narrative, performative and poetic. They are meaningful and imaginative in the sense that Deakin describes above, ‘experienced from the inside’. It is therefore no surprise that they were not recognised or understood by the colonial settlers until as late as the 1960s. That Oswald chooses to describe her own poem as such suggests that there is something of the river Dart that has evaded recognition, an oral culture centred on the river that is overlooked by the usual readings of it. I will explore here how her own ‘songline’ endeavours to include the working voices and the non-human noises that are often excluded from literary representations of place and that offer themselves up as complex and meaningful encounters that call for a certain rethinking, remapping and rewriting. Both Oswald and Robinson are attempting to correct prior representations of the places they have made their homes by developing new aesthetic forms to accommodate the standard set by their own ‘Garden Norths’. Both are quite self-consciously remapping their places and in so doing they are addressing that all important question of how we can bring that organic inner standard of meaningful experience to bear on the standards of measure that would ‘comprehend’ it from the outside.

Máire Bn. Uí Chonghaile, the postmistress of Cill Mhuirbhigh, hearing how Tim Robinson was spending his time exploring the island when he first arrived, and knowing about his talents as an artist,
suggested that he make an island map. Tourists were always asking for one and 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. Fortunately, with his Cambridge degree in mathematics and a time spent working as a freelance technical illustrator, he was fairly well equipped to go about the task with some degree of competence (*Setting Foot* 76). So between Timothy Drever the artist and Tim Robinson the author stands the mapmaker, without which he might have been a very different kind of writer altogether. In a sense it was this project that paved the way for the genre-defying style of writing he was about to begin to develop, since mapping in such a place as Aran comes with a certain complex array of baggage.

The history of mapmaking in Ireland is a difficult and sensitive one, and one that Robinson has very carefully negotiated his way around to create maps that are now considered very highly indeed (his company, Folding Landscapes, which consists of a staff of him and his wife, was given a European Conservation Award by the Mayor of Madrid in 1987). Looking at early cartography up to the medieval period, Michel de Certeau has noticed that there was a much closer relationship to textual description than there is today. Early maps often read like tours, histories, itineraries of pilgrimages; they opened out onto stories of the mapmaking process; but, he says, these stories were slowly shouldered out to make way for more purely spatial description. The map ‘colonizes space; it eliminates little by little the pictural figurations of the practices that produce it’ in favour of that top down, precisely surveyed representation of static space dotted with symbols that we have today (de Certeau 121). This erasure of the stories of the landscape from the official representation is nowhere more felt than Ireland. Too small to have developed its own map-making tradition before the English arrived, Ireland has, however, never been short of stories. In fact, before the English first started mapping the country, instead of maps, what they did have was a system of *dinnseanchas*, a literary and oral tradition of keeping the lore of the land. Charles Bowen describes *dinnseanchas* as ‘a science of geography… in which there is no clear distinction between the general principles of topography or direction-finding and the intimate knowledge of particular places’ (115). He goes on: ‘Places would have been known to them as people were: by face, name and history… the name of every place was assumed to be an expression of its history’ (115).

From the 1520s the English government began commissioning maps of Ireland. Begun as they were, just before the trend of pictorially recording historical details began to die out in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, these first maps do in fact contain a few of these examples of the kinds of placelore Bowen refers to actually written onto them in the style of the medieval maps de Certeau describes. On the Dartmouth Maps of 1598, for example, there is the description: ‘O’Donnell camped by this loch where his men did see 2 waterhorses of a huge bigness’ (qtd in Andrews 202). Or the following even stranger piece from the same map: ‘In this bog… there is every whott [hot?] summer strange fighting of battles sometimes at foot sometimes wt horse, sometimes castles seen on a sudden, sometimes great store of cows driving & fighting for them’ (*sic* qtd in Andrews 202). There is certainly something of the historical and folkloric imagination to these two pieces but nothing really to explain them.
This was, however, the exception to the rule and such curiosities should be read alongside derisive illustrations of ‘wild Irishmen peeping from behind rocks’ and in the context of a brutal colonial rule (Andrews 202). And, as J.H. Andrews tells us, what there was of this practice soon died out with the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as main roads were introduced and maps of Ireland began to endeavour to be more ‘objective’ for the purposes of administration. Such a concern for the Irish *dinnseanchas* would not be seen until the Ordnance Survey briefly set up its Topographical Department charged with the collection of heritage information in 1835, though this was brought to an end in 1842 on the basis that it was ‘stimulating national sentiment in a morbid, deplorable and tendentious manner’ (Hewitt 287). In the English mapping of Ireland a certain living history was erased from the map before it ever really found its place on it.

For Robinson, the project that began to present itself seems now to epitomise the principles of that ‘environmental art’ he had left behind in London. In this new environment, he had the chance to engage himself in a project with a ‘positive position’ (Brisley 268). He was already collecting all the Gaelic place names he could from those who lived on the island and was trying to make sense of them in relation to the Ordnance Survey maps. Patrick Curry has called this ‘a kind of Edenic naming in reverse’, a recovery of a world beneath the English language that had been imposed upon it (‘Elegies Unawares’ 13). In a recent interview I conducted, Robinson describes a typical mistake:

A very striking case was a place name that was recorded down at the south-eastern corner of the big island. It was something like ‘Illuaunaor’. The surveyors had obviously thought that the first part of it was ‘oileán’, island, when in fact it should have been the Irish ‘gleann’, glen. But apart from making it an island when it was a glen, the rest of the name ‘-anaur’ meant absolutely nothing in English phonetics. But in the Irish the name means ‘the glen of tears’ – it’s exactly the biblical phrase ‘this vale of tears’, ‘Gleann na nDeor’. And the story I heard from the local people was that, 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).

It is typical of the place names around the islands that such a small name as Gleann na nDeor should contain such an elaborate and evocative narrative, but unmapped, such names were slipping out of memory and there are numerous examples of intriguing names that Robinson is unable to find an explanation for. In general though, in the twelve years that he lived on Árainn, he diligently collected all the place names he could, in the original Gaelic, from those who knew them and put them correctly on a map for the first time. It is for this reason that he calls the work he was doing a kind of ‘rescue archaeology’ (*Setting Foot* 13).

As for the form of the map itself, he set about exploring something that would be importantly connected to the place. In a sense he was liberated by being able to tailor his map to so specific and small a location. The rules he worked by did not have to conform to so abstract or generalised a standard as those of the Ordnance Survey. For example, on its south-west side Árainn is all cliff and on its north-east
all beach, so the angle of vision that looks down on the island in his map is tilted slightly to the south west – what he calls a ‘seagull’s-eye perspective’ – thereby capturing the shapes of the sea-cliffs without losing anything of the north east coast (Dillon 38). This was something of a certain local importance to a fishing culture that navigated by these shapes, and that had its own names for many of the headlands that differed from the inland names. It is such attention to the locally distinct that must have appealed to Sue Clifford and Angela King who, in 1996, republished an excerpt from the booklet that accompanied Robinson’s map of the Burren in their own collection of essays for Common Ground’s Parish Maps project. In her introduction to the collection Clifford argues that ‘increasingly maps are made from satellite recording, [and] ground knowledge is regarded as less precise, less useful, more costly’, leading to a crisis of confidence in ‘our valuing of the unquantifiable smallnesses’ that rely on ‘inclusive gestures and encouraging questions’ (6, 4).

By making his such an isolated study, Robinson was enjoying a freedom from more conventionally accepted standards of measure, beholden to no central power and its national standards, but this also allowed him to consider the possibility of representing those ‘unquantifiable smallnesses’. Such flexibility, though, stemmed from the belief that all attempts at mapping are in some small way absurd, ‘a sustained attempt upon an unattainable goal’, and that this nagging ambition towards objectivity might find its peace with something closer to the personal artistic vision (Setting Foot 77). At his most playfully personal he even includes an image of his dog on the map where it makes its first kill, or of a badger that he stumbles upon in the Burren. In a later essay on Árainn he pays tribute to the more standardised work of the British surveyors in laying the groundwork for his own personal explorations:

This horde of men who tramped over the countryside with theodolites and chains so adequately measured its lengths, breadths and heights that I am free to concentrate on that mysterious and neglected fourth dimension of cartography which extends deep into the self of the cartographer (Setting Foot 19).

The personal becomes opposed to the (inter)national standard here as he searches for a gravity in himself and in the islands to counter the gravity of Westminster that had failed. The personal, for Robinson, is an assertion of freedom from standards that resonates with the island’s own freedom from imperial rule.

There is a reclamation of the will of the creative artist in this, and one in which we can read the influence of John Ruskin’s monumental work of non-fiction that Robinson’s Stones of Aran alludes to in its title: The Stones of Venice. In Ruskin’s argument for the gothic in architecture he admires the personalised asymmetry of medieval cathedrals as ‘signs of the life and liberty of every workman who struck the stone; a freedom of thought, and rank in scale of being, such as no laws, no charters, no charities can secure’ (163). This is opposed to what Ruskin saw as the rising tendency to make the workman produce like a machine to an externally imposed standard:

If you will have that precision out of them, and make their fingers measure degrees like cogwheels, and their arms strike curves like compasses, you must unhumanize them [...] The eye of the soul must be bent upon the finger point, and the soul’s force must fill all the invisible

13 This is also another example of a transnational archipelagic connection, a line of influence between two cultural organisations concerned with the locally distinct.
nerves that guide it [...] and so soul and sight be worn away, and the whole human being be lost at last (161).

Robinson designed his own symbols for the different terrains across the island, all based on ‘visual equivalents of their feel underfoot, the internationally standardized ornaments being unknown in practice and \textit{a priori} unacceptable to me’ (Robinson \textit{Setting Foot} 76). As compromised and as imperfect as the personal might be in relation to the ‘unhumanized’ precision of an (inter)national standard, it retains ‘freedom of thought’, the ‘life and liberty of every workman’. Ruskin’s argument has a similarly fraught double gravity to it here. The personal is a region for Ruskin that is being reached into and administered by something extrinsic; it is in danger of becoming managed by a dominant metropolitan industrial economy.

There is, of course, a danger in the personal map of it becoming so esoteric that only the cartographer him or herself is able to read it, but ‘personal’ never means a retreat into solipsism for Robinson. The personal finds itself affiliated with and, of course, answerable to the local community, and so despite his playful use of the dog and the badger, that fourth dimension seems to endeavour to incorporate the personal aspect of the community as well as of the self, something vital to the oral tradition of \textit{dinnseanchas}. In fact, he is as critical of any self-indulgence as he is of claims to objectivity and challenges it with an equal scepticism, as when he says with a wry self-criticism, after a long passage imagining the kelp makers of years gone by: ‘These memories of our first wide-eyed appropriation of this little world, and the counter-claims each new find here still makes on me after a decade of careful looking, interrupt my ghost-hunt, reveal its artificiality. Ghosts are to be created, not found’ (\textit{Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage} 211). There is an interesting paradox here that belies a certain ethics behind his project: while he permits himself very little imaginative indulgence, he yet has open eyes and open ears to the imaginative in the folklore of the islands as an aspect of its cultural history. His method shows an acutely empirical faculty, but he also shows himself to be sensitive and sociable, always interested in qualifying his findings with recourse to a variety of local perspectives, always striving to be ‘faithful to more than the measureable’ (Robinson 1996 19). Robinson’s is an exploration of the ‘meaning’ of the place, as Deakin would have it, rather than an attempt at ‘comprehending’ it.

In Chapter 2 I introduced the idea of intersubjectivity in Kathleen Jamie’s work and lately in Robert Macfarlane’s. It is as important an aspect of Robinson’s work; without it he simply would not have the material for the books and he has suggested himself that the whole project began to take on ‘aspects of communal creation’ (Dillon 35). But for Robinson it is more than an appeal to an aesthetic that somehow quells the instinct towards the convention of the first person Romantic wanderer. It is part of his research methodology. Knowing all too well the limitations of his own first person account, and yet unwilling to rest in the melancholy longing for the closure of an unbridgeable gap to the world, Robinson’s failure as an individual artist – his failure to make that ideal ‘good step’ – is also the beginning of his success as a part of a community. The alienation of the modernist artist living in exile finds not only respite but inspiration in getting to know his neighbours. While writing the content for his first book
on Connemara, he would publish his findings in the local newspaper, *The Connacht Tribune*, and has described the response he got in an interview:

> I had no idea quite how much attention was being paid to them until quite well into the process I found that everyone was waiting for me to turn up. They were quite indignant if I hadn’t turned up to them. And they’d have all their information absolutely on the tip of their tongue ready for me. I’d say in a sort of diffident way: “O I’m the man from Roundstone who’s making the map,” and they’d immediately start “O himself has a stone he wants to show you,” “the name of that hill is such and such” (Personal Interview 6).

The ‘aspects of communal creation’ really literally involve the community. Like Common Ground’s Parish Maps project or Richard Mabey’s *Flora Britannica*, Robinson’s map is open to public input. It is looking not for a wider but a more detailed consensus. He is also midway through a project to collect all the information he has on Connemara place names, folklore, archaeology and so on, into a computer database. What is particularly interesting about the project is that it will be open-ended, encouraging the like-minded in neighbouring districts to add their own information to an ever-growing map (‘The Seancháí and the Database’).

That ‘good step’ itself might well be ‘inconceivable’ as an individual artistic vision, but the humility that comes with that ‘fail better’ mentality that I discussed in Chapter 1, has an echo of Ruskin to it as much as Beckett. Again, in *The Stones of Venice*, Ruskin suggests that for the workman liberated to create according his own thought and his own creative will ‘[o]ut come all his roughness, all his dullness, all his incapability; shame upon shame, failure upon failure, pause after pause: but out comes the whole majesty of him also’ (emphasis added 161). The same can be said for a community’s own meaningful representation of its place, the likes of which have found their way into projects such as Robinson’s and Oswald’s that take on those aspects of communal creation.

Just last year, Robinson reappeared on the London art scene in Hans-Ulrich Obrist’s ‘Map Marathon’ at the Serpentine Gallery alongside Louise Borgeoise and Ai Weiwei. His contribution was a twenty-two foot vinyl print of his map of the Aran Islands laid out on the floor. Come and walk on it, he invited. Come and dance on it. Come and write your name, or your message on it. The map is open and waiting for your contribution. In a sense the failure of the Ordnance Survey’s imperial project in Ireland has led to this much more fluid and open-ended approach to the representation of the land which accommodates a more locally sociable and less nationally standard sense of place.

Such a localised and responsive intersubjectivity resonates with David Abram’s reading of Merleau-Ponty in such a way that may be illuminating in terms of understanding a contemporary account of place as a creative and progressive phenomenon:

> ‘The “real world” in which we find ourselves, then – the very world our sciences strive to fathom – is not a sheer “object”, not a fixed and finished “datum” from which all subjects and subjective qualities could be pared away, but is rather an intertwined matrix of sensations and perceptions, a collective field of experience lived through from many different angles. The mutual inscription of others in my experience, and (as I must assume) of myself in their experiences, effects the interweaving of our individual phenomenal fields into a single, ever-shifting fabric, a single phenomenal world or “reality”’ (39).
In this appeal to the agency of others in the phenomenal field, we have the archipelagic’s most distinguishable break with both the Romantic and modernist traditions that it at times resembles. In the social conscience and environmental ethics that find themselves trained on the local as a source of authority, there begins to arise a devolved aesthetic that can think itself beyond the failures and limitations of the individual artist. Such an aesthetic draws on a denser intersubjective field for inspiration.

For Merleau-Ponty, language itself offers such a phenomenal field, a common ground if you like, where multiple agencies can be brought together to share a space. Robinson is highly aware of this, working back and forth between Gaelic and English ever so carefully, conscious of the untranslatable but ever feeling the importance of our best efforts. There is something slightly utopian about Merleau-Ponty’s description of language as such, but nonetheless the literary spaces that an archipelagic literature creates can perhaps afford to be utopian for the sake of intervening in other discourses of place, for the sake of presenting alternatives and, as Jonathan Bate puts it, in order that it fulfils a possible goal of literature ‘to work upon consciousness’ (Song of the Earth 23). For Merleau-Ponty, self and other come together in language, in a shared operation of which neither of us is the creator. We have here a dual being, where the other is for me no longer a mere bit of behaviour in my transcendental field, nor I in his; we are collaborators for each other in consummate reciprocity. Our perspectives merge into each other, and we co-exist through a common world. Language affords reciprocity and collaboration with otherness (Phenomenology of Perception 413).

Language affords a space that does not belong to either the other or to the speaker/author, but into which both play forth. Such qualities are not ordinarily prized in language. Power all too frequently unbalances the nature of that ‘collaboration’ and we associate the first person with attempts to seize control of meaning. Language asserts and in doing so it empowers. However, it need not. I hope that this and the last chapter have begun to show, and will continue to show, that there is a consistent effort to try to step aside from that assertion of power, to allow language itself to be acted on rather than to use it to act on the world, to accommodate the found into the field of representation by changing how that field works. Language, put to use in such a fashion, offers a way beyond the limitations of the individual.

Merleau-Ponty goes on:

In the present dialogue, I am freed from myself, for the other person’s thoughts are certainly his; they are not of my making [...] It is only retrospectively, when I have withdrawn from the dialogue and am recalling it that I am able to reintegrate it into my life and make of it an episode in my private history (Phenomenology of Perception 413).

In Alice Oswald’s long poem Dart (2002), this process is played out almost precisely in her research and writing methodology. As I mentioned in the introduction, in an ‘Interim Report’ published on the Poetry Society’s website (the Poetry Society funded the project as part of their Poetry Places scheme) she discusses how the initial idea for the poem was ‘to orchestrate it like a kind of Jazz, with various river-workers and river dwellers composing their own parts’ (‘Oswald Creates’). However, she soon came to realise that ‘it was people’s living, unselfconscious voices, not their poems that were awake
to the river’ (*Ibid*). She describes (and here we can see Merleau-Ponty’s attitude to the intersubjectivity of language most clearly):

I decided to take along a tape-recorder. At the moment, my method is to tape a conversation with someone who works on the Dart, then go home and write it down from memory. I then work with these two kinds of record — one precise, one distorted by the mind — to generate the poem’s language. It’s experimental and very against my grain, this mixture of journalism and imagination, but the results are exciting. Above all, it preserves the idea of the poem’s living voice being everyone’s, not just the poet’s (*Ibid*).

This is language figured collaboratively and with an unusual self-restraint (‘very against my grain’), though still maintaining the authorial skill and imagination. In a sense it looks back to Robinson’s (and MacDiarmid’s) exploration of the geological semantic field. In fact, it is Oswald’s skill and imagination that is being put to use in making the collaboration work as whole, weaving together all these heterogeneous voices and styles. It is later, in a preface to the poem when it was published, that she described it as ‘a sound-map of the river, a songline from source to sea’ and it is later that she suggests ‘[a]ll voices should be read as the river’s mutterings’ (*Dart*). That we might be persuaded to read the many voices of the poem as the river’s is in part due to the care with which she goes about this collecting of voices into the fabric of its language with that ‘consummate reciprocity’ that Merleau-Ponty describes above.

I would not argue that this is in fact the voice of the river, but it is more convincing than that other prosopopoetic river poem that it inevitably shares an intertextual space with, Michael Drayton’s *Poly-Olbion* (1612-1622). It ought to be with reservation that we read the voices of *Dart* as unified since it is in their heterogeneity that something of their difference and their otherness is preserved, distinguishing it from Drayton’s more unitary verse. Like White’s packaging up of letter and dead peregrine falcon, the voice of the river is an assemblage of disparate elements here yoked together with awkward juxtapositions of short and long line length, metered verse forms and prose, blank pages, neologisms, folkloric, professional, dialect, and slang vocabularies. They have not been too violently integrated and this is for good reason.

The unitary language of Drayton’s early seventeenth century Dart can be, at a glance, seen as part of a nationalist poetic project. The first person assertion of identity in the voice of the river is a gathering together of authority, the representation of a united region. We ought to remember also that *Poly-Olbion* was an early survey of Britain in a tradition of chorography that would eventually grow into the Ordnance Survey and Oswald is very conscious of this as she treads in its footsteps. In a sense Oswald is re-mapping the river Dart in the wake of Drayton as Robinson was re-mapping Aran in the wake of the Ordnance Survey. But the relationship is a little more complex here.
Poly-Olbion was published in parts from 1612 onwards, following a wave of chorographical writings\(^\text{14}\) and Christopher Saxton’s *Atlas* of 1579, a collection of county maps. However, *Poly-Olbion* was also deeply subversive in the way it asserted its authority and in this sense it does bear closer comparison with Oswald’s *Dart*. Saxton’s *Atlas* was the first of its kind to collect together a comprehensive picture of Britain between two covers, plates of which were initially published with *Poly-Olbion*. Mention is made of the river Dart in some other of these early chorographical texts but Drayton’s treatment is by far the most thorough in relation to Oswald’s *Dart*. Drayton is preoccupied with rivers, most of his text being given over to their description in one way or another, quite conscious of their capacity to be, as Andrew McRae suggests, ‘at once evocative of place yet curiously placeless’ (*Fluvial Nation* 508). Rivers have been heavily contested zones from the Early Modern period right up to the present day. McRae has shown how complicated a process legislating for rivers has been, identifying different laws for the bed, the banks and the water, for navigable and non-navigable rivers and for the muddied distinction between estuary and river (*Fluvial Nation* 513). A river is a slippery character in all manner of ways and therein perhaps lies some of its appeal to the subversive author, as in this dynamic descriptive passage early on in Drayton’s poem:

I view those wanton Brookes, that waxing, still doe wane;
That scarclie can conceive, but brought to bed againe;
Scarce rising from the Spring (that is their naturall Mother)
To growe into a streame, but buried in another (5).

Richard Helgerson sees *Poly-Olbion* as a radical text with an important part to play in chorography’s shift from an England whose authority lay with the crown to an England whose authority lay with the land. In the first edition of Saxton’s *Atlas* (commissioned by the Queen’s privy council) the frontispiece bears an engraving of Queen Elizabeth I

enthroned, surmounted by her arms and an emblem of her rule, flanked by figures of cosmography and geography, underscored by verses celebrating the accomplishments of her benign reign... As we turn the pages we are invited to remember that Cornwall is the queen’s, Hampshire the queen’s, Dorset the queen’s and so on (Helgerson 54).

By 1612 in *Poly-Olbion*, maps of Saxton’s that had previously held the royal insignia were now adorned instead with multiple sea nymphs and decorative boats and the frontispiece bore, not the image of the queen, but of Great Britain herself in just the same posture and frame. ‘Positive value,’ Helgerson continues, ‘is invested in an implicitly antimonarchic image, an image of the headless (or, better, the many-headed) body of the land’ (78). The river Dart became, for Drayton, one of these many heads invested with a new importance (the Dart is a queen herself in the poem).

What we see then, in these ‘curiously placeless’ river narratives, is an emphasis on change, fluid boundaries and shifting authority. In Drayton’s Britain the land itself is privileged, and its ‘many-headed’ network of regional voices, though all speaking with a nationalist unison, are a challenge to the single

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\(^{14}\)William Lambarde’s *Perambulation of Kent* (1576); William Harrison’s *Description of England*, published as a preface to Raphael Holinshed’s *Chronicles* (1577 and 1586); Richard Carew’s *Survey of Cornwall* (1602); George Owen’s *Description of Pembrokeshire* (1602-3); and William Camden’s *Britannia* (1607).
head of sovereign power. Oswald, then, takes one of what were many voices united under the myth of nation state in Drayton and recreates it as itself many voiced. At a glance this appears to be an assault on a nationalist chorography, but it is worth remembering that this does also seem to be in the subversive tradition of Drayton himself and we might argue that just as Drayton asserted land over monarch, Oswald is asserting local authority over an externally imposed national authority.

Oswald is writing her poem in the immediate wake of the referendums on devolution and amid a growing atmosphere of discontent in terms of national unity. Raymond Williams had identified a growing sense of unease in a united Britain as early as 1984 when in an interview with Philip Cooke he had asked:

What are the genuine alternative units capable of developing a politics speaking to the interests of the people rather than the unjustified units of a presumed nation-state? Where there is a national entity such as Wales or Scotland, there is already a measure of self-definition, a real base. But it does not only occur in such places (‘Decentralism and the Politics of Place’ 239).

Totnes represents an absolutely tiny region that, through its work as a transition town, has achieved an unusual level of self-definition. This is something we are likely to see more of as the environmental and economic crises continue. Oswald’s literary methodology responds to this uneasiness and the sense of self-definition that arises in response to it in that it endeavours to preserve and assemble the voices in her poem as an intersubjective field rather than incorporate and homogenise them into a unitary poetic form. She trains her ear (or her microphone) on the local community and makes the language of the poem conform to what she finds, rather than making what she finds conform to the language of her poem. In doing so the poem contains a social geography that is oriented to its own ‘Garden North’; an orientation that is resuscitated from the ground up rather than imposed from the top down.

Dart’s appeal to the local cultures of the river, like Common Ground’s Confluence project and like Tim Robinson’s maps, takes on ‘aspects of communal creation’, making it a sociable project and grounding it more carefully in its subject (Dillon 35). I have mentioned that Robinson observes certain headlands on Áraiann have one name given by the farmers who work the fields from above and another given by the fishermen who navigate by the cliffs from below. Both names describe a different relationship to the same place and contribute to its cultural significance. Oswald’s sound-map of the Dart tries to bring together a range of similar working accounts of the place, calling on each to offer its own unique perspective in the hope that each will contribute to that more detailed, though perhaps not wider, consensus. She does this by staging the very beginning of the poem as a question. The poem sets out by inquiring after its own identity, suggesting that this will be an exploration and an act of listening rather than an assertion of identity. It begins without a claim on the world, asking after its own many possible selves with a porous receptivity: ‘Who’s this moving alive over the moor?’ The question, of course, is reminiscent of the opening to Ted Hughes’s ‘Wodwo’:

What am I? Nosing here, turning leaves over
Following a faint stain on the air to the river’s edge
I enter water. Who am I to split
The glassy grain of water looking upward I see the bed
Of the river above me upside down very clear
What am I doing here in mid-air? (183)
It is not looking for an answer so much as for a way to carry on investigating: ‘very queer but I'll go on looking’ Hughes says in finishing his poem without a full stop. Deryn Rees-Jones has noticed this parallel too as both poets use a voice not their own but a voice emerging as consciousness and language at the same time. She quotes Leonard M. Scigaj who suggests that ‘Wodwo’ discovers ‘itself as it discovers the world’ (235). Like ‘Wodwo’ then, *Dart* is a snapshot of an ongoing engagement that invokes a heterogeneous voice, a voice that cannot live by its own impetus alone but that must discover, must find and keep finding, to live. The voice of the river is fugitive and in search of possible shapes. ‘I depend on being not noticed, which keeps me small and rather nimble, I can swim miles naked with midges round my head, watching wagtails, I'm soft’ (*Dart* 7).

This ‘soft’ listening voice of the poem was there right from its methodological beginnings in research. As the ferryman between Dartmouth and Kingsweir said when asked if he recognised his own voice in the poem: ‘she's used her skills to stand aside and allow people who are part of the Dart a say in her poem’ (Oswald ‘Interview with Alice Oswald’). Through this unusual technique we get whole working vocabularies, foreign to most readers, laid down like found poems:

- tufted felting hanks tops spindles slubbings
- hoppers and rollers and slatted belts
- bales of carded wool the colour of limestone
- and wool puffs flying through tubes distributed by cyclones (19).

The working language of the wool trade here is suddenly poetry when deftly arranged to make the most of its sounds and rhythms. The poachers have a word – ‘voler’ – for the ‘unique clean line a salmon makes in water’ (38). ‘Voler’ is in no English dictionary and appears to be as native to the poachers of the Dart as a lichen such as *bryoria smithii* is to the trees of Dartmoor (*High Moorland Visitor Centre Wildlife Report* 5). However, closer consideration in fact suggests that this word may bear some relation to the French ‘voler’ which translates as both ‘to fly’ and ‘to steal’ prompting a reading as a kind of ‘line of flight’ here. It is another example of the way in which a tighter and tighter focus on the local reveals layers of global connection and resonance. There is a well documented history of connections between the fishermen of northern France, Brittany in particular, and the southern coast of Devon and Cornwall that might well explain the presence of this word here on the river Dart, but the anonymity of its attribution makes it hard to verify this (it could, for example, be due the poacher’s own personal French connections). Nonetheless it does prompt thoughts of the kinds of archipelagic connection that Barry Cunliffe explores in his study of the pre-national lines of communication along the Atlantic edge.\(^\text{15}\)

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\(^{15}\) ‘Voler’ has a special significance for the French post-structuralist and feminist Hélène Cixous in *The Laugh of the Medusa* where she describes it as a ‘woman’s gesture’ that resists the masculine impulse to ‘to take possession in order to internalize or manipulate’ (Leitch 1953). The ambiguity of ‘fly’ and ‘steal’ is quite a deliberate play for Cixous: ‘women take after birds and robbers just as robbers take after women and birds. They go by, fly the coop, take pleasure in jumbling the order of space, in disorienting it, [...] dislocating things and values, breaking them all up, emptying structures, and turning propriety upside down’ (Leitch 1954). It is a fortuitous, is slightly spurious, resonance in a poem so preoccupied with disrupting conventionally poetic language in order to accommodate the marginalised.
Oswald has listed the number of different perspectives she initially wanted to include in the poem, though not all of them actually made it, and some others not mentioned did make it:

Dartmoor prisoners, monks from Buckfastleigh, plumbers and water-purifiers at Dartington and students at the College of Arts, sewage workers, conservationists, workers at the Unigate milk factory and the Totnes industrial estate, railway employees, pleasure-boat drivers, foresters and special needs children from Sharpham, farmers, canoeists and swimmers, bell-ringers at Stoke Gabriel, coarse fishers, crab fishers, South West Water Authority, shop-workers, boat-repairers, coastguards and cadets at the Naval College and foreign workers on factory ships in the bay (‘Oswald Creates a River Dart’).

Each of these people will have their own linguistic repertoire that tells its own story of the place. Each will have their own linguistic ‘Garden North’ that diverges from the national perspective. When you write about someone and their relationship to a place there is an insight, but when you allow them to speak for themselves there is an intimacy and a density of information that is very unusual. It is the difference between a primary and a secondary source, or at least the distinction between the two is being blurred here. Oswald does surprising and quite witty things with the voices as well, as when the voices of Jan Coo, a ghost, and the water abstractor collide:

Jan Coo! Jan Coo!
have you any idea what goes into water?
I have verified the calibration records
have you monitored for colour and turbidity?
[---]
was it offish? did you increase the magnetite?
[---]
have you in so doing dealt with the black inert matter?
in my own way. I have removed the finest particles
did you shut down all inlets?
I have added extra chlorine
have you countervailed against decay?
have you created for us a feeling of relative invulnerability? (25-6)

There is a strange sense that the voice from folklore is mocking the real voice from a territory unspecified but beyond this familiar world. Jan Coo uses the water abstractor’s own vocabulary to interrogate him in a wonderfully strange yoking of folkloric and scientific diction. It is a collision of discourses that proves quite productive because neither gives over too much of its identity to the unitary voice of the poem. There is a resistance at the heart of both.

In William Crossing’s Tales of the Dartmoor Pixies a boy on the slopes of Sharp Tor hears a voice cry out ‘Jan Coo’ several times over several days before chasing after it never to return. The story ends with Crossing musing:
There may be those whose scepticism will not permit them to admit the agency of the pixies in this matter, but who will be ready to recognise in the mysterious sounds ["Jan Coo"] the hooting of an owl, and in the disappearance of the boy another proof of the truth of the rhyme:

“River of Dart, Oh, River of Dart!
Every year thou claimest a heart” (78).

With Jan Coo as this emissary of the pixies in possession of a half-human, half-owl voice, he and the river seem to be mocking the water abstractor by using his own vocabulary to criticise his work, checking up on him with something of an impersonation of his superior. The final question concerning our ‘feeling of relative invulnerability’ is almost satiric when we consider the inevitability of the rhyme that Oswald herself has repeated just a page earlier: ‘Dart Dart / Every year thou / Claimest a heart’ (Oswald 2002 13). The verb ‘claim’ in the rhyme, is given extra weight in Oswald’s version at the beginning of the line.

It is as if the river had a degree of entitlement to a heart every year. A modern working vocabulary of the river is here made vulnerable to an intersubjective field that reaches back into a human-animal-pixie hybrid of the folkloric past. The language of the poem becomes a level playing field for all kinds of hybridities. The people and the folkloric characters become an intrinsic part of the ecosystem of the place and their voices collide with the literary voices of Hughes and Drayton in interesting and innovative ways that are reminiscent of the way ‘East Dart smashes into West Dart // two wills gnarling and recoiling / and finally knuckling under balance’ (10).

In conclusion then, I would like to look a little more closely at one specific intersection of voices in Dart. The epigraph to the poem – ‘water always comes with an ego and an alter ego’ – is by Ivan Illich. In his H2O and the Waters of Forgetfulness Illich sets out to explore the ‘dual nature’ of water through what he calls a ‘historicity of matter’ (4). He doesn’t ask how a certain historical period represents water, but rather he asks what they believe water is, how they treat it. He suggests that ‘the very substances that are shaped by the imagination – and thereby given explicit meanings – are themselves social creations to some degree’ (4). What is key here is that he means ‘shaped’ quite literally, materially, physically. Water is ‘abstracted’ by the water abstractor and ‘purified’ by the sewage worker. The sewage is ‘stirred and settled out and wasted off, looped back, macerated, digested, clarified and returned to the river’ (30). Somewhere in this work water is changed. It becomes something other than water. Water has an ego – i.e. what comes rolling off the moor – and an alter ego – i.e. what we turn it into and what we believe it to be, something to be ‘abstracted’, or a useful solution in which to dispense of our waste.

Interestingly, the voice of the sewage worker comes before Oswald’s retelling of Drayton’s tale from Poly-Olbion about the founding of the nation of Britain. According to Geoffrey of Monmouth, after the Trojan War, Brutus and his boat full of soldiers were wandering the Mediterranean and Atlantic coasts in search of an island to colonise when they set eyes on an archipelago in the Atlantic and so they landed, after sailing up the river Dart, at Totnes. At the time it was populated only by a giant or two but Brutus and his men ‘vanquish’ them, wrestling the last, Gogmagog, to his death on Plymouth Ho and afterwards engendering the race of Britons, so called after Brutus (Drayton 11). Totnes has a double significance for Oswald then, as a place of this myth of origins of nationhood which, as we have seen, she is beginning to overturn, but also as the heart of the transition network. It has for a number of years been
the model town in endeavouring to build up resilience against the ‘organised irresponsibility’ of our national and global infrastructure (Beck 149). The collision of these two Totnes narratives is a very interesting one here.

Oswald retells the Brutus myth, but what is most interesting in her version is its situation between the voices of the sewage worker and the stonewaller. Her tale of Brutus begins: ‘It happened when oak trees were men / when water was still water’, looking back to the ‘macerations’ of the sewage worker (30). Perhaps stranger than the water’s ‘alter ego’ is the statement ‘when oak trees were men’ though. Here she seems to be challenging the idea of the archipelago being unpopulated before the arrival of Brutus. Oswald is very careful to represent the river area as highly busy with life upon Brutus’s arrival: cormorants, sparrows, salmon, oysters, shelduck, heron, river crabs, foxes and seals, not to mention the ‘skirts of the trees’ and perhaps most importantly the repeated ‘race of freshwater’ (31-2). The implication is that the myth of nationhood that builds up around Brutus and secures a classical origin to the British blinds us to the pre-existent ‘races’. They somehow go under the installation of a nationalist narrative.

There is also the implication that the infrastructure of the nation requires that we read and imaginatively reconstruct that ‘race of freshwater’ to serve the narrative of nation, something that overwrites its own material form.

For this reason perhaps, Brutus and his men are described in the same breath as ‘outcasts of the earth, kings / of the green island England’ (30). This is a genuinely radical statement that I would argue seeks to separate itself not only from an idea of Britishness but of Englishness too. One cannot be English and of the earth, the two narratives are opposed here. And we can see such a politics reflected in Totnes’s status as a Transition town, now even with its own currency – the Totnes pound – working towards taking itself off the ‘national grid’, literally and metaphorically. The narratives of nation are too bound up with the narratives of industry for Oswald.

After Oswald retells the Brutus myth, she moves into the voice of the stonewaller. The hinge between Brutus and the stonewaller, though, is the giant Gogmagog himself who is to have his ‘throat slit’.

At Totnes, limping and swaying,
they set foot on the land.
There’s a giant walking towards them,
a flat stone in each hand (Oswald 32).

The stonewaller is Gogmagog. The shift from the more classical rhymed quatrains to prose poetry is also a shift in perspective from a hot-headed gang gearing up for war to someone going about their daily business. The daily business, of course, is a local one, working closely with the land. Stonewalling, unlike bricklaying, requires the careful use of the pre-existent order of shapes to make its lines, or an improvised knapping of the rock. It engages with the forms of the land carefully to make its own narrative. And the stonewaller is under threat from the originary myth of the nation. He is to have his ‘throat slit.’ The kings of England are outcasts of the earth, and the stonewaller, for his attention to the earth, is an outcast of England.
Totnes’s pioneering efforts towards ‘transition’ from a reliance on oil and an unstable and rapacious global economy are attempts to step outside, to devolve themselves from the narratives of desecration and irresponsibility. The origin of England then is caught somewhere between the ‘macerations’ and pollutions of the sewage worker and the endangered local craftsmanship of the stonewaller. Totnes itself feels the tension between the local and the national, that argument between ‘True North’ and ‘our Garden North’. What both Oswald and Robinson are doing is reimagining and remapping the places they have come to know in ways that help us to reimagine and remap our own places. They encourage and empower the local in a way that is ‘meaningful’ in the sense that Roger Deakin uses the term as ‘from the inside’, and in such a way as to resist that ‘comprehending’ from the outside. This is not about drawing a line between insiders and outsiders but rather about bringing the ongoing narratives of meaningful inhabitation to be recognised on the larger scales of comprehension. This is not a narrative of inclusion or exclusion but one of care and co-operation, persuading the way we see and understand place to accommodate greater complexity and local distinctiveness.
At the Museum of Modern Art in Machynlleth in October 2010 the mountaineer and author Jim Perrin ended his William Condry Lecture with a volley of anger launched at the ‘new nature writing’ championed by Granta. For inspiration he turned to the naturalist and editor James Fisher who, in the 1940s, wrote the following against certain nature writers in his time who he felt had an ‘excessive consciousness of the exquisite nature of their prose’. Perrin suggested that it equally well ‘pins most of our so-called “new nature writers” firmly to the specimen-board’:

Do these people really believe that the search for truth is less important than the search for poetry or art or aesthetic satisfaction or ‘happiness’? Do they not understand that the purest source of these imponderables is in the realms of fact, and that the establishment of facts is most simply done by the ancient methods of logical science? Once facts are despised, fancies replace them; and fancies are poisonous companions to the enjoyment and appreciation of nature (‘The Condry Lecture’).

Aesthetics and facts are opposed to each other here, as are poetry and truth, much to the detriment of both. It is an unfortunate resuscitation of an attitude that predates some important interrogation of both what is meant by ‘aesthetic’ and by ‘fact’, the likes of which Perrin seems wilfully ignorant.

It is, however, a recurrent debate in the history of environmental non-fiction and nature writing. Other recent work on nature and aesthetics, like Perrin, takes a similar comfort in the establishment of facts. Yuriko Saito relays an anecdote about John Muir finding himself in a disagreement with two landscape painters in the High Sierra who did not have the depth of knowledge of natural history to appreciate certain aspects of the landscape. To Muir’s infuriation, the particular beauty to be found by the more knowing naturalist does not conform to the conventions of pictorial composition and the rules of the picturesque and so it is lost on them (‘The Aesthetics of Unscenic Nature’ 238). Saito coins the appealing term ‘scenically challenged’ for these painters (238). The collection that contains Saito’s essay is dedicated to rethinking the aesthetic in relation to environmentalism, to thinking beyond our all-too-often ‘scenically challenged’ perspective and developing a new understanding that is attentive to the facts of the natural historian. It recommends a ‘disinterestedness, which demands that appreciators purge aesthetic experience of their own particular and personal interests and opinions’ (Carlson and Litnott Nature, Aesthetics and Environmentalism 12). Elsewhere, one of its editors, Allen Carlson, has suggested that ‘[c]oncerning the art-based approaches, it is argued that they do not fully realize the serious, appropriate appreciation of nature, but distort the true character of natural environments’ (emphasis added) (Nature and Landscape 9). Such endorsement of nature as an object that we can know the ‘true’ character of, in both cases here, becomes oddly hostile to the human.

In a sense this scientific method is quite at odds with the agenda that I have put forward for an archipelagic literature. Not because an archipelagic literature is hostile to the establishment of facts though. On the contrary, as I showed in Part 2 it is ever on the lookout for new facts, diverse, local facts
to complement and complicate the established, recognised facts. But then perhaps we are talking about two different types of fact here. John Searle has distinguished between what he calls ‘brute facts’ and ‘institutional facts’ (The Construction of Social Reality). ‘Brute facts’ are those that would be facts with or without our witnessing or agreeing or describing them. ‘The Earth turns’ is a brute fact for Searle, even before I write it down as such. ‘Institutional facts’, however, are based on human agreement. They are facts because we accept them and behave accordingly and because we talk about them as facts. That a place might be called Totnes, or a river, Dart, is an institutional fact. Institutional facts are precisely ‘language dependent’ (64). The nature writer, like Perrin above, or like Carlson, is interested in the ‘brute facts’ and disturbed by the way in which aesthetics distorts such facts. The archipelagic writer is interested in both types of fact; he or she is interested in precisely the way that certain communities have established their institutional facts often in quite poetic ways. As such, the conflict between aesthetics and facts can afford to be a little less heated and can perhaps even be explored as a productive tension.

Raymond Williams has described a style of country writing that runs through the twentieth century in which there is a similar opposition. The way Williams puts it though, might be of more use here. Country writing, he suggests, moves ‘at times grossly, at times imperceptibly, from record to convention and back again, until these seem inextricable’ (The Country and the City 261). By ‘record’ Williams means those works that have tried to represent the real lives of those living in rural areas; by ‘convention’ he means those works that projected a literary and metropolitan fantasy onto rural life, though, as he suggests, most works play host in some way to movements between the two. In the awkward debate between fact and aesthetics that haunts nature writers then, we can perhaps see a shadow of this rather more helpful opposition of ‘record’ to ‘convention’. It is more helpful because ‘convention’ here refers to only one aspect of aesthetics, its adherence to tradition, leaving alone its other equally important aspect, the progressive struggle against tradition, the innovation and re-imagining of tradition. The side of aesthetics that is most progressive, then, still remains available through Williams as a means of playing out, if not resolving, the tension between ‘record’ and ‘convention’. Williams’s tension better describes the agenda of an archipelagic literature, in that a record may explore a human culture or a community’s way of life with its often ‘language dependent’ facts of existence; it may note or observe an oddity or an eccentricity that might not be ‘brute’ but that might be meaningful nonetheless. The establishment of facts ‘by the ancient methods of logical science’ speaks of a certain objectification more willing to endorse ‘nature’ as something separate from the human sphere. For an archipelagic literature, as I hope I have shown, the distinctions between nature and culture are more blurred, as are the shifts in perspective between subjective, intersubjective and objective.

In the following two chapters I will explore this tension between record and convention a little more closely. In Chapter 5 I will examine the tension as a way to distinguish a more critical, progressive and perhaps even literary tendency that runs through the genre of environmental non-fiction more widely. This will necessitate looking back at a number of authors down the tradition and considering how their resistance to literary convention has been, paradoxically, one of the things that most marks them out
as part of a tradition. Such authors are especially important to the project of rewriting the British and Irish landscape today. Towards the end of Chapter 5 I will begin to look more closely at the way this tension might be resolved aesthetically, specifically in a poetics of participation. In Chapter 6 this will lead into a discussion of field notes and methods of writing outdoors and the forms that emerge from such projects. It will end by returning to Tim Robinson and exploring a particular aesthetics that begins with participation and builds from the ground up into more complex formations. Chapter 5 will explore genre more widely while Chapter 6 will consider aesthetics more specifically, though there will of course be some overlap.

In debates around facts and aesthetics, recent work in environmental criticism has taken the side of aesthetics. This is in part due to the need for aesthetics to be considered as more than just Perrin’s ‘fancies’ or the ‘convention’ that Williams observes above. The reduction today of aesthetics to ‘fancies’ is naive and simplistic. John Joughin and Simon Malpas tell us that ‘[i]t is impossible now to argue that aesthetics is anything other than thoroughly imbricated with politics and culture’ (*The New Aestheticism* 3). This is by no means to suggest that all aesthetics are politically engaged in a self-aware manner. Historical formalism has shown that ‘enmeshed in a web of institutional and cultural as well as social and political histories, literary forms are overdetermined by their historical circumstances and thus multiple and variable in their results, neither consistently ideological nor inherently demystificatory’ (Stephen Cohen, *Shakespeare and Historical Formalism* 3). There is of course a case to be made for certain forms prevalent in environmental non-fiction to have been determined by the literary marketplace. Timothy Clark has asked how far the celebration of ‘the poetic as a kind of green psychic therapy’ is bought and read as ‘the wishful illusion of an industrial consumerist society rather than as a site of effective opposition to it’ (*The Cambridge Companion to Environmental Literature* 23). There is, then, an uneasy relationship between environmental literature and the culture industry, something that, as I showed in the introduction to this thesis, was behind Tim Robinson’s move out of London to the Aran Islands in 1972. That aesthetics can be employed to the ends of a mere ‘virtuoso verbal exercise’ is a failure of political commitment, though, not factual knowledge (Clark *Ibid* 41). The opposite of such superficial or consumer-driven writing is not, as Perrin suggests, factual writing but rather writing committed to struggle, a struggle within personal consciousness and a struggle within the genre and the tradition. Such struggle drives literature to innovation, experimentation and reinvention. Such struggle also often calls for us to re-evaluate what have been thought to be the ‘facts’ of our existence.

Eurocentric, racial, gender and anthropocentric hierarchies have been discovered underpinning the various ways in which we classify and know the world around us. Institutional facts have often masqueraded as brute facts, encouraged to do so by the imbalance of power. In chapter 4 we saw how Tim Robinson has helped to rectify a whole culture of mistranslation as the institutional facts of the Ordnance Survey misread the less powerful community of Aran, where the original Irish often offered a reading of the brute facts of the landscape. It is a story that reminds us of the complexity of knowledge
when it comes to places, especially when there is more than one language involved as is so often the case across this archipelago.

As I said, the response to this debate in environmental criticism has been to fall on the side of aesthetics recently, calling for artwork and literature that resists the dreary realist tendency of ‘landscape writing’ as ‘monocultural and monotone’ (Dana Phillips 19), reducing the complex to the simple in a form reminiscent of pastoral; or employing ‘kitsch’ (Morton 30) tropes that give the appearance of a greater parity between language and our experience of the world than in fact there is. Dana Phillips has suggested that the discourse ‘has yet to develop tropes enabling it to come to terms with the fractured (and fractal) realities of nature’ (20). But would such tropes be more or less factual, more or less aesthetic?

In the book that completes his Connemara trilogy, *A Little Gaelic Kingdom*, Tim Robinson addresses precisely this difficulty, taking, ‘as a source of metaphor and imagery’, the fractal geometry of Benoit Mandelbrot (252). He is prompted to do so by Mandelbrot’s 1967 essay ‘How Long is the Coast of Britain?’, which he applies to the intricate folds and convolutions of the Connemara coastline showing that the more closely it is observed the greater the answer. But for Robinson, these are not merely ‘the fractured (and fractal) realities of nature’ (my emphasis) that Phillips describes above. When he talks of the relation of the Connemara landscape to more conventional forms of geometry, it is hard not to hear an echo of the way that same landscape was represented for English colonial administration. It is ‘largely composed of such recalcitrant entities,’ he describes, ‘over which the geometry of Euclid, the fairytale of lines, circles, areas and volumes we are told at school, has no authority’ (249). And again, coastlines are ‘therefore too complicated to be described in terms of classical geometry, which would indeed regard them as broken, confused, tangled, unworthy of the dignity of measure’ (249). The lack of ‘authority’ chimes with the book’s earlier part on Connemara’s stories of political and cultural rebellion and the mention of something ‘confused, tangled, unworthy of the dignity of measure’ could as easily describe the English bafflement at the Irish dinnseanchas as it describes here a mathematical difficulty.

Post-Euclidean geometry, and theories of complexity and chaos are finding their way into this archipelagic literature, but not merely as descriptions of natural complexity. For Robinson, they are a way of understanding the folding together of land, memory, ecology, language and folklore, showing that ‘there are more places within a forest, among the galaxies or on a Connemara seashore, than the geometry of common sense allows’ (252). The proliferation of ‘places’ that such a new model of geometry reveals chimes with the theme of intersubjectivity that has been recurring throughout this thesis so far, the idea that an archipelagic sense of place should be less concerned with authenticity or with authority than with complexity and the development of a more thorough, encompassing and inclusive story of consensus. As Clifford and King suggest, ‘scientists of many disciplines engaged in the fascinating unveiling of ideas around Chaos theory are moving away from reductionism toward looking at the whole and are acknowledging that the objective and subjective are less clear cut’ (*Local Distinctiveness* 11).

A recent anthology of writing on the points of connection, fusion and transfer between nature and culture, *Patterned Ground*, has set out to explore ways of understanding the world that have absorbed
the lessons of post-structuralism but that also remain open to our desire to order the world. The editors take from Foucault the sense of obligation ‘to challenge those knowledges that think they know what ‘things’ exist and in what order they are to be put [...]’, to unsettle these knowledges’ (Harrison 17). But at the same time they seek to ‘celebrate a life led in curiosity’, to explore the ‘tension’ between, ‘on the one hand, the strangeness, and on the other, the necessity of classificatory systems’ (18). They conclude their introduction arguing simply and pragmatically that ‘to recognize, and understand, that we are flawed witnesses does not remove the obligation to think about the things that we see. Nor to judge them. We should just be careful when we assume we’re right’ (41). As I shall discuss towards the end of Chapter 5, works like the Flora Britannica by Richard Mabey and England in Particular by Sue Clifford and Angela King, with their emphasis on the vernacular have explored similar frameworks (though admittedly for different reasons) in which this tension between record and convention is resolved. Flora Britannica has shown us the multiplicity of names that a single flower can have associated with it across the country. One does not ask which is most true but rather what new and plural truths each name might offer up. The information in a name may refer to the properties of the flower itself, the time of year it flowers, the use to which it is put by a certain community, or the places in which it grows, all of which might be considered factual, all of which might be considered poetic as well. What is at the heart of such an understanding of the natural world is community, its diverse perspectives and its meaningful relationship to this Atlantic archipelago. In the next two chapters then I will consider writing, firstly from the point of view of genre, looking back over the tradition and examining a thread of continuity, and secondly in a closer look at aesthetics itself as a way of bringing together the previous two parts’ more geographical and philosophical explorations.
CHAPTER 5
THE PARADOX OF AN ENVIRONMENTAL GENRE

Stephen Daniels and Hayden Lorimer have suggested that the recent trend of British and Irish landscape writing now ‘demands some critical reflection on its own history as a literary genre’ (Daniels and Lorimer 4). In this chapter I would like to offer something towards that end. Having spent much of this thesis demonstrating certain historical factors that distinguish the politics and methods of authors today from their predecessors, I would like to consider a common thread as well. In a sense the political urgency of contemporary landscape writing means that it is struggling to distance itself from certain former tropes of the genre, a genre that, it is worth noting, now spans at least two continents and over two centuries. Authors today have tried to distance themselves from the pictorial tradition related to landscape tourism that I discussed in the introduction to this section. They have tried to distance themselves from the literature that Raymond Williams finds ‘scribbled over’ the real lives of people in the country by those in possession of a Georgian vision that used rural England as an image for ‘its own internal feelings and ideas’ (The Country and the City 258). They have also tried to distance themselves from certain nationalist narratives of rural literature that were prevalent in the landscape tourism of the 1930s. However, such moves, in carving out their own unique position, also find them emulating certain of their forebears as well, most notably in their response to this tension between record and convention: on the one hand there are the facts as they can best be explored and on the other there are the literary forms that come with the tradition and with the marketplace of literature.

It is a peculiarly literary phenomenon to be wrestling against the genre in which you are choosing to write whilst at the same time enjoying the intricacies and opportunities of its form. The more careful and acutely self-conscious works being published today also prompt us to look back at those practitioners of the past who, in their own way, struggled against the genre as well. In so doing, we begin to see that, in fact, resistance to genre is perhaps one of this particular genre’s most interesting threads, a thread that separates, not old from new, but rather the more alert and engaged authors from those enjoying riding on the coat tails of the various popular booms down the years. I do not mean that the best of this literature is factual, but rather that it feels that tension between the facts and literary convention as a source of innovation and creativity. The letter that Gilbert White sent to Thomas Pennant with the dead peregrine falcon is the tenth letter in any copy of The Natural History of Selborne today. It is, however, the first that has a date attached to it. The previous nine ‘letters’ were not really letters at all and were written much later as introductory material when White came to prepare the book for publication. He agonised over how he should best go about framing the material and, as Richard Mabey (Gilbert White 123) and W.J. Keith (52-3) tell us, he considered a range of different approaches to the form of the work – including a shepherd’s calendar – searching for the one that would most honestly communicate the nature of his work. It was such honesty and fidelity to his subject that led him to publish them as they had been written, in an epistolary work, a popular form in the eighteenth century as a means of communicating
one’s findings on all manner of subjects from travel to history to geology (Smith 80). However, it was also a form that had been appropriated into the literary mainstream in such novels as Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1749). With this in mind then, White left the first nine letters undated as an endeavour to communicate to his reader where the literary artifice ended and the real fieldwork observations began. It is an oddity that is there in every edition of the work today and suggests that from the very beginning this genre has felt the tension between record and convention very strongly.

Before I move on to explore a longer tradition to this tension though, I would like to briefly consider another area in which this genre has seen itself appearing lately and to think about some of the reasons that there might be for this. Timothy Clark has suggested that ‘more than in elements of romantic politics, it is in questions of genre that environmental non-fiction challenges the agenda of literary studies’ (*The Cambridge Introduction* 35). As a fourth genre, literary non-fiction (if not specifically environmental non-fiction) has become increasingly established on American and British university courses in literature, geography and creative writing departments (Douglas Hesse). Precisely the relationship it bears to the literary is more ambiguous though. To suggest that it is a purely factual genre is clearly not true since it can be narrative and highly poetic. And yet, its most innovative moments can at times emerge out of a resistance to be seen to privilege any fidelity to a literary genre at all out of fidelity to its subject, where its subject might be a landscape, a place, an animal, or a season. Such groundedness and focus, I have argued, is crucial to the politics of an archipelagic literature. The paradox of landscape and place writing then as a literary genre is often that it is most of and in its genre when it is resisting its own conventions.

Such an intriguingly conflicted form has recently been appealing to cultural geographers as a way of addressing certain questions that have been arising around the issues of critical distance and scientific objectivity in geography. It is perhaps for this reason that the literature that this thesis is concerned with has received more attention from geographers than it has from literary critics (Daniels and Lorimer; Matless, ‘Nature Voices’; Wylie, ‘Dwelling and Displacement’). Geographers have, for several years now, been publishing academic papers in the form of first person narrative excursions that offer ‘creative and critical means of discussing the varied affinities and distanciations of self and landscape’ (Wylie, ‘A Single Day’s Walking’ 234). There is an unexplored relationship here that will benefit from a closer look before I move on to more literary texts. In some sense the geographers have reinvented a literary genre that has been around for many years now, but the way they articulate the difficulties that they encounter is interesting. Emerging out of cultural geography’s interest in post-structuralism, and therefore suspicious of the assumptions inherent within the idea of ‘critical distance’, narrative geography still nonetheless seems uncertain what it might mean ‘to posit a formal equivalence between scientific and literary accounts of nature and environmental process and change’ (Daniels and Lorimer 5).

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16 A few of the best examples of this narrative form of geography are DeSilvey’s ‘Observing Decay: Telling Stories with Mutable Things’, Lorimer’s ‘Herding Memories of Humans and Animals’ and Wylie’s ‘An Essay on Ascending Glastonbury Tor’.
The problem is that such a strategy has been employed by geographers in order ‘to connect certain conceptual polarities’ such as ‘subjective/objective’, ‘imagination/experience’ and interestingly ‘fact/fiction’ (Ibid 3-4). However, in connecting fact and fiction, and imagination and experience, as Daniels and Lorimer describe, geographers find themselves with a problem all too familiar to literary scholars: such a form is ‘too powerful a method and too powerless’ (Ibid 4). Such a form can be very rich in affect but somewhat lacking in authority. Suspicious of the transparent values embedded within critical distance, it forfeits that critical distance without necessarily having a plan for how an academic discourse can function without that critical distance. In a transcript of a panel discussion on ‘Landscape, Mobility and Practice’ held at the Royal Geographic Society in 2006, Tim Cresswell inquires of his colleagues as to how he, as a geographer, should approach such literary forms of geographical writing: ‘But does this poetics preclude engagement, or does it engage in a different way? [...] Articles can be almost hermetically sealed, beautifully written stories, but how do you intervene? Do you intervene aesthetically? Or do you intervene in another way?’ (Merriman et. al. 196) The question is an interesting one, but also slightly premature since the problem that he is sensing is the fact that such a poetics is already an intervention itself.

The question before this one ought to be why they have chosen to intervene in the way that they have. It is a question that should direct us back to a problem with what they are choosing to intervene in, which is more strictly ‘representational’ geography. Many of the narrative papers that have come out of cultural geography with this attention to ‘poetics’ fall under the title ‘non-representational geography’ or ‘more-than-representational geography’, a field that endeavours to account for aspects of our experience of landscape and place that are more immediate and affective, experiences of the everyday that resist conventional representation and critical distance, that in fact critical distance might in some way abstract or distort. In an review of the field, Hayden Lorimer suggests that ‘attention to these kinds of expression, it is contended, offers an escape from the established academic habit of striving to uncover meanings and values that apparently await our discovery, interpretation, judgement and ultimate representation’ (‘Cultural Geography’ 84). The more literary tendency of the narrative with its capacity for various forms of poetics offers geographers today an alternative means of apprehending the world not bound by the scientific distance of representation. If we look back to Searle’s distinction between brute facts and institutional facts we can see that these geographers are not disputing the existence of brute facts but are troubled by the statements about those brute facts which are necessarily filtered through a certain discourse specific ‘intentionality’ (‘that feature of representations by which they are about something or directed at something’) (7). Again, this is a tension between the conventions of the discourse and the desire to make an honest record events and experiences. I will move on now to think about certain ways in which this tension had been played out in a number of authors that belong to the traditions of environmental non-fiction, nature writing, rural writing and the countryside essay before returning to this debate. What I hope to show is how this tension can in fact be resolved into a ‘more-than-representational’ literary aesthetics.
In *Ecology Without Nature* Timothy Morton describes the unfortunate habit that nature writers have of trying to ‘escape the pull of the literary’ (31). But, he suggests that they do so quite unwittingly. Without self-conscious reflection the author attempts to close the gap between language and the world, but in so doing he or she in fact makes use of more and more complex forms of rhetoric. One trope in particular Morton uses as an example goes something like: ‘As I write this, I am sitting on the sea shore [...] No,’ he scoffs, ‘that was just pure fiction; just a tease... As I write this, a western scrub jay is chattering outside my window [...] That was also just a fiction,’ he scoffs again. ‘What’s really happening as I write this is...’ and so on and so forth (29). In trying to close that gap, to somehow break down all the distancing effects of language and to communicate his or her experience as directly as possible in a ‘(non)aesthetic form’, Morton argues, the author unwittingly creates a complicated rhetorical maze that he calls ‘kitsch’ (30).

Whilst I am in agreement with him that there is no escaping ‘the pull of the literary’ in a written work, I do take issue with the implication that this is due to a naivety on the parts of the authors. Morton takes issue with Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac* which, he suggests, tries to pass itself off as a non-literary form, a journal of sorts. Ignoring the fact of an almanac’s relation to a shepherd’s calendar, and this particular almanac’s interesting reworking of that genre, the book also contains four significant essays on conservation (165-226). In fact, Leopold had agonised over the best form for his book as Gilbert White had agonised over the form of *The Natural History of Selborne* (Ribben). Where White consciously revealed his hand though, Leopold seems to deliberately, though only partially, make use of a literary genre in order to woo or entice his reader into the arguments of the later essays. In the cases of Leopold and White though, the result is a heterogeneous form that distinguishes it from other similar work that may indeed be considered ‘kitsch’. I hope to show in what follows that the desire to ‘escape the pull of the literary’ is by no means merely a naive tick of the genre but that in fact there has been a tradition of careful and very conscious commitment on the part of certain authors that, in fact, might be a reason to take them more seriously as literature.

In the late nineteenth century George Sturt, who wrote as George Bourne for fear that he would lose business at his wheelwright’s shop if his fellow townsfolk found out he was a writer, wrote anxiously in his journal about literary artifice. W.J. Keith has studied the journals and suggests that ‘in a queer combination of whimsicality and bitterness, ‘authorship’ is contrasted with ‘genuine work’” (152). Such anxiety leads Sturt to criticise Hardy and the whole genre of fiction suggesting: ‘Sometimes, even, I think that a new art must be invented, proper to [the] unrecorded and intangible beauties of the commonplace’ (qtd in Keith 154). It was just such an ambition that drove Sturt to publish his transcriptions of conversations with his gardener ‘Bettesworth’ (Frederick Grover). However, as an author he is worried that, as Bettesworth’s employer, he cannot be in a position to hear him speak freely. The result is prose dialogue written from a perspective that always seems to be trying to compensate for the original imbalance that is the precondition of it existing at all.
It is in reference to the country literature around at the time of Sturt that Raymond Williams describes those movements ‘from record to convention and back again’ (*The Country and the City* 261). Williams commends Sturt for offering such an excellent record of country life in his transcriptions of Bettesworth, but what Keith shows us is that Sturt’s anxieties and his subsequent desire for ‘a new art’ show him turning to – in terms of genre – an unconventional and original form to record those ‘intangible beauties of the commonplace’. Sturt’s is an art precisely born out of that productive tension between record and convention. The result, of course, is *The Bettesworth Book*, another oddity of rural writing, like *The Natural History of Selbourne*, that shrugs off genre out of fidelity to its subject matter. New methods and poetic devices are put to use in a highly conscious and open form that tries, again, to ‘escape the pull of the literary’ (Morton 31). The end product does not resemble work like White’s, or even Leopold’s, but it does share with it a capacity to think itself out of its own convention of rural writing.

If we are to understand the contemporary re-writing of the British and Irish landscape as a literary movement that is working within a literary genre, then I would argue that this is the tradition from which it emerges; a thread of authors whose aesthetic is born out of struggle with the wider tradition of nature writing or the rural essay. Such anxieties have been compounded today and made mainstream in a genre that has become ‘a precipitate of environmental crisis’ (Macfarlane, qtd. in Tonkin ‘Call of the Wild’). Authors today are more wary than ever of contributing to a cultural form that may be exacerbating the very problem they are trying to address. The critical localism of an archipelagic perspective demands a responsible attitude to the places being written about. A similar anxiety as that expressed by the authors above is necessitated today by various geographical crises of identity, such as those I have discussed in previous chapters. As Macfarlane has argued, the act of reading is ‘a vital force for brokering dignified and durable relationships between people and places’ (*Where the Wild Things Were*), but this is a potential that must be very carefully realised if we are to avoid using ‘the aesthetic as an anaesthetic’ (Morton 10).

In her 2012 collection *Sightlines*, Kathleen Jamie published an essay called ‘Three Ways of Looking at St. Kilda’. It is divided into three parts. In the first, for a fortieth birthday present from her family she takes a week to go out to that most peripheral of the Hebridean islands but finds herself and her fellow pilgrims unable to leave the Monarch Islands because of bad weather and has to return home disappointed. In the second part she makes it all the way there but again the weather turns and the ship must take her away again immediately if she is not to be stranded: ‘Wild, remote, famous, oft-imagined St. Kilda, so theatrically abandoned [...] Did you get there? Yup, but not for long. In fact, I’ve spent longer standing at bus stops’ (142). The third time she finally makes it and spends two weeks with a team of surveyors from the Royal Commission of Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland. What is particularly interesting here though is the first two failed tries and her choice to include them.

There is, as always with Jamie, a resistance to the romanticised representation of place, even when she does finally arrive. Donald, the ship’s captain points out to her: ‘The radar base, of course! The missile-tracking base! Some people are horrified by it. Remember I told you how some folk have this
Romantic idea of St. Kilda? What do they get? A radar base. Wardens and bylaws. A souvenir shop’ (141). This resistance to the ‘Romantic idea’ in part explains these two initial ‘ways of looking at St. Kilda’. They are interventions in a more conventional travel narrative, interventions in the sense meant in relation to Tim Cresswell’s comment above. She does not censor them as failures in an effort to present us with a ‘successful’ trip to St. Kilda. Each is a part of her own process of visiting the island. Each plays an important role in generating the sense of place and the sense of space, particularly the distance and difficulty that weighs around the island. The structure of the essay recalls Douglas Dunn’s ‘St. Kilda’s Parliament: 1879-1979’:

> It is a remote democracy, where men,
> In manacles of place, outstare a sea
> That rattles back its manacles of salt,
> The moody jailer of the wild Atlantic.
> 
> (New Selected Poems 70)

Jamie’s three-part narrative, beset with difficulty and disappointment, does more to capture the ‘manacles of place’ than any description of storm-swept seas and wild weather would. She ends the essay in a passage that might disappoint readers looking for a conventional wilderness narrative:

> but in truth I didn’t care for the place. Not because it was sullied by the base and its Cold War paranoia; not because it wasn’t ‘remote’ enough – though with the satellite and cruise liners and environmental health officers, you do wonder what ‘remote’ might mean. It was the village itself that troubled me, those cottages we walked past twice a day en route to plot and measure every last jot their people had left behind. They didn’t sing of a lost idyll, those cold empty doors. If the cottages spoke at all, it was to say – Look, they made their decision. They quit. They moved on (161-2).

Jamie ends up leaving the island early in case a bout of expected bad weather ‘manacles’ her for a further week on the island, concluding that ‘[t]o linger on St. Kilda just for the sake of it would merely have been romance’ (163). This is all circumspection (‘If the cottages spoke at all…’), writing of life on a weather-torturmented place that has all too often been described as ‘an ideal society’ before the encroachment of modernity (MacLean, Island on the Edge of the World ix). What is interesting here is that this criticism of her own and others’ romantic impulses seems to emerge out of sympathy with the islanders themselves who were evacuated in 1930 as life there became untenable, impractical and unsustainable. Jamie’s narrative undoes the more traditional travel narrative from within the genre; it deconstructs it into three parts, all in some way failed, and as such assumes a form that in fact bears a greater fidelity to the island and the islanders themselves. The closing remarks are an effort to think herself into the decision that the islanders finally made to leave, to ‘move on’. The deconstructed form becomes, like Sturt’s The Bettesworth Book, a ‘new art’ sympathetic to the unrecorded, difficult lives of a community of people.

Class is one of the driving impulses behind this essay, and it is interesting to note that while Jamie was staying on St. Kilda she had with her Macfarlane’s The Wild Places in order to write her review for the London Review of Books.

Last year I took The Wild Places with me to St Kilda and to Mingulay. Both islands are now uninhabited and St Kilda is, of course, an icon of remoteness. But I never read a line, even when
it rained. I was with friends and we were too busy. There were too many birds and basking sharks to watch, too many ruins to explore and projects to help with, too much conversation, too many general comings and goings, boats and helicopters. It’s different in winter, but St Kilda is busier on a summer’s day than many mainland places, what with the radar base and the cruise liners (‘Lone Enraptured Male’ 25).

Jamie here seems to contrast her own sociable and busy experience of this ‘remote’ place with what she sees as Macfarlane’s more romantic wilderness pilgrimage. In some small way we can feel the impression left by Macfarlane in Jamie’s reticence and circumspection. A negative space of arm’s length resistance that helps to form her own distinct attitude to the landscape. She would cast herself among the surveyors, not the authors; her sympathy is for the working people of the island in an unsentimental way, a reminder of her own family’s history in the mining landscape of Darnconner in Airds Moss. Her uneasiness with Macfarlane is an uneasiness with an English tradition of literary excursions to the Scottish islands that dates back to Samuel Johnson and James Boswell. Jamie’s essay is an intervention in such a literary convention, as was her review of The Wild Places.

Jamie’s conflicted attitude to writing has a precedent in the early twentieth century in Edward Thomas, better known today for his body of poetry that leads us into the First World War. In his poem ‘The Other’ we encounter his strange, but by now well known, split or double psyche, his sense always of somehow stalking himself or his doppelgänger as he goes, arriving at an inn just after himself in an uncaney psychological belatedness: ‘I wait his flight. / He goes: I follow: no release / Until he ceases. Then I also shall cease’ (Collected Poems 42). Drawing on, but also reflecting upon, psychoanalysis, Edna Longley has suggested that ‘when ‘The Other’ enters the unconscious and dramatises splits within the psyche, it marks the start of a poetic movement that will internalise the perplexities of modern selfhood’ (Thomas Annotated Poems 14). The perplexities of modern selfhood, of course, are still very much at the fore in debates about the environment, with Richard Kerridge, for example, suggesting that green politics is insistent on ‘restraint and self-denial’ (Writing the Environment 6).

Less well known than Thomas’s poem ‘The Other’ is a similar technique employed in his prose work. In In Pursuit of Spring the same split psyche narrative technique describes his frustration at a career in what he called ‘the Norfolk-jacket school of writing’ (3). The books Thomas wrote on his walking and cycling trips he wrote for money, serving a popular interest in patriotic countryside literature in the lead up to the war. This is precisely the style of literature Raymond Williams deplores in The Country and the City and, in fact, he does take Thomas to task at one point (The Country and the City 255-60). But one of Thomas’s many saving graces is the anguish he feels over writing such books and the way this anguish finds its way into the narrative. The narrator of In Pursuit of Spring meets this ‘Other Man’ and recalls how he found himself frustrated by the act of writing, or more specifically of taking notes, from which ‘he could never afterwards reproduce the great effects of Nature’ (220). The ‘Other Man’ becomes a rhetorical device established to put some distance between the part of him that takes pleasure in such ‘great effects’ and the part of him contracted into a literary industry that he does not like. Thomas
suggests to this ‘Other Man’ that he is surely lucky to be able to make £50 for ‘doing what you like’.

“What I like!” he mutters in reply. Thomas continues:

He rambled on about himself, his past, his writing, his digestion; his main point being he did not like writing. He had been attempting the impossible task of reducing undigested notes about all sorts of details to a grammatical, continuous narrative. He abused notebooks violently. He said they blinded him to nearly everything that would not go into the form of notes (In Pursuit of Spring 219-20).

For Thomas, the more sensual experience of the landscape is ‘impossible’ to ‘reduce’ to ‘a grammatical, continuous narrative’ and quite at odds with the market driven convention in which he finds himself writing. Instead we get this unusual, self-parodying and strangely fascinating intervention of the author stalking himself.

It is not immediately apparent that the ‘Other Man’ in In Pursuit of Spring is in fact Thomas himself. Discerning readers might have guessed it by the slightly gothic capitalisation but most would not have expected such a (presciently modernist) flourish in a rather prescriptive and conservative genre. As with White, Sturt and Leopold, Thomas’s allegiance is to his subject in all its apparently irresolvable difficulty, not to the literary convention, but again this is what marks him out and sets him in such good company in this paradoxical genre emerging out of the wider tradition. It is a genre affiliated not by the end product but by the tension felt between his record, or at least his inability to make an adequate record of those ‘great effects’, and the literary convention. From this tension he develops an original literary device. All of which begs the question: which is the more literary, the author who adapts him or herself to the convention, or the author who resists and innovates that very convention?

Innovation of a genre need not always be so abrupt and resistant though. This chapter has so far focussed on those aspects of the tradition that have made a place for themselves on its outer edge by way of intervention. They intervene with styles and forms that are heterogeneous, that deconstruct as they re-imagine. But there are threads that are less disruptive and that yet re-imagine and innovate the genre in their own way too. For the remainder of this chapter I would like to discuss this other thread. The end is of course the same – it is the development of a progressive aesthetics to help to draw us into a better understanding of the world at our feet, the various cultures and ecosystems that shape life on this archipelago – but the means are subtly different.

Edward Thomas was a great admirer of Richard Jefferies and wrote a literary biography and a lengthy introduction to the 1909 publication of The Hills and the Vale, commending a man that he saw as sportsman, naturalist, reporter, philosopher and even mystic at various stages of his life. At the heart of what Thomas admired in Jefferies was the marriage of poetry and reportage, the fact that his writing was able to do more than record but that this did not necessarily mean a lapse into convention. ‘So well did he know it [the country] that he practically never mentions any part of it by name, and then usually by a fictitious name. He was creating, not referring to places well known, or which people might visit for verification’ (A Literary Pilgrim in England 134-5). And again: ‘He knew it so well [...] that it became a portion of himself, as if he had partly created it, as in fact he did’ (134). This description of a collaborative
relationship between creativity and knowledge goes some way to resolving the tension that, for Thomas, drove a wedge into his own psyche.

In a discussion of Jefferies’ later essays, Thomas draws on William James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience*, ticking off the aspects of an experience necessary for its classification as ‘mystical’ and somewhat problematically commending Jefferies as a mystically inspired author of the British landscape (Jefferies *The Hills and the Vale* xxvii). It is interesting to note how close such a description comes to a version of Emerson’s transcendentalism, but also interesting to note that it falls short, tempered by Jefferies the scientific naturalist. Thomas describes the sense of ‘hovering on the verge of great truth’ and of a ‘meaning waiting in the grass and water’, a ‘wider existence yet to be enjoyed on the earth’, but such things are never to be grasped or understood, only glimpsed as they momentarily pass (xxviii). There is a sense of being in the presence of a great truth but of the author being grasped *by* it rather than himself grasping that truth. It is more akin to Gilbert White’s being ‘seized by wonder’ (74) at the world plainly before him than anything otherworldly. As Edna Manning has suggested, Jefferies would have denied the sense of ‘universal theological intelligence’ and the existence of ‘a divine soul in nature’ that we get in Emerson (135-6). Jefferies’ is a closely grounded mystical experience, if we are to call it mystical at all, and one that is also worked out aesthetically in interesting ways on the page.

Thomas admires the following passage from Jefferies’ essay ‘The Sun and the Brook’ in which we can see the descriptive factual record of a natural history writer blend in an extraordinary way with a creative, poetic and aesthetically progressive form to achieve something that baffles generic description. It is, in a sense, the aesthetic that Thomas felt it was impossible to approach in the countryside books he was contracted to write with their reliance on place names, literary history, architectural detail and so on. It is a style in which the self does not find itself written apart but rather finds itself at peace and able to connect in extraordinary ways with its immediate environment:

> The long, loving touch of the sun has left some of its own mystic attraction in the brook. Resting here, and gazing down into it, thoughts and dreams come flowing as the water flows. Thoughts without words, mobile like the stream, nothing compact that can be grasped and stayed: dreams that slip silently as water slips through the fingers. The grass is not grass alone; the leaves of the ash above are not leaves only. From tree, and earth, and soft air moving, there comes an invisible touch which arranges the senses to its waves as ripples of a lake set the sand in parallel lines. The grass sways and fans the reposing mind; the leaves sway and stroke it, till it can feel beyond itself and with them, using each grass blade, each leaf, to abstract life from earth and ether. These then become new organs, fresh nerves and veins running afar out into the field, along the winding brook, up through the leaves, bringing a larger existence. The arms of the mind open wide to the broad sky (144-5).

‘Thoughts without words’, Jefferies suggests, a phrase that then prompts him into a description of thought (and dream) in terms that are material and formal. Doing so aligns thought with the material and formal movements of the grass and water and light. Similarly the ‘abstraction’ that takes place in this passage is of grass drawing life out of the earth in such an ordinary and vegetable process of growth that we might question the use of the term ‘abstract’. But Jefferies may also be alluding to the way his own perception ‘abstracts’ what he sees, not as an empty receptacle receiving data but as those watery thoughts and dream. Both movements wind towards a strangely externalised form of material hybridity (‘new
organs, fresh nerves and veins’). The mind is open, self and landscape are exploring interesting possibilities woven together in language. Neither record nor convention, such poetic prose brings to mind the idea that the aesthetic speaks its own truth, that representation might better be understood as presentation, as simply speaking rather than speaking about something else. As Simon Malpas has suggested though, this does not mean that it exists in ‘a separate realm cut off from the world’, that in fact it ‘acts as a potential site for a continually changing disturbance of the conceptualisation of the actual in particular historical circumstances’ (‘Touching Art’ 84). I would change the word ‘historical’ for the word ‘geographical’ here to suggest the way in which the aesthetic can resolve those tensions that I have been describing by pledging its allegiance to the intimacy of the local and record more than just ‘brute facts’.

In terms of genre, between Thomas’s psychological schism and Jefferies’ so called mysticism, both, in their own way, literary devices, there falls much more recently a work by Richard Mabey, Nature Cure. Published in 2005, it does not adhere to the usual excursion narrative form prevalent today. If it had to fall into one of the more conventional literary genres it would have to be autobiography, telling the story of Mabey’s recovery from a crippling spell of depression. It is also a love story between him and the woman he meets, Polly, and the story of a move from the Chilterns to the Upper Waveney Valley in the fens of East Anglia. More than this though, it is a philosophical book concerned with how the self can fall out of contact with itself and with the world like Thomas and how it might find its way back through acts of writing. The tone is personal without ever being indulgent and at times we sense that it is really only superficially autobiographical, that below its outer appearance it has its sights set on a much bigger goal: ‘In a strange and ironic turn-about, I had become the incomprehensible creature adrift in some insubstantial medium, out of kilter with the rest of creation. It didn’t occur to me at the time, but maybe this is the way our whole species is moving’ (Nature Cure 4). That ‘It didn’t occur to me at the time...’ characterises the modesty which masks a significant book about people’s relationship to the world around them.

What is perhaps less immediately obvious is that it is also a book about creativity, about writing. There is an image at one point of TB patients at the sites of local sanatoria ‘lying outside in all weathers, sometimes with snow covering the mackintosh aprons which kept their blankets dry’, exposure to the elements being the prescribed ‘nature cure’ for their ailments (224). However, the book refuses such a passive image of rehabilitation. The real cure for Mabey is a ‘flash of loving inspiration by Polly, that sat me down under the beech tree in my old home, and made me pick up a pen again. It was those first stumbling imaginative acts that reconnected me, more than the autumn breeze through the trees’ (224). Depression, in this book, means alienation from both the self and the world in a way that strikes an interesting chord with Thomas who also suffered from depression. Recovery is not a matter of putting the self back in touch with the world but of putting it back in touch with itself as world. This happens for Mabey through the act of writing, those ‘first stumbling imaginative acts’. This jars with Carlson’s idea that I mentioned in the introduction to this part, that the environmental considerations should ‘purge aesthetic experience of their own particular and personal interests and opinions’ (Carlson and Litnott...
It jars because these are two different approaches. Carlson is promoting a form of nature writing that views nature as an object ‘out there’, an ongoing system of ‘brute facts’ to be written about. But Mabey, in books as early as *The Common Ground* and *The Unofficial Countryside* was interested in the natural world as a hive of ‘institutional facts’, as in fact a cultural world imbricated with meanings that are personal, communal, sociable.

Mabey’s work on the monumental *Flora Britannica* is an excellent example of his interest in the way the brute facts of the naturalist are complicated and complemented by the institutional facts of vernacular folk traditions. It is a huge and highly detailed work of some quarter of a million words compiling material sent in from nearly ten thousand people across Britain and Ireland in response to newspaper, television and radio advertisements. What is so remarkable about the book (and Sue Clifford and Angela King’s *England in Particular* shares this as well) is that it takes as its primary material local and personal, vernacular, folkloric and popular accounts. The method looks back to S.P.B. Mais’s radio broadcasts of the 1930s which ramblers nationwide would listen to and phone into with anecdotes and information (Harris, *Romantic Moderns* 208-9). The radio program, like these books, offered a stage on which to share the local with a wider audience, to think about what locales might have in common. The cultural histories around flowers in the *Flora Britannica* are divergent, place-specific stories of people’s relationship to certain flowers in certain locations, the more localised the better. This is not in order to retreat from the standard scientific information of a given flower but in order to build a more rich (and perhaps more progressively democratic) picture, inquiring after a cultural significance they might have had, or they might still have, to our everyday lives.

Such histories and local cultures, in their variety and multiplicity, crowd and muddle the edges of the established scientific facts about a flower; they present other perspectives that tell stories of a flower’s use or imaginative significance, or its relationship to a wider seasonal ecosystem. The prefix ‘cuckoo’ before a flower’s name, for example, often refers to the fact that it blooms at the same time as the first cuckoo is to be heard (*Flora Britannica* 9). Such names are not final; they are not truth in the sense of closure but rather they are part of an ongoing conversation with a specific flower and with numerous specific places. Mabey suggests that some flowers have acquired over a hundred names across the country, ‘all of which say something about the plant’s history or associations’, all of which are also facts that cluster around the truth (8). These are poetic and aesthetic interactions with place that are not to be ignored in an environmental aesthetics.

These projects like the *Flora Britannica* and *Birds Britannica* and *England in Particular* grow out of an open-minded attitude to what constitutes a fact or the truth and they are, as we saw in the last chapter, a part of a broad project that has been rethinking place with an eye to the recuperation of cultures of local distinctiveness from the ground up. But these books are the result of unusually large-scale projects that span the whole archipelago (except, admittedly, *England in Particular*) and serve as hubs – much like the journal *Archipelago* – for diverse cultures to collect around and where people can turn to consider relationships and connections that they might never have made ordinarily. The perspectives we get on...
flowers and birds are diverse, creative, witty, fantastical. Likewise, Clifford’s and King's *England in Particular* collects a vast amount of knowledge about the locally distinct in England that takes pride in its vernacular form, the locally distinct range of little ‘institutional facts’ that pertain to the meaningful experience of a place without objectifying that place (Searle 2). Both of these books have emerged out of a mutually beneficial relationship between the discerning scientific mind in search of a record of the facts and the open mind that can recognise the value of aesthetics, of creative ways of relating to a place not bounded by the rigor of official taxonomies, official mapping practices or official administration.

Simon Malpas concludes his essay on the aesthetic, in which he argues for the autonomous truth of presentation, suggesting that the disjunction that aesthetics produces with the actual might in fact be cause for celebration. ‘Art’, he suggests, ‘is what touches upon differences between us that form the basis of community, and remind us of the necessity of being in common. In the surprise fragmentation of sense elicited by the work there is the possibility of touching on the sense of plural community’ (93).

For Mabey this ‘being in common’ and this ‘plural community’ are not limited to the human alone.

He confesses in *Nature Cure* that in the winter after he finished work on *Flora Britannica* he wished he ‘had been the conker-player, not the census-taker’ (51). This is significant because the type of writing that emerges as being so helpful for his recovery in the book is crucially playful. It is playful in the sense that Joseph Meeker means it in *The Comedy of Survival*. Mabey quotes Meeker’s ‘Playbill of Right for all creatures’:

- All players are equal, or can be made so
- Boundaries are well observed by crossing them
- Novelty is more fun than repetition
- Rules are negotiable from moment to moment
- Risk in pursuit of play is worth it
- The best play is beautiful and elegant
- The purpose of playing is to play, nothing else (201).

These rules for play, that are not really rules at all, could also be said to be useful in terms of thinking about aesthetics and the work of the creative imagination. Bar perhaps the awkward suggestion that ‘the best play is beautiful and elegant’ which ignores how relative both beauty and elegance can be, each of these can help in thinking through that tension between record and convention. It is an enormous shame that we do not get in the body of *Nature Cure* precisely those ‘first stumbling imaginative acts’ that Mabey writes sitting in the garden under the beech tree. They are, he tells us, ‘some unashamed erotica’ and a ‘complete and detailed political confession’ (63). It is intriguing that these notes are not about nature and it is curious that he would choose to omit them since they sound very playful. Perhaps they do not fit the genre though; perhaps it seemed too self-indulgent to include something so personal; perhaps, again, this is the return of a tension between what is expected of the genre and the record of felt experience. There is, of course, always the concern that one’s play could be too wild. Mabey is again caught between being ‘the conker-player and the census-taker’.

We do not play about something in the way that we might write about something. Play interacts; it participates. Thinking back to that non-representational geography, we might consider the way in which
geographers have criticised that subjective/objective opposition again, and the assumptions behind the idea of critical distance. Hayden Lorimer describing what he calls 'more-than-representational geography' suggests that the object of it was to privilege ‘shared experiences, everyday routines, fleeting encounters, embodied movements, precognitive triggers, practical skills, affective intensities, enduring urges, unexceptional interactions and sensuous dispositions.’ It is interested in how all these things have been glossed over in academic discourse and in attempting to find ways of apprehending them now, often through the use of literary registers and forms. These things appeal to the aesthetic for their material formal properties, for their emphasis on affect, immediacy, haptics, and for the fact that the best approach to them might be creative, improvised and playful. Aesthetics wants to be the 'conker-player', it wants to participate in what it is commenting on. In the following chapter, then, I will continue to consider the way this tension between record and convention is resolved aesthetically into a participatory aesthetics that will begin by looking at the ways in which authors have chosen to write outdoors. I will then offer a more sustained look at the kinds of aesthetics that have been explored or put to use by Tim Robinson, Kathleen Jamie, Richard Mabey and Alice Oswald. I hope I have shown in this chapter though that there is something quite paradoxical about the kind of literature that these authors are emulating across the tradition. It is in its resistance to the ‘pull of the literary’ and even the pull of its own genre that a common thread can be discerned (Morton 31). What I hope to go on to show is the way that this resistance can be resolved into a more progressive aesthetics.
CHAPTER 6

‘A TAWNŸ GRAMMAR’

In his essay ‘Walking’ (1861), Thoreau calls for a knowledge and a language that is connected to the land, something more than the classical alphabet, a ‘wild and dusky knowledge’ that the Spanish call ‘Grammatica parda’ or a ‘tawny grammar’ (78). ‘Where is the literature which gives expression to Nature?’ he asks. He would be a poet who could impress the winds and streams into his service, to speak for him; [...] who derived his words as often as he used them — transplanted them to his page with earth adhering to their roots; — whose words were so true, and fresh, and natural that they would appear to expand like the buds at the approach of spring, though they lay half smothered between two musty leaves in a library (72).

The desire to ‘impress the winds and streams into [...] service’ might seem, on the surface, part of a technologically violent attitude that relates to ‘Nature’ only insofar as it can serve our ends, but we soon see that in fact, this attitude stems from a deep humility on Thoreau’s part and the desire to reform an otherwise fusty and anaemic culture through a relation to the ‘wild’. He also collapses the opposition of ‘Nature/culture’ in a memorable image that muddles the two: ‘words [...] with earth adhering to their roots.’ What he is calling for with a ‘tawny grammar’, and with the essay more widely, is the reimagining of a language and knowledge that is basic and concrete, one that resists the overcomplicated abstractions of modern life. But it begs the question, what might writing ‘with earth adhering to [its] roots’ actually look like? What would words ‘so true, and fresh, and natural that they would appear to expand like the buds at the approach of spring’ sound like?

In the previous chapter I proposed that one of the ways to address the tension between a factual record and a literary convention is through a circumspect aesthetics of intervention. I concluded, however, that such a tension can also be resolved into an aesthetics of participation that is playful. In doing so there is a consideration of the importance of local vernacular cultures and the range of meaningful relationships to landscape and place that they reveal. In a fairly playful turn of phrase himself, Thoreau suggests that we should ‘derive’ our words as often as we use them. It is an absurd and impossible thought though. The rules of language, the shared meanings of words, are what allow us to understand one another and to forfeit this is a rejection of one’s human community. That said, the idea of a tawny grammar also points us to the possibility of a wider grammar of being, the world’s inflection with non-linguistic meaning. In this sense Thoreau is asking us to recognise a wider sense of community rather than a narrower one. He is asking us to compromise some of the conventions of our human grammar and consider how the world around us might already be inflected with meaning. This is how Gary Snyder reads Thoreau’s idea in his own essay ‘Tawny Grammar’.

A text is information stored through time. The stratigraphy of rocks, layers of pollen in swamps, the outward expanding circles in the trunk of a tree, can be seen as texts. The calligraphy of rivers winding back and forth over the land, leaving layer upon layer of traces of previous riverbeds is text (The Practice of the Wild 66).
This is not to say that ‘nature is a book’. Snyder suggests that such bookish metaphors are ‘not only inaccurate, they are pernicious’, but rather, quite the opposite, that language itself emulates the kinds of layering and forming of these natural processes (69). Snyder helps us to see that the ‘deriving’ of a grammar from our environment is a matter of recovering something that all planetary matter and being has in a sense emerged from, and that this we can read or trace. I say ‘read’, though, conscious of the creative interpretive possibilities that Derek Attridge discusses in *The Singularity of Literature*. Reading in this sense is a creative labour, different every time but also struggling every time to read more carefully, more sensitively. Crucial to a tawny grammar, an aesthetic derived from such a careful reading of the land, is a first-hand participation and interaction with the landscape or place that forms the subject. Not only this, but a creative interaction with it, one that recognises in its own form that sense of ‘being in common’ and that sense of ‘plural community’ that Simon Malpas describes as associated with the aesthetic. This chapter offers a critical study of some participatory aesthetics, looking at methods of writing outdoors and literary interactions with the non-human as a starting point. It will then conclude with a reading of a particular form of poetics in Tim Robinson’s work that builds up an interdisciplinary network of perspectives that is founded on and grounded in that initial participation.

In a paper on Scott and Amundsen’s race to the South Pole, an early example of the kind of narrative geography I introduced in the previous chapter, John Wylie narrates the two explorers’ different approaches to planning and executing their journeys. One surprising fact to emerge was that among Scott’s company was a religiously inspired landscape painter, Edward Wilson and a rather commercially driven photographer, Herbert Ponting, both artists still working within the tradition of the sublime and the picturesque (256). In some sense Wylie begins to identify the failure of Scott’s expedition with his inability to shake off a very European, aesthetic understanding of the landscape that is quite out of its depth in such an environment: ‘Perspective is not much use in Antarctica,’ writes Edward Wilson, for example (qtd in Wylie, ‘Becoming-Icy’ 256). They are, as a group, to recall Yuriko Saito’s term, ‘scenically challenged’ again (238). After we hear Scott and his companions discussing the merits of the poetry of Browning and Tennyson (‘Scott preferred Keats’ 256), we get a contrasting and insightful portrait of Amundsen and his company.

Amundsen too likes to stand and gaze upon the landscape. ‘If only I could paint,’ he writes, ‘if only I could.’ But he has no artists among his companions. Or perhaps they are scientists and artists of a different type. Scott’s is a science of coverage and observation and classification - almost a regional geography. His companions are meteorologists, geologists, biologists, glaciologists. Amundsen’s are sailmakers, cobblers, carpenters, ironmongers. They spend their entire winter overhauling their equipment. Amundsen’s diaries are devoted to the minutiae of ski bindings, tent pegs, sledge-runners, fur clothing. The champion skier Olaf Bjaaland systematically reduced the weight of the skis and sledges. The carpenter Jorgen Stubberud built and remorselessly planed the ski cases. Oscar Wisting sewed and dyed the tents. The dog-driver Sverre Hassel made dog whips. Theirs is a different science, at a stretch a nomad science, the forging of a landscape one might travel through rather than observe (256-7).
Wylie's suggestion of a science and an art 'of a different type' is a useful one here in trying to think through the struggle for an archipelagic aesthetics. It is one not of 'observation and classification', enframing and prospecting, and reinforcing that sense of distance, but an intimate, haptic science and art that improvises in imaginative ways. It works at the faces of contact with the snow and ice: the skis and sledges, the tents, the dog whips. It does not bring its own readymade aesthetic along, but 'derives' it, in the sense that Thoreau might mean above, from interactions with the snow and ice. It is not without knowledge but it is a knowledge of a different order; Amundsen and his men had visited and learned from people who lived in similar conditions in the Arctic. What they brought with them was a vernacular crafts culture and the readiness to improvise, to 'forge a landscape one might travel through rather than observe'. This is also, of course, in part why Wylie chooses to present what is essentially an academic paper in the form of a literary narrative, breaking down some of that critical distance and using narrative rather as a 'generator of questions' (Daniels and Lorimer 4-5). Wylie seems to be suggesting that in extremis what is needed for a sustainable relationship with such an environment as the Antarctic is forfeiture of a classifying and organising prospect of the land driven by rational supremacy, theological faith and commercial interest. Instead, the survivor in such an environment sees him- or herself as surrounded, immersed, always already interacting with their immediate surroundings, in fact always already in a precarious and volatile relationship with them. In aesthetic terms we might read this as a distinction between making artistic representations of or about a place and creating or crafting with a place. This is Richard Mabey’s emphasis on the improvisatory nature of play again, and may help to point us in the direction of integrating a 'tawny grammar'.

Seldom are they in such extreme landscapes as Scott and Amundsen were, but nonetheless, the authors I have been discussing across this archipelago today are reading their own landscapes much like Amundsen and his companions. They are adapting themselves and their writing to forms that they read there. An emphasis on working outdoors shows this interesting attempt to write – or certainly at least to begin writing – with the place that is being taken as subject. But this is a problematic process and we need to be careful not to essentialize it. Robert Macfarlane has said in interview that ‘the first laying down of evidence is scribbles in a notebook as I’m walking, and the notebook becomes muddied and wet. That’s where a lot of the thinking goes down, and the sketching, and then comes the endless working and reworking - inside I should say’ ('Bookclub'). Kathleen Jamie writes about Tim Dee in the boat on the way to Caenn Iar: ‘He could tell a bird by a mark, a piped note, an attitude on the air. When I marvelled at this, he said identifying a bird was similar to making a poem or a finished piece of work from the kind of notes I stopped to make in my book, crouched down in the wind’ (54-5). What comes from those notebooks is just fragments, snatches that are laboured over later, but Dee seems to be suggesting that there might be something particularly lively being preserved in the field journal, a cadence or an image perhaps. I am unable to consult such notebooks as all of the authors I am writing about here are of course still living and working with them. However I am able to reflect on the ways in which they have
represented themselves or each other as writing outdoors, some of the methods they have discussed and some of the aesthetics that have emerged from this work.

In his introduction to Tim Robinson’s *Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage*, Macfarlane paints a very unusual portrait of Robinson in the field:

In bad weather – of which there is plenty on Aran - he would hold his notebook and pencil inside a clear plastic bag, tied shut at his wrists, and proceed in this manner. He must have looked, to those who encountered him, like a deranged dowser or pilgrim, wandering through the mists and the storm spray, hands locked together in mania or prayer (‘Introduction’ *Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage* x).

It is testament to the importance of the note taken in the field that such a contorted and awkward method should have become established as the norm for Robinson in bad weather. Such a dependency on the immediate we are familiar with in painters. Robert Macfarlane and Andrew McNeillie have both written about watching Norman Ackroyd work, fascinated by a medium so subject to ‘immediate hazard and serendipity’ (McNeillie, ‘Where Art Meets Sea’ 32). Somehow we feel differently about language than we do about paint though. Why, one of those who encountered Robinson might well ask, must such detailed notes be taken right there and then?

In an essay for the Art Events anthology *Towards Re-enchantment: Place and its Meanings* Iain Sinclair describes the writing of place in terms that resonate with such a portrait.

The trick was to delete internal projections and fantasies, mental trailers that act as a nuisance filter between world and self, and to empty that space until landscape flowed through, freely and without editorial interference. We must become the becoming, alert not alarmed, walking just far enough for the process to work (18).

He goes on: ‘Making yourself ready to accept the dictation of place is the first requirement’ (19). Writing outdoors, then, is also at the heart of this conflict between what Raymond Williams calls ‘record’ and ‘convention’. The more the writer advocates ‘deletion’ of the self and its ‘internal projections and fantasies’, the better the author is able to ‘record’ the free flow of place itself, its ‘dictation’. But how far can the writing of place ever really be ‘dictation’, a pure record as Sinclair seems to be suggesting here?

In the previous chapter I showed that some of the more interesting threads that run through the history of this genre have emerged out of precisely the tension between record and convention, a tension that has been either explored or resolved by way of innovative and progressive aesthetic forms, not, as some have argued, through the repression of aesthetics. Richard Mabey has shown us that it is precisely the playful, creative forms of culture that bring us into touch with our environment, and that there is no need to minimize the role of the author, as Sinclair does above, casting himself as something of a channel through which the place speaks. As much as there may well be a desire to empty the self of those ‘internal projections and fantasies’ that can hamper our ability to really see what is there, working in the field is still a selective and creative process that is often preoccupied precisely with linguistic difficulties and ‘editorial interference’, without either of which we would not have books at all. As I have suggested, the distortions that Allen Carlson attributes to the aesthetic might not be something to be avoided at all costs. In fact, in small and very human ways they help us to become meaningfully attached to the places we live in. Indeed,
we might think of the multiplicity of poetic perspectives on a given place or flower simultaneously as a celebration of its value to and a celebration of that ‘being in common’ (Malpas 93). Each gives another fragment that tells us something about the whole.

In an interview Tim Robinson reflects on the refrain of failure in the Stones of Aran books, the sense that despite their exhaustive detail and range of disciplinary perspectives, the writing is always somehow inadequate to that about which it is writing.

I think if the gambit is used very carefully and sparingly, to say that something is inexpressible can be very expressive about it. But the ground has to be prepared so that the reader is conned into seeing what is being expressed even through the claim that it is inexpressible. One aspect of the natural world that is strictly inexpressible is the totality and the richness of life forms (Personal Interview 5).

The expressive comes in all shapes and sizes and the articulation of its own perceived limitation here becomes a means of confronting and working through that very limitation. Such figures and tropes are performative. Circumspect restraint and self-effacement, however, frequently give way to more literary strategies in Robinson, as in this passage from Stones of Aran: Labyrinth where the naturalist’s notebook suddenly flares into a kind of poetics that much more expressively explores that ‘richness of life forms’.

On hot days these crags sizzle like frying-pans with insect life; grasshoppers spark to and fro, caterpillars ready to pupate have tantrums in their too-tight skins […] rose chafer beetles like half-inch nuggets of green gold orbiting with the inertial fatalism of asteroids crash softly into purple beds of hemp agrimony. Everything is burning with particularities: I fly like this, I jump like this, I eat this, my wings have six red spots on black, nothing else is like me! And of each of these tiny egos, there are millions of replicas. They fly up from disturbed bushes like the contents of a jewellery-shop fleeing a blaze; they swarm and pluck at me in their paroxysms of individuation […] And they will never understand, and if they could understand would never accept, that my book can only achieve its end by relinquishing its all-inclusive aspirations (585-6).

The metaphor, of course, is one of dictation again as the insects call out ‘write me’. The naturalist’s list seems to ignite into playful, personified enunciations that perform Robinson’s own desire to write everything as much as they themselves perform the richness of the individuated life forms. The slip into aesthetics becomes densely layered with that ‘more-than-representational’ information (Lorimer ‘Cultural Geography’ 83).

Lawrence Buell, in The Environmental Imagination, suggests that Thoreau comes closer to apprehending the nonhuman world when he writes ‘in painstaking but rather clinical fashion about the sensitivity of tender seedling oaks to frost’ than in a ‘metaphorical set piece about a stand of pines marching across a plain as on a field of battle’ (217-8). Perhaps so, but one of the most rich and interesting aspects of this form of environmental non-fiction is its ability to shift from one register to another, its tendency to deploy whatever rhetorical strategies are most useful at a given moment as above where Robinson moves from a closely observed list of insects to the figurative enunciations and images seamlessly. This is a deliberate attempt on his part to ‘evolve a style flexible enough’ to move ‘between purely literary passages […] and factual writing’, in short to resolve that tension in a form that satisfies both (Robinson Personal Interview 5). What is key is that this improvised movement is responding to his participation in the given environment even if much of the drafting and writing up is done later on. This is not in the hope of an authentic record so much as it simply helps to ground the author’s creativity. Such grounding, whilst a question of ethics for Robinson, bound up
with his notion of the good step, also helps in the aesthetic struggle of trying to think himself out of habitual ways of seeing and into new, deliberate, alert ways.

At a reading in Bristol in 2010 Alice Oswald talked about a current project under way that also, strangely, bears a relationship to this metaphorical idea of ‘dictation’, but in this instance we can see the role of creativity more plainly. She described going out with recording equipment, as she did when interviewing people for *Dart*, but this time not to record human voices. She was recording natural sounds, then bringing them home and listening to them and somehow trying to transcribe, to hear and mishear, to use the rhythms and forms as a starting point for poems (Oswald, Literary Environments). In this method she is endeavoursing to accommodate living sounds, or the forms of living sounds, into linguistic structures and literary forms. It is an inherently playful and creative project and she is under no illusions that what she is doing is actually transcription. It is perhaps the most literal understanding of Thoreau’s tawny grammar imaginable and, though she says she will probably never publish these poems, they represent an interesting method of working, again a *writing with* rather than a *writing about*.

In an anthology of ’Poems for the Planet’ that she edited, *The Thunder Matters*, Oswald chose a poem by John Clare that, unpublished in his lifetime, still does not always make it into selected editions of his work. ’[Transcription of a Nightingale’s Song?]’ appears on the surface to fulfil Sinclair’s call to ‘accept the dictation of place’ in a manner surely even more literal than he must have meant. I shall reproduce just one stanza here:

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    Chee chew chee chew chee
   - cheer cheer cheer
    chew chew chew chee
   - up cheer up cheer up
        tweet tweet tweet jug jug jug (36).
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The poem continues for another seventeen lines ending on ‘pelew pelew - / bring a jug bring a / jug bring a jug’. John Taylor, Clare’s publisher and editor, had to, in fact, strike a number of these bird noises from other poems of Clare’s as they were considered unfit for publication, and even today it has the ring of a literary oddity to it. The poem seems nonsense at a semantic level, even when we hear what sounds like sense (‘bring a jug bring a’); it is an onomatopoeic ‘transcription’ of the nightingale Clare is apparently listening to, a perfect ‘tawny grammar’. Clare seems to accommodate the strangeness of birdsong into his poem, emptying words of their meaning and rendering them opaque noises. Grammar, syntax, spelling and meaning are all forfeited for this strange noise of syllables. Or at least so it seems.

Nick Groom has recently traced some interesting connections in the conventions of transcribing a nightingale’s song which rather complicate its being read as a ‘transcription’ (Groom, *Unpublished Lecture*). He looks to the Latin ‘jugum’ and ‘jugulum’ for the origin of what seems to be just an onomatopoeic sound ‘jug’. ‘Jugum’ translates as ‘yoke’, the fastening of two animals together, or two married humans as in ‘conjugal’; and ‘jugulum’ translates as ‘jugular’. In the myth of Philomela, Tereus rapes his wife’s sister and cuts out her tongue, before she is turned into a nightingale. ‘Jug jug jug’ then, Groom suggests, has a trace of matrimonial vows and throats cut. Such a reading is compounded when
we get to the line ‘tee rew tee rew tee rew’ which might be more familiar to us today as Philomel’s macabre and tongueless ‘Tereu’ called out in The Waste Land (Eliot 71). What seems at first glance to be a pure record or an onomatopoeic transcription, in fact, then, carries some buried trace of semantic meaning whether Clare intended this or whether he simply repeated the convention. This is not to say that it isn’t like the sound of the nightingale, but that the sound is, as Groom suggests, ‘culturally mediated’ (Groom, Unpublished Lecture). The fact that record and convention meet in such an intimate way in this highly unusual poem make it all the more interesting.

Oswald has described her own method as a ‘primitive kind of echolocation, like they use on ships’ (qtd in Tyler 225). Echolocation operates by sending out a signal and receiving it back altered by what it bounces off. It is an interesting and apt description of writing outdoors in which she is recognising that whatever she is doing with her poems is in her own voice, her own human language, but that other agents are operating to influence that voice, whether these are the people she met and interviewed on the river Dart or the material sounds she has been recording. By playing around those very ambiguous points of intersection between sound, form, listening, writing and creating, what we see for moments in Oswald’s poetics is a use of language that tries to preserve this ambiguity. In the poem ‘Owl Village’ from The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile there is an early example of the semantic and sonic working in a playful partnership together as she describes those two distinctive sounds that a tawny owl makes, one the male marking his territory, the other the male and female courting

and then a fleet of owls, throwing the hoot between them,
owls with two faces singing Ave and Ouch Ave and Ouch (28)

Here she uses two words, one particularly musical, the other an interjection, words that sit on the fence between noise and meaning anyway, to capture this eerie habit of the owls. It is not particularly helpful to talk about the distinct semantic and sonic qualities of these words. Their strength exists in the middle ground between the two, a cloistered hoot and an urgent exclamation. Kathleen Jamie has employed a similar technique in her very short poem ‘Swallows and Swifts’ in which the birds arriving home from migration twitter ‘tickets and visas, visas and tickets’ (Mr. and Mrs. Scotland are Dead 145) where the ‘t’ and ‘s’ sounds replicate what is commonly transcribed by birdwatchers as the ‘tswit tswit tswit’ call of the swallows (Heinzel The Birds of Britain and Europe 206). This imaginative interconnection goes beyond the dualist opposition of semantics and sound. It enacts rather than describes. It is an act of listening that plays with traditional sense-making. It engages with rather than writes about. The words have earth adhering to them, but this is achieved not by evacuating the self to the dictation of an other but by an active collaboration between the two. This is a kind of folk aesthetics that emerges from time spent listening in the presence of such birds.

In Nature Cure again Mabey reminds us of John Clare’s claim: ‘I found my poems in the fields’ (Nature Cure 23). There is a danger that in such a statement he is endorsing the rustic Clare, about whom it was said in his heyday that ‘he owes no debt to any dead or living author’ (Storey, John Clare: The Critical
Heritage 83), and that ‘he reads in a book which requires no commentary – the book of nature’ (70). In fact, since at least his 1865 biography, Clare the devourer of books has been well known, placating some of the sensationalist hyperbole that was around at the time of the publication of his first collection. Interestingly though, Mabey does not read this ‘finding’ as a collecting in but rather as a playful working exploration and an interactive labour. Clare the reader and Clare the walker are not distinct because culture and nature are not distinct for Mabey: ‘Culture isn’t the opposite or contrary of nature. It’s the interface between us and the non-human world, our species’ semi-permeable membrane’ (Nature Cure 23). This is what distinguishes someone like Mabey, and indeed someone like Clare, from ‘nature writing’: a ‘semi-permeability’ and the play at that ‘interface’.

For his argument about the interactions between nature and culture, Mabey turns to Gary Snyder who, in a 1992 conference address asked the following: ‘Is art an imposition of order on chaotic nature, or is art (also read “language”) a matter of discovering the grain of things, of uncovering the measured chaos that structures the natural world?’ (The Gary Snyder Reader 260) For an art that imposes order on ‘chaotic nature’ we might read various pictorial landscape traditions, even, he suggests a little earlier, the ‘rhetoric of beauty, harmony, and sublimity’ associated with much nineteenth century ‘nature writing’ (257). This Snyder compares with some natural history writing, suggesting that both are at times

“naively realistic” in that they unquestioningly accept the front-mounted bifocal human eye, the poor human sense of smell, and other characteristics of our species, plus the assumption that the mind can, without much self-examination, directly and objectively “know” whatever it looks at (257).

Snyder here is diverging from the environmental aesthetics of Allen Carlson. ‘Discovering the grain of things’, for Snyder, need not imply solely that one ‘knows’ things or can factually account for things. It is also connected to the recuperation of a sense of the wild in language itself. Later, in a discussion of early Stone Age cave paintings, Mabey draws on Claude Lévi-Strauss who suggests that totem animals were ‘not so much good to eat as ‘good to think” (88). The phrase elides that key word ‘about’ and draws thinking into much closer proximity with its object, in this case animals. In so doing, thoughts themselves stand to be changed, nourished if you will, by their interaction with the idea of the animal. Hence we have ‘Ave and Ouch’, a very close and playful thinking-with the owl that allows the agency of the owl into the language; that sends our language out and receives it back changed in a form of echolocation. It is by participating in the landscape that we discover agencies not our own. Deploying aesthetics playfully is interactive and sociable; it recognises that ‘being in common’ and that ‘sense of plural community’ that Malpas describes. As such it comes to realise how particular and strange our own human perspective is, the ‘front-mounted bifocal human eye’ and the ‘poor sense of smell’ that Snyder describes above.

That our own human and variously cultural perspectives are limited and strange is something that comes out of this participatory aesthetics. It is, for example, what grounds Tim Robinson’s first

17 What also emerges from this first biography is that he was surrounded by folksong as well, sung by his Granny Baines (Frederick Martin 8-9).
‘pilgrimage’ around the perimeter of Aran, the measure of one man walking out a set portion of the earth. This forms the foundation for the gradual accretion of more and more complex perspectives that bear on this initial ground until Robinson’s writing becomes the ambitious and unnerving task of relating the perspectives: ‘Can the act of writing hold such disparate materials in coexistence?’ he worries (Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage). The way in which Robinson attempts to do this is an interesting form of participatory aesthetics itself. The boundaries that it plays across are not limited to the boundaries between the human and non-human alone, though this is there too as we saw above in the passage from Stones of Aran: Labyrinth. For Robinson, to participate in a place is to participate in not only the brute facts of a ‘simple ontology’ but it is to participate in the maze of institutional facts of what Searle calls a ‘complex ontology’ that is ‘observer-relative’ and therefore community-relative, history-relative, and so on (4-5). I began this thesis with the story of Robinson setting out for the Aran Islands from London, and I would therefore like to conclude it with a look at the way he manages to weave together some of these disparate materials that his engagement with place generates.

In an interview he paraphrases an episode in Connemara: Last Pool of Darkness where he describes a place in which Wittgenstein once stayed where there is a legend about the local saint’s struggle with the devil that explains a geological feature. It is thought that:

the chain that the saint was being pulled away to Hell on produced this gash through the mountains. But on the other hand one can look at that same gash and say this is a fault, a fault-weakened zone that’s been excavated by a glacier, giving a geological explanation. And then you can go on to remember Wittgenstein’s mental struggles over his philosophical ideas, and imagine that, in some future or mythological recasting of the history of Connemara, people might get it all muddled up and think it was Wittgenstein’s struggle with the devil of inaccurate speech-forms that caused this disruption of the landscape. But then I’m really just using that as a sort of hidden metaphor for the way that all sorts of different ways of looking at the ground are necessary, and they all necessarily rhyme because they’re all directed at the same thing in the end. There’s a sort of rationality about existence – what E.O. Wilson calls consilience – that forces correspondences between them (Personal Interview).

There is an element of this aesthetics that is a process of ‘discovering the grain of things’, as Snyder suggests, but not just material things, not just things ‘out there’ in nature. These things are language dependent, but they are no less things for this and they have no less of a grain running through them. Snyder’s reading of a tawny grammar is one that helps to remind us that the structures of our language and culture are the same structures that underpin geology, animal tracks and ocean currents because our language is as much a thing of the world as these other things. Michael Quigley has suggested that ‘no book containing such a vast amount of detail on such a small portion of landscape could possibly be sustained were it not for its intrinsic literary quality’ (117). It is hard to tell though in this search for consilience where the creativity of the author stops and the ‘discovery’ of that grain begins.

As with the other participatory aesthetics I have discussed this is based on very careful attention. Rather than ‘discovery’ or ‘creativity’ then, in this case it might be helpful to look back to the term I borrowed from Merleau-Ponty in Chapter 2: elucidation, to brighten, to make clearer what is already
there. Merleau-Ponty’s shift from ‘explanation’ to ‘elucidation’ happens in his later work and is most apparent in the final essay from his work *The Visible and the Invisible*, *The Intertwining - The Chiasm*. Here the premise is fairly simple, but the implications complex and far reaching. The human subject looking at the landscape, he suggests, can only see the visible things around itself because it too is one of those visible things. The human is simultaneously subject and object. It is, in a sense, bringing those things into being within its consciousness just as it too has been brought into being embryonically within the world of things.

He begins with a metaphor of ‘envelopment’ to describe the gaze (*The Intertwining* 393), but dispenses with this since it does not capture what is a much more reciprocal process (399). Whilst my gaze ‘envelops things’, and in so doing ‘unveils them’, it can only do so because it has simultaneously been enveloped and unveiled by its own material presence (393). The metaphor of envelopment then is exchanged for the more mutual one of the ‘intertwining’ of the essay’s title. This is the folding together and binding of vision with visibility, the sense of touch with real physical presence, sentience with the sensible. Both are simultaneously bringing each other into being at their point of contact. Here the language gains an increasingly material quality as he describes the intertwining as a ‘connective tissue of exterior and interior horizons’ and finally as a ‘flesh’: ‘it is as flesh offered to flesh that the visible has its aseity, and that it is mine’ (413). In the flesh then we have the coming together of exterior and interior horizons. It is an excellent term to describe the consilience that Robinson ‘discovers’ between perspectives, discourses, disciplines, entwining them together as he does so.

This particular aesthetic in Robinson lights up the landscape from a range of points of view, each of them otherwise invisible to someone who does not have a connection to the place. It draws them out in language as a flesh of simultaneously exterior and interior horizons. It also manages to hold together disparate, contradictory and even antagonistic perspectives; suddenly they are talking to each other on the page, revealing the ways in which they ‘rhyme’. It reminds us that there will be other perspectives in future to which our latest geological science may seem as the folklore of yesterday seems to us now. Think, for example, as I mentioned in the introduction to this part, of the new possibilities that fractal geometry is opening up for us in accounting for the spaces that Euclidean geometry could not.

In much the same way as we saw earlier with the imbrication of the human and the non-human, it is in the way the aesthetic can play across such boundaries and borders in a process of intertwining that we get interanimation, intersubjectivity and here interdisciplinarity. Patrick Curry has suggested that this work is ‘not so much multi- or inter-disciplinary as gloriously promiscuous’ (‘Elegies Unawares’ 13). Once again this is about connection and communication across polycentric networks. It is about resonance and collaboration, not setting down how our landscapes and places are or ought to be but opening them up to new possibilities, drawing in all those horizons, exterior and interior and intersubjective, and participating in the continuous process of re-imagining place. But it is also about doing so in a grounded way, shaping

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18 It is important to note here that it is not just vision that is addressed but, at various points, vision, hearing, touch and even thought itself, along the same lines; he even suggests that ‘this delimitation of the senses is crude’ (395).
the aesthetic on an island or a coastline, a river or a moor, taking the prompt from the ways in which our existence is bounded by the earth at our feet and not overstepping that. This is the principle of the ‘good step’ again, taking its measure with care. In the Antarctic, Amundsen and his company improvised in such a way that was highly responsive to their environment. This was one of the things that kept them alive. They did not come to the place with a simplified notion of the landscape but were ready to adapt to the conditions they found.

About half way along the south coast of Aran there is a limestone promontory that juts out from the top of the 300 foot cliffs called An Troigh Mhairbh, ‘the deadly step’, or ‘the step that isn’t there’ (Robinson, Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage 131). It is the shape and size of a plank that pirates might walk their bound victims out along and legend has it that an English army officer was goaded by his pretty new wife to walk out onto this rock. ‘Go on!’ she said. ‘Even the village lads go as far as that!’ until he took the ‘step that isn’t there’ and fell to his death (131). Robinson embeds this rock feature into his philosophy of our relationship with the land. The step that isn’t there becomes the dark opposite to the good step. For him, this is the step that falls out of rhythm with the world around it. It is an ecological dead step that overuses planetary resources to an unsustainable level. It is a mathematical dead step that reduces and simplifies the world in all its vibrant fractal complexity into Euclidean geometry. And it is a literary dead step that puts the convention of the genre before the particularity of the land. What all of these deadly steps have in common is their lack of attention, their simplifying of the difficult richness of the world out of laziness, their retreat from the ever renewing facts of existence: ‘to refuse “the leap” of faith is the honourable alternative and, if fully accepted, the more demanding one; these demands are what I hope to clarify for myself in the writing of it’ (132). Everything that is written must be answerable to this original grounding that refuses to overstep its provision and yet at the same time feels its duty to search out the grain of things, something that involves an imaginative participation.

In a moment at the end of a later essay Robinson imagines himself standing on the deadly step, this rock promontory, and looking down over the sea. Where we used to believe space to be somehow infinitely divisible, he tells us that Max Planck suggests otherwise. There is a smallest possible length that has been suggested, if not proved, now known as the Planck length. He imagines that the dead step is this very Planck length. Below this, in the sea that he looks down on:

lies primordial chaos, momentary eruptions of enormous energies, fissures in spacetime itself, tunnels linking our universe to countless others, six or seven new dimensions rolled up so tight that all the power our civilisation could ever generate would be unable to penetrate them [...] All that exists emerges from this sea, for good or ill. And that includes us, which is why, without claiming to make it comprehensible, I want to bring the existence of this appalling and entrancing sea that underlies space - not an Urgrund, a sound foundation, but an endlessly creative uncertainty - into our consciousness (‘In Praise of Space’ 27).

That the firmness of matter is set upon an ‘endlessly creative uncertainty’ is disorienting to say the least, but it is also a ‘brute fact’, if you like, of our existence. Realising this, however, should not liberate us to imagine the world in whatever careless way we please. On the contrary, it demands an even greater care to
be taken in the way we bring together those interior and exterior horizons. The idea of the flesh demands an ecology of thought and an ecology of culture that is responsive to all horizons equally. Perhaps this is as inconceivable as Robinson’s ‘good step’ but it is in aesthetics that we can experiment with this. Not just any aesthetics though; an archipelagic aesthetics remains open to our plural and communicative being, intersubjective, interanimate and interdisciplinary, ‘gloriously promiscuous’ as Patrick Curry would have it, following the lead of our primordial matter itself.

I have shown in this chapter that the tension that has run through the genre of environmental non-fiction can be, and has been, and is being, resolved in a range of methods and aesthetics today. Defending the autonomy of the aesthetic for environmental writing seems crucial in face of certain reactionary moves against it. At the same time though, I hope that I have shown the importance of grounding such aesthetics in not only an exterior horizon but other interior horizons as well. Steering Robinson’s aesthetic, and other projects such as the *Flora Britannica*, is the desire to elucidate that intertwining of culture and nature that is, in a sense, the grammar that underpins place.
CONCLUSION

In *The Environmental Imagination* Lawrence Buell describes three key developments that had to take place for environmental non-fiction to seem an important literary enterprise in the United States in the middle of the nineteenth century, and for a work like *Walden* to be written:

1. a specialization in the branches of natural science to the point that exposition for laypersons seemed necessary;
2. a degree of urbanization sufficient to produce substantial numbers of readers regretful about being cut off from nature; and
3. a sufficient array of literary media (lecture forums, magazines, book production and distribution networks) to provide belles-lettres writers a decent hearing if not a fortune (398).

There is much that rings true in this for the popularity of the closely related genre in Britain and Ireland today. By understanding the way these first three developments are acting on authors today in subtly different ways, I hope to have explored so far the way in which what is taking place today can be distinguished from the writing of the past. In summary then, before I conclude this thesis, I will briefly review these three developments above as they might manifest themselves differently today.

Firstly then, that ‘specialization in the branches of natural science’ ought to be considered in relation to a specialisation in the branches of geographical distinctiveness and its consequent politicisation today. For example, the specialist knowledge of the nineteenth century naturalist has been developed today by the archiving of a great quantity of locally derived knowledge that serves to build on and flesh out that conventional natural science. The collection and publication of such vernacular knowledge offers a host of alternative perspectives that might appeal to a more interdisciplinary inquiry. This can be seen in such monumental works as *Flora Britannica, Birds Britannica, England in Particular* and in the United States in *Home Ground: Language for an American Landscape*. It can also be seen in the field of cartography as such alternative ways of mapping places as those discussed in Chapter 4 help to flesh out and develop conventional practices such as those of the Ordnance Survey. Such a spatialisation of the natural sciences has come to the fore at a time of grave uncertainty regarding the scales at which identity finds its purchase, amplified, as I have suggested, by the partial devolution of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Exposition of such local knowledge seems necessary today in quite the same way that it was necessary for knowledge of the natural sciences in the period Buell is referring to: simply because such knowledge pertains to a better understanding of the world which we inhabit on a day-to-day basis.

Secondly, whilst a much evolved road and rail transport infrastructure has meant that urban populations can now more easily leave the city, the realisation of the degradation of the environment has meant that there is again a readership ‘regretful about being cut off from nature’, only in a slightly different way. Population movements to rural areas from urban areas have been met by large scale agriculture often driven mysteriously by European subsidies in such a way as to complicate the assumption that to move to the country is to in any way get ‘back to nature’ (Williams, ‘Between Country and City’ 215). Aggravating this is a virtualisation of culture into online and televiusal mediums and a disturbing drop in the numbers of children growing up playing outdoors. Statistics published in *The
Guardian in 2010 suggest that 21% of today’s children regularly play outside, compared with 71% of their parents (Henley 11); in America the problem has recently received the title ‘nature deficit disorder’ (Louv 10). There is also the suspicion that whatever it once was that we were calling ‘nature’ was in fact, at best, an ideological construction (Morton 5). At worst, ‘nature’ may be in fact a non-human ecosystem that has now become so altered by human intervention that we find ourselves forced to qualify the term, explaining that we no longer mean it in the sense of an environment untrammelled and pristine (McKibben 43-50).

Thirdly and finally, there is today a ‘sufficient array of literary media’ not only to sustain but to continue to generate a diverse readership for the genre. A number of postgraduate university courses are springing up across the country that offer training in the writing skills of an environmental literature. Bath Spa hosts a Masters degree in ‘Travel and Nature Writing’, the University of Essex hosts a Masters in ‘Wild Writing’, the University of Exeter in ‘Writing, Nature and Place’, and the University of Glasgow offer an MLitt in ‘Environment, Culture and Communication’ to name a few of the most recent. The journal Archipelago continues with a healthy readership; Two Ravens Press, based on the Isle of Lewis, has begun a new literary magazine called Earthlines dedicated to ‘Nature, Place and the Environment’; and New Networks for Nature is an alliance of some very well known authors and artists who have been holding public events to ‘explore new perspectives in our cultural and creative responses to birds, nature and wildlife’, and ‘to challenge certain narrowly defined but prevailing views on the environment’ (‘New Networks for Nature’). None of which is to mention the plethora of book length publications and anthologies that have been coming out over the last five years.

The conditions that were there in the mid nineteenth century are here again, only in slightly different ways. In conclusion then I will revisit the chapters of this thesis drawing out some of the arguments and connecting them up into what I hope will serve as a comprehensive overview of a contemporary literary movement and its cultural and historical significance.

In Part 1 I explored the popularity of the excursion narrative in environmental non-fiction from two different angles. On the one hand, narratives of disillusionment have helped to reveal the ideological production of the British and Irish landscape in a way that has helped to purge the literature of a sentimentality all too familiar to earlier twentieth century rural writing. I argued that such narratives have played an important role in correcting our understanding of landscape and presenting a literary form of resistance that we can connect up with the older traditions of radical pedestrianism and psychogeography. However, I also stressed that there is a risk that such narratives can be ‘predicated on defeat’ (O’Brien 12). On the other hand, narratives of enchantment that avoid sentimentalising the landscape can offer as potent a political narrative. These intimate landscape narratives respond differently to a similar disillusionment with a belief that literature can be ‘a vital force for brokering dignified and durable relationships between people and places’ (Macfarlane, ‘Where the Wild Things Were’).

With this in mind I concluded that both narrative strands were essential for an archipelagic literature, but that the former offers us a progressive way of writing landscape that may serve the
purposes of defending it against the footloose developments of industry. This looks back to the important blend of an avant-garde artistic tradition and an environmental politics that we saw developed by Tim Robinson and Common Ground toward the end of the twentieth century. There is a potent cultural form that emerges from these narratives that begins with walking out in search of corrective experience, acknowledging the actual state of the land, however much it may present a hybrid of ‘the abject and the sublime’ (Macfarlane, ‘Tory Island’ 40). It then responds by engaging in meaningful explorations of the interface between self and landscape, community and landscape and even self and community. Such a form begins to diverge from the prior tradition of ‘nature writing’ since it is concerned with community and the ethics of intersubjectivity. Landscape figured as such a sociable space complicates the idea of ‘nature’ as something other than the human. As Kathleen Jamie makes clear, it serves us well to remember to ask who it is that is telling us that the landscape is ‘natural’ or ‘wild’ in ‘this ancient, contested country’ (‘A Lone Enraptured Male 25). Remembering that landscape is a social space then is why I have framed the thesis as ‘An Archipelagic Environment’, a term that should be read in quite a different way to a ‘natural environment’ (‘Poems and Paradigms’). As I have said, I read ‘archipelagic’ in a way related to Edna Longley’s reading of John Kerrigan, as affording that cultural ‘criss-crossing’ of authors travelling back and forth, but also books themselves travelling back and forth establishing lines of influence.

In Part 2 I looked at the idea of ‘Findings’ from two different angles and began to think beyond the originally pictorial framework of ‘landscape’ to the more lived and socially involved term ‘place’. I considered the ways in which an unusual range of authors have demonstrated a fascination with found objects as an extra-literary and performative nod to the kinds of ‘humdrum, everyday rites, practised by millions’ (88). This preoccupation with a very basic form of ontology also suggests a wider preoccupation with what Jane Bennett calls ‘vibrant materiality’, a theory that endeavours to recognise agencies beyond the human scale. Macfarlane in particular sees a consideration of such non-human orientation as a fertile source for re-thinking the space of the archipelago in accordance with an ecological ethics. In fact the very use of the term ‘archipelago’ for the geopolitical space otherwise known as Great Britain and Ireland or the United Kingdom represents a similar recuperation of a post-national, post-human materiality from beneath its human frame.

Such a recuperation – that is simultaneously a reorientation – chimes with Robinson’s methods of ‘rescue archaeology’ in Connemara and the Aran Islands (Setting Foot 13). Both Robinson and Alice Oswald have engaged in extraordinary projects of remapping that refuse and correct the prior representations of the places they have lived in. Both of these authors have located their centre of gravity and their centre of cultural authority within the local, but not in a reactionary way. Critical of essentialist or nostalgic representations of place as bounded and timeless, these two have stressed a progressive and creative attitude that explores place as crucially plural and heterogeneous. The kinds of philosophical outlook that inform this attitude to re-mapping strike a chord with the earlier cultural form that I described emerging out of the excursion narratives of Part 1. Where, in Part 1, narratives of intimacy...
served to broker new relationships between landscape and self and landscape and community, these re-mappings in Part 2 offer a more developed way of representing such relationships. The cultural form that emerges here is one that resists top-down cultural representation and administration. It devolves a certain cultural authority to the local and, as an artistic idea, it finds a social and political counterpart in the Transition Towns network and other such grass-roots environmental organisations, not least among them, Common Ground itself.

However, none of this is to suggest that the local in this dynamic becomes cut off, isolated. The metaphor ought rightly to be that of an archipelago which, as Fiona Stafford reminds us ‘suggests clustering and analogy’ (‘Review’ 24). This may be figured as Barry Cunliffe’s island coasts ‘bright with Neolithic argonauts’ or as Andrew McNeillie’s ‘good ship archipelago’ with its collaborations between English and Scottish, Scottish and Irish, or Irish and Welsh authors: in both old and new forms the archipelago is seen to be a cosmopolitan space (Cunliffe 16). Such movements as the Transition Towns initiative are ‘networks’ and they behave in such a fashion with conferences national and international and a thriving web presence that has helped the movement to spread to other countries. Likewise, small arts organisations and publishers such as Folding Landscapes, Clutag Press and Common Ground are all connected culturally, and are beginning to develop those connections further afield as well. That place should be grounded does not mean that it becomes cut off, bounded. For Dirlik, place remains open to ‘the extralocal, all the way to the global’ (‘The Place-based Imagination’ 155).

In Part 3 of the thesis I looked in greater detail at writing itself, at this movement’s status as a genre, and at the kind of aesthetics it has developed to embody the politics of Parts 1 and 2. I explored a recurrent tension in the genre of environmental non-fiction between facts and aesthetics, arguing that it is precisely through its aesthetics that the genre is most politically potent. Unlike ‘nature writing’ (as understood by Jim Perrin, for example), this archipelagic literature is uncomfortable with only a rational scientific understanding of the world. This is in part because certain cultural institutional practices that have asserted a scientific, rational version of the world have, it has turned out, done so to the detriment of certain local cultures. These cultures have often lacked the authority or power to defend themselves against such an imposition. The Gaelic placelore of the Aran Islands under English colonial cartography is a case in point. As early as Richard Mabey’s The Common Ground, the literary tradition that I have been tracing has called for the recognition of vernacular, poetic and culturally meaningful relationships to place to be recognised and validated on an equal pegging with the more ‘brute facts’ that the scientifically-minded naturalist is in search of. This is not to privilege aesthetics over facts but to suggest that poetic ways of encountering the world are valuable in just the same way that Part 2 argued for the value of marginalised local cultures.

Towards the end of Part 3 I explored certain methods of writing outdoors and how there has been an attempt to explore a ‘more-than-representational’ writing that absorbs non-human agencies into its aesthetic. This formed a foundation for a closer look at Tim Robinson’s aesthetics of ‘consilience’ that offers an ‘intertwining’ of disciplinary perspectives on a place in which a ‘grain’ is discovered that is
continuous between ‘exterior and interior horizons’. This idea, drawing on both Gary Snyder’s writings on the wild and Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s writings on ‘the flesh’ serves as a useful practice for bringing together the range of cultures and perspectives that an archipelagic aesthetic is open to. An openness to interanimation, intersubjectivity and interdisciplinarity goes to the heart of the kind of philosophy that Parts 1 and 2 developed in relation to landscape and place. Such an aesthetic is crucially grounded in the participatory phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty.

A grounded literature such as this endeavours to take its form from its subject matter in ways that can only continue to be stimulating for the literary tradition. Robinson’s ‘Pilgrimage’ around the edge of the Aran Islands followed by his ‘Labyrinth’ of the interior; Oswald’s ‘sound-map’ of the river Dart; Jamie’s ‘three different ways of looking at St. Kilda’; and Macfarlane’s pedestrian and literary elucidations of landform: all of these are the result of a literature’s capacity to look out beyond its own preoccupations and to absorb something strange and new into its textures. The word ‘chthonic’ has come up a few times in this literature, most notably in Kathleen Jamie’s title poem of her 2004 collection The Tree House, in which she describes ‘our difficult / chthonic anchorage / in the apple-sweetened earth’ (41). But Macfarlane has also described it as an important component of an ‘archipelagic literature’ (‘the adjective “archipelagic” might serve, catching as it does at imaginings that are chthonic, marine, elemental and felt’ ‘Go Wild in the Country’ 13). Both uses refer to the geological, to an idea of irreducible terrestrial anchorage (though Jamie’s has the meaning of community, family, as well), but in each there is also a hint of something less than objective – in Jamie’s ‘difficult’ and in Macfarlane’s ‘felt’ – that suggests that other meaning of ‘chthonic’ which is of the mythic imagination; the ‘chthonic gods’ were the gods of the underworld. An archipelagic aesthetics holds these two meanings in interesting tension together, the mythic and the very real. ‘Precision,’ Macfarlane suggests, quoting Marianne Moore, ‘is a thing of the imagination’ (‘A Counter-Desecration Phrasebook’ 118). It is this kind of imaginative precision that is at the heart of an archipelagic literature.

We are, in a sense, still very much in the middle of this vast and complex project to rewrite the archipelago that has been prompted by the historical influences that I have outlined. It is uncertain where this movement will go from here. Horizons new seem unlikely since the interest of these authors has been sustained by what lies so close to home, that ‘undiscovered country of the nearby’ (Macfarlane, ‘The Wild Places of Essex’). And yet horizons themselves have been of interest. Iain Sinclair has followed John Clare to The Edge of the Orison. Tim Robinson has looked back across the archipelago in The View from the Horizon. Both recall a comment made by Martin Martin in a book about his trip to St. Kilda in 1697: ‘It is a piece of weakness and folly merely to value things because of their distance from the place where we are born: thus men have travelled far enough in the search of foreign plants and animals, and yet continue strangers to those produced in their own natural climate’ (3). There is a strange paradox in that he should be going to so remote a place as St. Kilda and yet referring to it as a part of his ‘own natural climate’, climate, of course, being one of the things that most distinguishes life on St. Kilda from life on the mainland. In a sense though, what distinguishes journeys like Martin’s, or indeed projects like Robinson’s,
from other works of travel writing is the quality of attention, and the care with which it is offered up, a
diligence due to the places we call home. But such places, insofar as an archipelagic politics goes, know no
exclusionary bounds, certainly no national bounds, and have an openness to connection and conversation
with other places that avoids a careless sense of the global. Perhaps to horizons new then, or are horizons
new and horizons renewed more interchangeable than they sound? Martin Martin is opposing his own
domestic travel to a sense of the cosmopolitan that is superficially enamoured with the exotic, that rushes
off around a smaller and smaller world forgetting the complexity and richness at his feet. The framework
of the archipelagic, however, can offer us a cosmopolitanism that refuses such reductive globalism. In a
sense the archipelago can keep connecting up, can keep growing with a cosmopolitan sense that remains
grounded. This combination of the grounded and the cosmopolitan, the precise and yet imaginative, may
well be just the kind of progressive thinking that is needed in such a radically changing world. It may
certainly help to recognise, where recognition is due, and establish, where establishment is necessary,
cultures that are meaningfully engaged with their archipelagic environment.
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APPENDIX NO. 1
SEVENTEEN POEMS

INTRODUCTION

In the following short collection of poems I have attempted to work practically with many of the ideas that have arisen in the writing of the thesis. The dominant theme driving the majority of the poems is that of the chthonic that I described towards the end of the conclusion: chthonic in the sense of the geological or deeply terrestrial; but also chthonic in the sense of the mythic imagination. I have tried to develop an aesthetics that is responsive to the particularities of landscape and place, particularities that are visible, audible, haptic, a part of the exterior horizons, but also particularities that are invisible, social and subjective, historical and interdisciplinary, a part of the interior horizons. Merleau-Ponty describes his notion of ‘the flesh’ as a ‘connective tissue of exterior and interior horizons’ (‘The Intertwining’ 413). For Kathleen Jamie, ‘poetry’ itself ‘is a sort of a connective tissue where myself meets world [...] it rises out of that liminal place’ (Scott, ‘In the Nature of Things’). In such a fleshly understanding of poetry, what is exterior and what is interior becomes a moot point. Both are part of a performative intertwining.

More poems have been discarded than are given here. I found that the poems written early on were bound up in literary conventions such as the pastoral and the picturesque, and it took some time to begin to write myself out of these. I cannot claim that these poems are free from convention but where they most closely resemble these conventions, I hope it is in a manner sufficiently self-aware to merit some interest. Writing this work as part of the thesis helped to develop an awareness of the kinds of tension that inform the work of the authors that I have discussed. As such they also helped to shape the thinking behind Part 3 of the thesis in particular. I include these poems as an important part of the research – albeit practice-based research – and I hope they demonstrate a critical perspective integrated within them.

Some of the poems have been more playful than this too, but this play has been an important explorative tool as well. What these poems are not is the voice-piece of a political position that is certain of itself. There will always be a danger that environmental art and literature is so assured of its message that it comes to resemble propaganda such as the Stalinist art of the mid-twentieth century. Aesthetics should be explorative too, it should push at the imaginable and struggle for new ways of understanding that may seem presently mysterious. This is an important part of the playful method that Richard Mabey proposes in Nature Cure, drawing on Joseph Meeker as he does. So these poems are more than just landscape poems. Some of them are the product of more involved, participatory interactions with the landscape. Certain rhythms and forms have been developed through a ‘writing with’ rather than a ‘writing about’. In general though, they are presented as an appendix of material that has played an important role in the research and writing of the thesis just as the interviews and conversations with the authors included in other appendices have.
A latter day Noah might have set up camp here, 
drunk his wine from a pigskin clenched in a fist, 
bitten his lip and drowned that inextinguishable grief. 
Here where the Black Ridge slopes to the south 
and Hangingstone Hill to the north, a plateau so high 
you could see in the fog a god kneel down and deliver 
the Okement, the Dart, the Taw, the Teign and the Tavy.

And remember, when the waters were high in the world 
the ocean made an island of this moor. And remember, 
when the glaciers came down from the north, 
dragging their bite across the Earth, they stopped 
short of these heights, and shuffled off their moraine.

To these few miles of upland heath, of blanket bog 
and valleys draining out toward the sea, is left 
the pristine quiet of survival, air with its ears ringing. 
As with the prophet whose lot is to live and remember, 
an aureole borne so high, pronged with its unscathed 
tors, weighs heavy. In such stone, the closed eyes of 
gravity; in such stone, silence kept between the teeth.
THE CLIFF RAILWAY

There’s a sliding of levers so greased beneath the carriage you could be lifted by nothing at all. Maybe a thunk in the gears and a baggy cable tightening, but otherwise the ascent is heavenly, luminous, pulled sunward through a granite canal by a counterweight of salt-water dragged from the mouth of the Lyn. This is Victorian engineering, lifting these two families, and their solemn looking basset hound into the sky.

The channel slumps below in a bowl, white light cooking up a dream of a stranger and stranger sun; the whole ascent also a backing away uphill. Iron rails pinned and fixed in the earth, the spoked wheels, double braking system, the speed and ingenuity, all this capital investment cradling us up from the edge of the ocean; the dream is to keep going spare no expense unto weightlessness, but here’s that swell in the knees as we come to a stop and file out, restored to the gravity we left in a moment of well-oiled possibility all over now. Now we are finding our feet again, not sure quite what just happened, quietly milling about in the shadow of a flint-walled church, two crows fighting over gravestones, an empty bench looking past all horizons, and the naked air suddenly chilling us to the bone.
MUFFLED

The oak copse drips with damp, slick black against the heavy red dusk. These cold months it knuckles into silence, tongues wound round with rinds of bark and swallowed into lower, weighty saps, nosing through the rootwork, draining with a gurgle into flinted dark.

We stand, abandoned, in the clearing by the pond. Not a soft thing shows against this closed world, only the muttering heart of a mole in hibernation, or badgers, buried, fogging their sett with stink, or the birds that in their toughness stayed, straining through their body-fat with song for the red Earth pushing out toward the sun.
HADES TAKES A QUEEN

I watched you dive from the old pontoon, cushioned and caught in the hands of the river, unspooling through its black fingers, clenched into foam and raised like its lover and carried downstream beneath the stars.

I envied you that perfect embrace, turning adrift on the flow, and your mouth half-open. I kept my distance in those days like the boy who is frightened to join in the bundle of bodies because of the girls.

I watched you rise on the far bank below the tall mouths of balsam flowers shedding water like a skin that was old to you. Steam rose from horses in the field beyond. You stared up into the eyes of a huge full moon.

It was as if you could have reached up and touched it. I wanted you then, I wanted to drag you into my mind. You turned to see two swans approaching carefully, delivering their bodies through the mist.

It was as if they could have reached up and touched you. And yes, just then you saw me — The fear on your face! The swans backing away, I can still see you now, surrounded by animals and flowers, as a cloud cut in front of the moon —
STUGGED

'Dartmoor: richer in its bowels than in its face thereof
- Tristram Risdon

Falling asleep in a horseshoe turf-tie
under a wind-flat khaki bivouac,
all the soldier can think about
is the give of moss underfoot as if he’s falling.

It lives in the body like an echo:
that snapping sound and the weight of him
dropping through the step.
He thinks of the joke about the man
they found in the mire by his hat,
of his view through the peat-black
dreamscape below.

The bog’s dream:
its half swallowed hawthorns and their
bright, strangled roots, its boulders
like teeth gone stray through the flesh.
A dream of shotguns, vibrations given
down through the legs of a man,
the unthinkable speed of lead
crying out through the sky. Dreams
of the rhythm of shoed hooves thumping,
drumming into the dark, of muffled voices
and the sudden, sharp noise
of dogs baying at a burrow.

Or just silence, like an aura packed in the dark.
And here the muddied skeleton of a cow curled up,
suspended, afloat in a congealed night sky,
almost comfortable, almost warm
like an idea laid to rest in the back of the mind.
Bangles and brooches and knotted gold
glinting, lost in the thick, prickling flesh
of long-decayed heather like stars in the pools
that remember what we were never here to see.
And the soldier is sleeping now, with the cow
and the drowned noise of the dogs
still ringing in the mouth of the burrow,
fast asleep in the mind of the moor with the man
who is not there, who has gone down now,
off through the dark below his hat.

'Stugged’ is a Dartmoor dialect term for being stuck in a bog.
A ‘turf-tie’ is where farmers would cut their peat.
PITCHING BELOW HAY BLUFF

The coarser pleasures of my boyish days,
And their glad animal movements
- Wordsworth

Four miles to go at the end of the day is
a long way to drag those blistered feet
over pocked and puddled upland heath
in an ice-flecked wind…

Four miles to go at the end of the day is
a ragged noise of inhale, exhale,
toe-stub rhythms in the glazed and helpless
weight of the head…

Four miles to go at the end of the day is a ludicrous,
knackered euphoria that can’t believe
and can’t believe and seems to have
come apart in the middle…

Four miles and three miles til the bluff drops north
on a meadow lit with yellow flowers,
and we dump our packs and feel that swell
like a breaking out of wings.

And the yellow flowers are closing their heads
and the sun is done and the day is done, we hit
the ground and fall asleep as if the ground
were water, our breaths held,

staring below us, at the clenched flowers
swimming like fireflies
down through the darkening earth.
LIFT

Up on the hill of summer over the city
scrumping pale young cobs of corn,
stripping away that sweet white hair
and listening to the buzzards cry peeioo, peeioo –

Up in the baggy, tangling heats of June,
alone and lost on private land;
smiling, and no one to share it with
but the towering turned back of the sullen sky –

Up in the sullen sky and wanting
to shake out some noise, up
in the fluttering stars of sycamore leaves
imploring the day for levity and space –

Up in the blinding, white light of the sun,
the air that trembles, grows, breathes
against the galaxy above, up
up in the sun with a grin full of wings
and never coming down –
SCAPULAR

These two poems originally printed on either side of the scapular of a cow found near the Erme Head on Dartmoor and returned to the same place

GUSTS

An uphill stampede of nothing over the grass.
Nothing feeling its way through the foliage of the air,
all hands and hair and somersaulting weight,
chasing out a space between the earth and the sky.
One pulls long strokes close to the ground;
one lurches, twists and buries its head in
smithereens of light; one shoulders the underside
of ravens in courtship; each one faceless and rowdy,
throwing sunshine ahead of itself and charging
through the doors of the sky, eyes closed. Until they vanish.
Collected, as if from nowhere, into a sudden LULL

LULL

Now the flowers ease out their fullest show of colour yet
as if there had never been such a thing as the wind.
Were there anything more they could do to share the sun’s rich heat but follow its arc fastidiously, they would do it.
The air stares down on itself from a still point in the blue.
For a moment it is able to dwell on the earth at its feet.
Strange place, this grass-grown hill of peat,
this clutter of granite scattered with horse dung.
But it leans too far and forgets itself. Towering there, begins to come unpoised. Falls at a startling rate of speed, and is shredded into GUSTS
MOVING ON

I am thinking of you as I stoop to pick them up
two long willow leaves, dried together,
our last night alone in the empty house
coiled up rust-red from tip to stem,
your tanned back fitting the length of me,
both emptied of the living sap,
shadows of the summer we lived in these walls
resigned to the ebb of their season’s lot
as memory begins its affectionate work
in one final chapter of fragile form, held,
our night together on the palm of my hand,
a stripped bed blown with autumn willow leaves.
TIRESIAS AT THE GALWAY INSTITUTE FOR ENVIRONMENT, MARINE AND ENERGY

*Take to heart what I say, Pentheus.*

- Euripides, *The Bacchae*

They are setting a halter in the weight of the sea, taking the measure of moon and storm with the nerve and with the caution of precisely uttered prayer. They are fossicking for grace in the turn of a planetary haul: cylinders, blowing and gasping on the swell, cabled through the dark into barnacled concrete below. They are shucking the weight of an ocean - leaving it to play across the panel-beaten west – for this, a trickle of data, a current roping in, pulse by pulse, across the sea-floor toward them.

Deference offered to the black water moving beyond the wired glass, these heads bowed over pencilled equations, over green ticking screens. Until the good news comes: this is beginning to work.

A blind man stands beside the water cooler, whispers, ‘Yes, this is good news indeed,’ begins to leave, to walk to Thebes to tell the king: ‘Pay up, we need the real money now.’
OUR WINTER

We have put back the clocks in our houses
and let ourselves slide into the darkening year.
It is bonfire time and remembrance time.
I choose to remember the darkness, whatever
unknowable gods I have forgotten again.
We walk out over the ploughed field, clay
builds up on the soles of ours shoes.

We think of the dead below us in their vast
language of silence that we do not speak
though we stood at dusk staring up into
the dripping mouths of the gargoyles on the Abbey.
We think of the naked dead who are possessed
by the winter in a fathomless dark below us
and we turn, at the treeline, and wait for the fireworks.

The lights come strobing over us, screamers
and rockets fill the valley, gunpowder cakes
and the pouring magnesium flares, all of it
as if by way of introduction to the silence
on the other side. Our winter. Listen now
for the gods who come calling, shaking their bells
in the dark copse, grunting and stamping their feet,

the fence-breakers in their animal skins,
stag-antlered over the smoking fields,
the half-seen, half-heard, strange Old Things
silhouetted out beyond us in the dark.
HOME

We are in the smallness of the year, the long, midwinter, midday shadows are hosting their frosts, and light slides through the graveyard yew in beams. I have come home here to my family the way winter sap runs back to its trunk.

We sit by the fire reading, or we talk about nothing in particular, measuring as we do, the tone of voice for what it hides among the words, finding in the animal shine of the eyes what we missed, what we might have forgotten that we loved.

And in the evening, as the stars come out above the roof, the television goes on and our sleepy, breathing bodies lie almost as one again, snoozing and chuckling through the darkness of the year.
Snow has fallen on the meadow by the river.
The world beneath the snow holds its breath;
it wants to blurt out turf and earth and stones
but doesn’t, waits to see what comes of this
silence, these miles of still air balanced on snow.
Tits and sparrows fidget in the hawthorn bush.
It is like we are out past curfew; we want to lodge
an apology with someone official, when a peregrine
carries its soft flight overhead, poised
on a gushing stream of air, and watching.
Something in me wonders if she isn’t about
to stoop, thump our shoulders to the ground
and carry us away for the hills to the west,
while the world below stares up, pressing a finger
to its brilliant, white lips with a ‘Hushhh’.
ANNUNCIATION

The angel saw the architect
and said nothing;
and the architect stood before the angel
in silence.

So they remained
in this way for some time –
oak leaves fluttering in the wind
crickets chirring across the hot meadow,

until finally the angel disappeared
and the architect stood there alone.

It was as if
the sky itself had receded
leaving only his open heart
glittering under the galaxy beyond.

And his hands, and his eyes
and his breath
were empty
and the green meadow was suddenly greener
than the colour itself would allow

and he stood in the raw daylight
inexplicably afraid.
PAYING THE PIPER

Now the quaking grass and the harebell
and the yellow trefoil begin to nod about.

Now an uphill gust from the holloway
blows the squinancywort apart.

Now a cloud shifts over the railway station at Tring
and the acres of glinting commuter car park darken.

Red kites mew and dip down columns of sky;
the wind drains off to a silence in the leaves.

Now the train rolls in from the south along the rails,
squealing to a painful halt on platform one.

Overcoats and suit lapels and skirts and ties
flap in the breeze as they file out onto the road,

as they come, stern or laughing, freed for the day
in their hundreds back to the open plain.

Peter has been watching your cars for you,
each one just as you left it this morning.

A penny for Peter Wren and your car secure,
a penny left at the driver’s side front wheel.

They bend and then glance up at the hills for a moment,
where he watches from his seat among the flowers.
THAW

*after Bernini*

It is April outside the Santa Maria della Vittoria. Those rays of plate-gold splayed over St. Teresa begin to thaw. Gold into sunlight; sunlight into air, air through the varnished wooden pews.

You can hear the traffic gusting in from the street. It is like an ocean floor in here; dust motes catch the light like plankton, but something is changing. The woodwork is ticking awake.

Teresa, in the folds of her cloak, begins to breathe. She does not look around her. She has not been sleeping and knows exactly where she is. She is holding a silence the size of an ocean about her.

She does not step down from her absurd pedestal. Or walk out among the traffic, palms calmly blessing the windscreens and horns of the city. She has hardly opened her eyes.

She is listening to the starlings in the palm tree, the sound of a straw broom on the marble and tiles. A tear slides from the corner of her eye. By the time it hits the floor, she is stone again.
SATURDAY MORNING

Light fills the house like a huge stranger
leaning in at the windows
and watching.

Everyone dreams of a primrose the size of a village,
each walking the hill of a petal
to meet in the centre;

bidding good morning politely and sitting at desks,
adjusting the height of their chairs,
untangling typewriter ribbon, until

they all look up at once, wondering what,
what on earth are we doing
in the centre of a primrose this morning?
APPENDIX NO. 2

A STEP TOWARDS THE EARTH: INTERVIEW WITH TIM ROBINSON 28 Feb 2011

The following is an interview with artist, cartographer and author Tim Robinson. In 1972 Tim left a life as a visual artist working in London and moved with his wife to the Aran Islands off the west coast of Ireland in Galway Bay. After the post-mistress on the island suggested he make a map for the tourists he began to compile an index of the placenames and the history and lore associated with them. There soon came to be far more information than he could represent on the map, and so he began work on his two-volume study of the islands, Stones of Aran, the first volume of which was to be published in 1986. Today Tim lives on the mainland with his wife Máiréad in the headquarters of their small publishing company Folding Landscapes in Roundstone, where 25 years on he has just finished the final book in his Connemara trilogy. In this interview Tim reflects on his early practice as an artist and how this might have affected his choice to move to Aran before discussing his method both as a maker of maps and as an author. Touching also on such subjects as science and its relationship to art, religion and the environment, he shows the depth of thought and the extraordinary commitment to his practice that we have come to expect from perhaps the greatest living literary and documentary author of place.

As a visual artist in London in the late 1960s and early 70s you were involved with a movement called ‘environmental art’. This seems to be slightly different from what we would call environmental art today. Could you say a little about this movement and about its relationship to the art world at that time?

Yes, I think what we meant by ‘environmental art’ was installations of artwork that surrounded you, spaces that you could walk into, and I don’t think it had that connotation of concern for the environment that the word has taken on since then. But there was the beginning of that as well in the 60s. Richard Long was one of the leading lights at the time and a number of artists were leaving the cities and doing things out in the natural world, making little changes on it and so on. I think that meant the beginning of more of an artistic consciousness of the natural world and its fragility, and the necessity to protect it. So maybe there was a slow change going on in the connotations of the word at that time, and I’m sure all that had some influence on our decision to leave London in 1972 and go off to the Aran Islands. I had an idea that all the rich and heady stuff brewed up in cities could flow out into the countryside and revivify it.

I was wondering if there was tension between the schools of art going on in London at that time. On the one hand there was work quite influenced by American modernism, with visits by Clement Greenberg, and on the other there was an art emerging that was more socially engaged and politically active. Was this a tension that you felt?
At first, in London, I was doing big abstract paintings of the sort that Greenberg would have appreciated. In fact Greenberg was one of the judges in that John Moores Biennial competition I had a painting accepted for, which was then noticed by the art critic Guy Brett and Signals, the avant-garde gallery of that time. But at the same time there were other movements coming up which didn’t appeal to me. The Pop movement never meant anything to me whatsoever and hardly means much to this day. And then later on, my environmental works of 1969 might have had something to do with the nascent environmental movement, but it is rather peculiar that my contribution to those environmental exhibitions was very geometrical, very mathematical. They were made up of numerous pieces that could be put together in a geometrically coordinated fashion but also leant themselves to being laid out as if composing a natural landscape. One work, ‘Moonfield’, was a series of curved shapes cut out of hardboard and painted black on one side and white on the other and displayed on a black floor in a blacked out gallery. At first they were black side up and you couldn’t see them at all. People shuffled around and found them with their feet and turned them over so they became palely visible, and either made them into beautiful patterns or heaped them up at random against a wall in a fashion I hadn’t thought of, which was fascinating to watch. So in a way they were subverting what I was doing. Or exposing a contradiction in what I was doing.

Before you moved to the Aran Islands, you lived in a number of cities across Europe. What was it that drew you out of England?

Sheer romanticism I think. I had visited Malaya before going to university, and during my time in Cambridge studying mathematics I’d been to Turkey with some friends. And I just found the East so romantic and exciting. There’s a wonderful phrase in Patrick Leigh Fermor’s description of Istanbul: ‘haggish but indestructible beauty.’ And that’s it, wrecked but still wonderful. The great mosques, Hagia Sophia, and the strange graveyards that surround the city like a carapace. And the ruined Venetian caravanserai where the caravans coming in from the far east would have docked and unloaded their goods and so on. The people we knew in Istanbul were mainly French-influenced painters who made a bit of a living by translating French novels and art books into Turkish. They were a rogueish, bohemian lot. I remember Yüksel Aslan. He lived at the foot of one of these great slopes covered with graves. And when it rained the bones would be washed out of the hillside and roll down to his place and he would collect them and grind them up and mix them with honey and use them with pigments to make his strange, surrealist paintings. We enjoyed those people and their strange ways very much; but when I wanted to quit teaching maths and start painting seriously it was clear that Istanbul was not the place to pursue a career in the arts.

So we moved to Vienna, which we thought of as the nearest purely European outpost to Istanbul. I had my first exhibitions there. But, again, Vienna was dominated by a small, belated surrealists group and the avant-garde stuff, the more exciting stuff, was happening in London at that stage. So we moved back to London. Then I had that bit of luck, that breakthrough with the John Moores Biennial and the Signals gallery and then the Lisson gallery. The Lisson has gone on to great things since then, but it was so new at that stage
that when we were helping to paint it for the first exhibition we almost persuaded ourselves it was some kind of artist's co-operative.

After all that moving around what do you think it was about Árainn that made you settle?

Well I had started to write, and the thing about writing is that it sucks in material copiously, and in the Aran Islands I found a world that was rich in so many dimensions. I soon found I was spending all my time writing it up in diaries, of which I have stacks – I’ve been living on them ever since in a way. So it was the plenitude of material. The islands are quite exceptional from the point of view of geology, and flora, and the cliff-bird fauna, and the folklore and placenames. The Irish language is alive and well there and the folkways were still legible. Little had been written about it, and I just found it a wonderful field for exploration and discovery. It was also a very quiet place. We were the only non-Aran people there during the winter

Aran re-awakened a love of the countryside and an interest in natural history that I had had as a kid but had lost through many of years of living in cities. The wild flowers enraptured me. I’d never really particularly concentrated on wild flowers - I’d been much more interested in caterpillars and butterflies when I was a kid. When we first settled on the island it was November and everything was very stark and bare until fairly early in January, when the whitlow grass appeared, tiny white spots of blossom about an 8th of an inch across. And all that Spring as each plant appeared - almost day by day a different plant would come into blossom - I looked them up and learned their names and their relationships. So it was as if this was unfolding beneath my eyes. It became quite intoxicating. I couldn't bear to be in the house; as soon as I came in from a walk I’d dash out again to see what had changed.

Regarding your first forays into mapmaking, you mention that you saw it for a while as a ‘making amends’. Could you elaborate on that?

Yes, that really revolved around the cultural side of map-making, the placenames in particular. In many places they have been very carelessly recorded by the Ordnance Survey. (The first survey of the islands was made in 1839, and another one in 1889; they were at 6 inches to the mile and covered the island chain with about six big sheets.) I remember that in Inis Oírr I was very puzzled trying to match the local people’s account of the names of places along the south coast with what was on the map, until I realized what had happened. There was a whole sequence of bays along the south coast of the island that had got moved over one bay. So they were all wrong. They were in the right order, but in the wrong places.

So there was that sort of carelessness. But then much more importantly there was the fact that they’d all been anglicized, and it was already clear to me, a mere beginner in the language, that the project of trying to imitate Irish word sounds in a phonetic system based on English was totally ludicrous. It produced a great coarsening of the sounds of the names. A most obvious and simple one like baile, which just means settlement
or village, comes out in English as ‘bally’, which sounds slightly ridiculous. So they lost their musicality and they lost their meaning.

A very striking case was a placename that was recorded down at the south-eastern corner of the big island. It was something like ‘Illaunanaur’. The surveyors had obviously thought that the first part of it was ‘oileán’, island, when in fact it should have been the Irish ‘gleann’, glen. But apart from making it an island when it was a glen, the rest of the name ‘-anaur’ meant absolutely nothing in English phonetics. But in the Irish the name means ‘the glen of tears’ – it’s exactly the biblical phrase ‘this vale of tears’, ‘Gleann na nDeor’. And the story I heard from the local people, was that, 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. That was very typical of what was lost in the project of anglicization.

There seems to be a certain pleasure taken in the subjectivity of your mapmaking. Where do you feel it sits between an art and a science?

I was approaching it from the point of view of an art form. I wasn’t interested in the sort of maps that had little drawings on them, pseudo-artistic styles or anything like that, but I wanted to use the maps as an expressive medium. I wanted them to engage you with the surface of the ground somehow, and to involve and delay you like thickets that you got into and that held you there. Most maps seem designed to help you get out of a place as fast as possible; I wanted these maps to draw you in and keep you there as long as possible.

A lot of this depended on the style of drawing. There are all sorts of quick ways of putting a mechanical tint on an area in cartography or in diagram drawing. You can buy sheets of Letraset with patterns of dots and squiggles and so on, and stick them on. I wasn’t interested in doing that. These commercial products were all too mechanical and regular. So instead I was doing it all with a pen, all these minute dots to represent beaches and so on. And I enjoyed doing that. It was very laborious, it took days sometimes to just cover a corner, but I could do something that expressed my feeling about a certain beautiful shelving beach, say, like one I can remember that is shaped like an oval seashell and has a pearly sheen on it when the tide is out and leaves a huge expanse of sand to splodge over, with sand dunes round it. By dotting away very carefully I could get a delicate gradation of tint. On the map it was tiny, but if you look at it carefully under a lens, it’s beautiful. And then endless little jagged bits of line for the rugged shores; I wasn’t representing any particular rock formations but just giving the general idea of what a craggy shore this was to walk along. Or a
mix of dots of two sizes to express what a sucky and muddy shore it was. I was able to invent symbols of my own for such qualities of the ground; I wanted to express what it was like to be there. The only academic criticism of the maps I ever heard was that I apparently ‘departed grievously from the international norms of representing limestone’, which was a kind of brick pattern I wouldn’t have dead on my coffin.

**Could you describe your thinking behind the move from cartography to literary essays?**

I think I was really writing about Ireland from the very day we arrived there. It became a habit to write quite a lot in my diary. But I’d always done some writing. I’d written but not published a novel before then and some short stories and so on, and I tended, in my earlier days, to write very elaborate letters home. But for some reason I never quite focused on the fact that I really was a writer rather than anything else, until making a belated start at about 36 or so.

Although the maps could do all sorts of things that maps don’t usually aim to do, they weren’t able to encompass the richness of what I was discovering in those places. One aspect that always interested me and always had done, I think, even in my earliest painting days, was the fact that the natural world is made up of countless tiny details, and yet there are these huge overarching forms that bring it all together. I was fascinated by the textures and the details and the names and so on, but also in the big things as well, the place’s relationship to the sun and moon and the cosmos behind that. Lots of the paintings I had done had fallen down on the attempt to try and convey these things together. On the maps I could do the detail, certain sorts of detail anyway, but couldn’t say much about these global forms, and I found I could do that in writing, because you can produce a book that has a very clear overall structure. The two volumes on Aran have that clear north/south, east/west structure with excursions in either book between the two halves, and a preface to the first volume and a postscript to the second. So *Stones of Aran* had a balance of structure that held innumerable details in place and left me plenty of room to move, quite suddenly, from the minutiae to some observation about the whole place’s relationship to space and time on a grander scale. It also had a sense of progression from east to west, a direction that is very important in Irish culture. I found much more scope for doing that in my writing, and by degrees writing took over from the maps. I’ve done these three maps, of the Aran Islands, the Burren and Connemara, and I wouldn’t be interested in doing another map unless I had some radically new ideas about mapping.

**There is a preoccupation in the *Stones of Aran* books with the inconceivability of the job at hand, the failure of the book to adequately capture the islands. What prompted this?**

I think if the gambit is used very carefully and sparingly, to say that something is inexpressible can be very expressive about it. But the ground has to be prepared so that the reader is conned into seeing what is being expressed even through the claim that it is inexpressible. One aspect of the natural world that is strictly inexpressible is the totality and the richness of life forms. The density of perceptual experience in walking a
landscape like that of Aran, poking into the bushes, looking down the crevices and looking over the cliffs – sometimes I’d feel in trying to write the book, or experience the place, that it is too much.

In one of the chapters towards the end of *Labyrinth* I write about the last time in the book when I go up to Na Craga, the craggy plateau along the spine of the big island, on a roasting hot day. It’s bursting with life; there are many butterflies, and caterpillars about to pupate and having tantrums in their too-tight skins. You could see it all happening, you could see the burnet moths hatching out and big golden chafers zooming to and fro – a very rich, an almost frighteningly weighty experience. Ultimately you can only represent that metaphorically, you can’t go on listing species and describing the way they jump and fly. So I just have a little passage in which each one of them is crying out to be noticed before I finish the book – “what about this? I am the unspotted form of the six-spotted burnet moth, this is how I fly, this is how I hop, this is how I jump.” So, yes, there’s this constant movement in the book between purely literary passages like that and factual writing. And I did try quite consciously to evolve a style flexible enough to move seamlessly from one to the other.

**Coastlines, margins, boundaries, borders, edges are a recurrent fascination for you, both materially in the landscape and more abstractly. Why do you think this is?**

I used to think I always lived on the fold in the map, and I think that’s one of the reasons why our publishing firm became ‘Folding Landscapes’. A long time before I thought of doing anything with maps I’d been interested in some ideas about them – I haven’t ever been interested in the history of mapmaking or mapmaking techniques or anything like that – but the idea that we might use a map, marking out the itineraries you take, all starting from where you live, until that part of the map is worn out, that’s the bit of the world that you can’t see, that always gets lost and obliterated. I seem to have felt this as a feature of my mental life.

**Why did you never come to write books on the Burren?**

In a way I would like to write a book about the Burren, it would round off the project nicely. But if I did – and it remains a possibility – I think it would be very short and more literary than factual. I have the usual great stack of stuff concerning the placenames of the Burren and could very easily spend a year gathering more. I’d have to re-explore the archaeology, there’s been quite a lot of discoveries made there since I last updated the map. But I couldn’t really undertake to go round the Burren again like I did when I was making the map all those years ago. I think it would kill me. And anyway if I did write about all that I would be repeating material from the other books. Anything like a complete account without obvious gaps in it would necessitate repeating a lot of what I’ve said about the Aran geology and the Aran flora, which might be a bit tedious. So I’ll only write about the Burren if I can come up with another mode of writing or of shaping a book.
A lot of the research you were doing for the Connemara map you published in the *Connacht Tribune* before you put it in a book. Could you say a little about the thinking behind this decision and about the kind of response you got?

I’ve always had this pedagogical urge. As soon as I learn something I want to tell people about it. And it sometimes shows itself prematurely, before I’ve really absorbed and understood whatever I’m dealing with. But that habit did turn out to be a wonderful research tool because, as I moved around Connemara, I’d write up a little account of each townland, partly from library researches and partly from my own explorations of it and what I heard locally. I started publishing these in the local newspaper, the *Connacht Tribune*, and I was amazed by its penetration. I had no idea quite how much attention was being paid to the articles until, quite well into the process, I found that everyone was waiting for me to turn up, even in the most remote farmhouse up the valley. They were quite indignant that I hadn’t already called on them, and they’d have all their information on the tip of their tongue ready for me. I’d say in a sort of diffident way: “O I’m the man from Roundstone who’s making the map,” and they’d immediately start: “Himself has a stone he wants to show you; and the name of that hill is such and such.” I’d described a megalithic tomb on a hill near where we live and I very soon got a letter saying: “There’s something like that on my land, come and have a look at it.” And, yes, it was another megalithic structure of some sort. All that was very exciting.

**Looking for correspondences and resonances between the materials that you write about has become something of a hallmark of your poetics, particularly in the Connemara books. What inspires this?**

That does mean a lot to me and often enough it seems to be a correspondence between the mythological and geological aspects. Somewhere I use the phrase ‘we search for rhymes, between words in literature and between things in science.’ And science is like finding how things rhyme; Newton shows how sentences about apples falling relate or rhyme with sentences about the Moon going around the Earth or the Earth going around the Sun. He’s exploring a real physical correspondence, or discovering one. I like to find imaginary or literary correspondences I can use as a metaphor for the interconnection of all things, the concatenation of cause and effect through the cosmos down to tiny details of micro-geography and micro-history. Sometimes I do this quite fancifully, like in that passage about Wittgenstein who spent some time in Connemara and lived in a place where there’s a legend about the local saint’s struggle with the devil. The chain that the saint was being pulled away to Hell on produced this gash through the mountains. But on the other hand one can look at that same gash and say this is a fault, a fault-weakened zone that’s been excavated by a glacier, giving a geological explanation. And then you can go on to remember Wittgenstein’s mental struggles over his philosophical ideas, and imagine that, in some future or mythological recasting of the history of Connemara, people might get it all muddled up and think it was Wittgenstein’s struggle with the devil of inaccurate speech-forms that caused this disruption of the landscape. But then I’m really just using that as a sort of hidden metaphor for the way that all sorts of different ways of looking at the ground are necessary, and
they all necessarily rhyme because they’re all directed at the same thing in the end. There’s a sort of rationality about existence – what E.O. Wilson calls consilience – that forces correspondences between them.

**Your atheism, or what you call your ‘passionate unbelief’, has been an issue of difficulty for some. How do you feel it has developed living in a landscape permeated by such a variety of faiths?**

Well in a way it hasn’t, because I think I’m a naive realist so far as theological questions go. For me there are certain entities that do exist and certain entities, including God, that don’t exist, for better or worse; that’s not up to us, that’s just part of the facts of the case as I see them, and I could be wrong. But it also seems to me that we’re missing something about the natural world and our natural relation to it by expending our religious emotions on non-existent entities. I think that religious emotion is extremely important, perhaps the most important aspect of human life, and most of it is misdirected, wasted in a way. So it seems to me anyway. So if there could be some sort of secular language, secular vision, secular ritual perhaps, directing that source of power in the human spirit towards the Earth and our relationship to it, and not just the Earth but the whole cosmos that contains it, that could perhaps be very much more enriching than the standard religious approach, which always tends to prise things apart into two layers, the physical and the spiritual.

**I read somewhere that your Aran map was used in something called the Vinyl Project.**

What happened was an artist and curator called Simon Cutts – who used to run a little gallery shop down in the east end of London called ‘Workfortheeyetodo’, but then moved to Ireland – was organizing an exhibition of works on vinyl, in Cork when it was European City of Culture. Apparently artists have used vinyl in all sorts of ways. And he suggested that I take the Aran map and blow it up and get it printed on a big sheet of vinyl and that we’d put it on the wall in this exhibition. I thought that this was a pretty boring idea actually, just a big map of the islands. But if we put it on the ground and let people walk on it, something interesting might happen. So that’s what we did, printed it on the sheet about 22ft long and about 15ft across. And it was big enough for you to walk along and see the house that you lived in or the road that you took and you could look over the cliff and read all the placenames and so on. It came up very clearly on that scale. So we invited people to walk on it, to write on it, to dance on it, to treat it as they saw fit. And so they did, kids skateboarded on it and some people wrote rather nice little reminiscences of their time on the island. Later on it acquired notes like “Here I wished I was kissing Jenny. Here I kissed Jenny for the first time” and rather charming things like that. By the time it came back to us it was crumpled and dirty, but untorn. We decided to call it ‘A Distressed Map of the Aran Islands’.

But then, just last year, this extraordinary curator, Hans-Ulrich Obrist, phoned up out of the blue from the Serpentine Gallery in London and said that he was putting together a “map marathon”, which was to be a series of interviews with people who as artists or thinkers had worked with maps of some sort; would I take part, and so on. So we sent the Distressed Map across. By that time the exhibition had become too big to go into the Serpentine so it was moved to the Royal Geographic Society, one of these grand old Kensington
buildings with portraits of Speed and Livingstone and all these heroes. It looks like an old fashioned
gentleman’s club and it has a lovely map room, and the map of Aran fitted nicely into this room, between four
pillars. Again we invited people to walk on it and dance on it. I remember one elderly gentleman dancing on it
with a little girl while Hans-Ulrich was interviewing all the people who had taken part, including very
interesting people such as Ai Weiwei, the Chinese artist who produced that astounding work of 80 million
porcelain sunflower seeds in the Tate Modern.

So the Distressed Map of Aran came back with another layer of damage on it and a few interesting
bits of graffiti, and we’ll continue exhibiting it now until it wears out. There’s a bit of magical thinking going
on here: that maybe if it happens to the map it won’t happen to the islands. It certainly makes you think about
what’s happening to the islands with 300,000 people visiting it a year.

Finally, I have to ask, what do you think it is that drives the enormous scope of your interest, from
the minutiae of Planck’s constant up to the scale of deep geological time and the cosmos?

It seems very significant that we’re middle-sized entities between those two vast extremes. And if you
abandon the transcendental aspect of things, if you abandon that relationship to theological transcendence,
then you’re left clinging onto a place on a globe that’s tumbling through space and time. I’ve always had that
sensation of the precariousness of all things. I can’t pin it down more exactly. Art can at least play at
permanence. I like to think that sometimes I can write a sentence that stays written – but I know I delude
myself.
Could you say how you met and how you met Roger and what sort of ideas generated the beginning of common ground?

I had met Angela back in 1970-71 when Friends of the Earth first started and she had come back from New York where she had been for five or six years and she was Friends of the Earth’s very first wildlife campaigner. I had got in touch with Friends of the Earth as they were forming as a fledgling lecturer at the Poly of Central London in the Department of Architecture, Planning and Building and within a short while I was on the board of Friends of the Earth. So we’d met, we knew each other but we’d never really exchanged very much in the way thoughts or information or anything. And then in 1979 or 80 we bumped into each other and she asked me to read something she’d written. By this time she’d been Friends of the Earth wildlife campaigner for a while, she’d started the Friends of the Earth Stop Whaling campaign in Europe and lots of endangered species stuff and trade in endangered species issues and she’d then gone on to do the otter campaign as a sort of outrider, doing lots and lots of work persuading people they should be interested in otters and doing lots of basic survey work persuading landowners to have otter holts and so on. And then she moved from species work to habitat work, and people were just beginning to do it and she worked with the Nature Conservancy Council as a consultant doing habitat work.

I was still working as a planner, although I’d moved from the Poly of Central London in the January of 75 to University College just along the road, still in architectural planning but my interest was very much the ecological side, the landscape side, the natural resources side of planning. That’s the sort of stuff that I was up to and I was still on the board of Friends of the Earth up to just after 1980. Anyway we bumped into each other in Friends of the Earth again and she asked me to read some work she was doing on habitat and landscape. So we started talking and saying we thought that Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, various other organisations seemed to be rather lost, sounds strange now, but that a lot of the focus had gone. What had happened was, it’s the co-option thing. You know, you start something and you’re antagonistic and you’re showing somebody that they should be looking at this, and then they do start looking at this but only slightly sideways, but they introduce to their way of looking at things, or they invite you onto their committees and so on. We felt that quite a bit of co-option had happened to Friends of the Earth at that stage. The thing that really struck us was that, although there was a lot of work around designation – so, Sites of Special Scientific Interest, National Parks, ancient monuments, listed buildings etc. – that actually the ordinary was being missed out. By definition almost, as soon as you put a ring around something and say this is really important, you’re actually saying that that isn’t, and that’s the way in planning it has often worked. So Angela through her work and me through my work, had both got the idea that unless you looked after the commonplace, the rare and the endangered and the special can’t
really survive. It has no context, whether it’s a building, just one left amongst all the rest, or a creature or a river or whatever else. Singling things out just seemed to be negating the whole.

So, we started saying ‘who’s arguing for the ordinary?’ and we started looking round and we couldn’t find anybody and so we started saying ‘well, how do you do it?’ And one we felt – and that’s why we helped Friends of the Earth get off the ground – that actually you needed popular support. You can’t leave things to the experts, 1 because there aren’t enough of them and 2 they aren’t persuasive enough, they fall down their own rabbit holes and argue down there without anybody listening. Most of the arguments were about how many or not enough, about equations, about how much something cost or benefit and so on – cost benefit analysis was at its height then. And when you’re just arguing for an ordinary high street, as it then was, of fields and fields and fields or a particular stream or so on, you haven’t got any of those things on your side, and to my mind that is a good thing, these things shouldn’t have economics and finance and so on around them. So we said ‘How are we going to argue for the everyday surroundings, for the ordinary, for the commonplace?’ and we began to think, well there are people who have affected us, who’ve made us look and who’ve touched us, and they are... and then the stream came out, the writers, the poets, the painters, the sculptors, the music makers and the music writers and so on, and we suddenly thought, well, why don’t we see what we can do together. Not just to do what has become more commonplace – to use the name of, or the writings of, a person – but actually to listen to them and to learn with them. So that was the idea. We said let’s challenge them to think about this, to help us.

Is that the thought behind commissioning work?

Exactly, that’s right. And or, if something has been written that already says it, making more of that, putting that somewhere that makes it seen again, or juxtaposed against something that makes it have more voice or something. So that’s where we began, we began thinking, how could we do it? And it was at this point that Roger came forth as it were, and we knew him through Friends of the Earth because he’d acted as a consultant to do various bits and pieces and he had done one or two concerts for them. He’d acted as an impresario and that sort of thing, he just came through the door and did odd things whenever he had the time. And Angela talked with him and we all three sat down and it was thought that we should start an organisation, and we should not only be championing nature, which was easy for him, you know, he was a Wordsworth man and all the rest of it. And I remember in the beginning we would have great big arguments about words we would use. I remember having big arguments with him, he and me in particular, about the word morality – and of course now I know my Wordsworth better than I did, but I kept saying no we must use the word ethics, morality sounds so evangelical and it got all the connotations of that and that’s not what we’re about. And I also recall that we went round all sorts of names for the organisation and Common Ground kept coming up as something that just captured it all, that got it all you know. And we didn’t really know Richard Mabey then, we had read a book of his called The Common Ground which had come out in 1980 which had obviously influenced us in a big way, as had The Unofficial Countryside and Food for Free and his other earlier books which had been on my reading lists.
for students. Literature obviously drove him quite strongly, he writes beautifully. So we contacted Richard and explained what we were doing and that we wanted to call it Common Ground, would that bother you in any way, because it’s not based on your work, although you have influenced us? And he said, no of course not, words are in the public domain as it were. We didn’t ask him for a number of years to be on our board because he was busy doing, I can’t remember what at the time. So that’s how the name came about.

The other aspect that had driven me very strongly was the involvement of local people. And again we need to get a bigger more popular..., not just involvement but recognition, awareness, activity and action, doing, really doing.

**You talk about sustainability as not just preserving knowledge but as rather to keep practicing.**

Yes, the word sustainability, which was coined by one our erstwhile colleagues at Friends of the Earth when he was in another position hadn’t come into the language in this kind of way until... I’m not sure when actually, but we never use it actually because, well, we all knew what it meant and then it started getting used by people on the financial pages, and suddenly it had lost its real power. So, if necessary I use but I really don’t. The point is precisely that, that if something should have longevity and meaning and feedback and positive feedback and so on then it needs people to believe in it. We all said that the philosophy has to be in place in people wanting it to happen.

So, those strands, the involvement of people, the commonplace and crucially the local – you know that local authority is in fact too big and we wanted to go to the street the neighbourhood, and then we said the parish. We hadn’t got anything else to draw comparison with but the little territory, and self-defined too, not necessarily one that has already been drawn on a map. Either ecclesiastically or as a civil parish but that kind of scale. And those became our minds really, to go off into the distance with.

**How do you feel those ideas have changed over time?**

I think they’re all still there. One: I hope we’re better at it, less naive, and I think that you still see them in what we do. I mean we’re busy working on community orchards: what’s that all about? Very local, run by people but making something that connects right across the country that says we and nature can live together and what’s more we both get good things out of it. In the end the orchard has proved a wonderful vehicle for our arguments, you know, nature and culture rubbing along, great.

**Do you remember any news events or publications that particularly influenced you at the time of forming Common Ground?**

I remember Tim O’Riordan coming over from Canada in the 1970s. He wrote a very wonderful book called *Perspectives on Resource Management* which was on my list for a very long time. I think that came out sort of 69ish, and he came to England after teaching in Canada to UEA and he’s now retired but still
active in East Anglia. Anyway, at one stage he and I thought we might do a book. So I wrote about all the things that had affected me as it were, and then turned that right around into what issues had brought environmentalism up the scales. And my recollection of that was..., I don’t particularly remember anything in the late 70s but... Well one has to go back to Rachel Carson and Silent Spring. And one has to go back to a good writer, you know have you read Under the Sea-Wind and other things. I mean she’s never mentioned as a nature writer. She was vilified for all the arguments she made and had a terrible time, but she really hit something so that always stands for me as a something, as a little milestone of huge import. When I read that – and of course I read it long after she wrote it – in way that happens a lot, you come across something that really gets you, you know, even though Richard Jefferies is long gone etc. The Torrey Canyon disaster was another big milestone. A huge oil tanker ran aground on the... south coast of Cornwall I think. It was absolutely huge and it hit everybody right between the eyes: just what is this that we’re doing. And then of course in the early 70s there was the oil crisis, dot dot dot. So there are all these kind of big events and thoughts that certainly put me where I was. But can’t remember anything apart from what I’ve mentioned about Friends of the Earth had gone a bit rudderless and so had Greenpeace, and so on. And CPRE were just going through the motions and so on. But I can’t remember anything in particular that made us think oh we must start an organisation etc. There had been, in planning terms, an enormously important report called the Skeffington Report that had also come out in 69 which was about public participation in planning. And there was another book that had affected me called After the Planners by Robert Goodman, written in America and about America but it was about advocacy planning – that was a new term that had come in – and it was about encouraging people to stand up for their own patch in their own way and get professionals to help them. So, it’s all in there weaving through them. For Angela, you will have to ask her, but she’s a much more forthright thinker in her own right. You know, right and wrong are very much there and, it’s not right to hunt otters, you know, anyway, whether there are lots or little of them etc. She’s been a vegetarian since she was 11 because she doesn’t like what happens to animals, not just in their killing but their treatment and what happens in the process. So she’s much more, something in her own right, you know, I feel more influenced in my views.

Roger, one should speak up for Roger too, of course, he knew lots of things. His interest in literature was enormous and he had lots. Also he’d been a teacher at school and so education was part of his thing. He never wanted to be very hands on. He had his own things he was doing and so on. But when there were moments he could he did and ‘Pulp’ was one of those things where he actually put a lot of effort in working with Pearce Marchbank who designed it, literally laying out, sitting up night after night doing it. We had lots and lots of good conversations and so on. And he kept on his own personal battles for ‘Cow Pasture Lane’ in Suffolk where he lived and he was a tower of strength on the end of the phone and he was always willing for a good talk, a good natter around something. And he would introduce us to all sort of interesting bits that he’d written and so on.

BREAK
We talked a bit about why you chose artists and writers to pursue your agenda in *Second Nature*. I wonder if I could ask about the specific choice of artists. A lot of them were really quite radical, abstract and avant-garde artists. I was wondering why you chose that kind of artist to go with other quite traditional photography and writing.

The feeling was that we needed the range and that we needed perhaps people who weren’t so well known. I mean Andy Goldsworthy hadn’t hit anything then. David Nash said to us that there’s this young man who, I think, is going places. I still have the original cover for *Second Nature* which Jonathan Cape did and they showed it to their people who sell books and so on and who actually go into the shops and say this is our latest thing. So they have this meeting every so often and they show them the book covers and so on and they said oh that’s awful, that’s terrible, nobody will buy that. So, this book cover which had Andy Goldsworthy on the front was changed to the rather boring Henry Moore and we couldn’t believe it. I mean it’s a nice Henry Moore and we like it but nevertheless very, you know...

But the idea was really to pull the string tight and see what we got at both ends and then let it go again and see what dropped out. And to choose the ones that were still up here. It could have gone on and on, you know, we had loads of ideas and so on. But yes, we thought, it’s no good having only challenging people because then the gentler folk won’t be drawn in, and we need them, and it’s no good having just the expected ones because then we’re not shifting anything.

I think what had happened was, we’d gone along to Jonathan Cape with this idea and said we wanted to do this, and they had said, not knowing us from whoever – we’re talking about 1982-3, so we were just starting out – and they said, realising there was a connection between us and Richard Mabey that is you do it with him then we’ll commission it but otherwise, well, who are you, sort of thing. So we contacted Richard and he was great and said he would help. So a lot of people on the literary side were very strongly brought in by him and we were left almost completely on our own to do the visual artists side, so we talked across the boundaries and we talked a lot about the literary side but he pretty much left to do the visual arts side.

**Am I right in thinking the book emerged out of some meetings or a conference event?**

No, as the book was due, we felt that we wanted an event to launch it and of course Jonathan Cape were very happy with this idea and we went to the ICA and said what about this and we got people like Melvyn Bragg to chair sessions and we had, I think it was a something like a series of four Tuesday evenings or something like that – I’m sure we can probably dig out the original playlist as it were – but as I say Melvyn Bragg was one of the chair people so it wasn’t necessarily people who’d been in the book, though the people on the panel were, and they gave little talks and then it was free-for-all, you know back and forth with the audience.
APPENDIX NO. 4
EMAIL FROM KATHLEEN JAMIE

Dear Jos
Thank you for your message.

I think you're right - social class is hugely important in the way we 'do' nature, or the environment - much more than I could possibly detail here (not least because I haven't thought it through myself, and when I do it gets bigger and bigger!).

I think it's to do with land, and ownership - hugely political, and class-driven. In this country, Scotland especially, we have a lamentable system of land ownership. For historical reasons (Clearances, Industrialisation, Enclosures) ordinary people have been removed from the land, and thereby from 'nature', and have, I fear, internalised that; a terrible rupture. An association with land and nature with things that are painful, bad. The last working people who lived out on the moors, for example, were probably miners.

We have certain 'nature' writers (Sir John Lister Kaye) who own lumps of land and who take it upon themselves to instruct the rest of us in its appreciation. I am presently writing an essay about Gavin Maxwell - another aristocrat, and a mentor to Lister Kay. Maxwell was a very damaged man, and he's hailed as a nature or wildlife writer - he *is a beautiful writer - but he had this toff's attitude: he arranged the 'natural' in a way that pleased him. Importing species he wanted (otters) and slaughtering those he didn't. (I overstate this, but the point remains).

Where are the working class nature writers? Where now are the politically radical land reclaimers? Think how political the Ramblers' Association was in the 1930's. Why has this collapsed?

I would hazard that the last book which brought together a working class lad and an aspect of the natural world, was Kes (Kestrel for a Knave) by Barry Hines, in 1967 - again, why has this ceased?

The land owning classes have embraced environmentalism by claiming to be 'stewards'. This is the Prince Charles/Lister Kay school. Those who, by their tone, invite us onto the land, and into nature, as gracious hosts. For the rest of us, there is a lingering sense that we're conducting a raid. Think how recent is 'Right to Roam' legislation.

Richard Mabey is more political than he's given credit for - an old fashioned English radical. Try his 'Beechcomblings'. Paul Farley & Michael Symmons Roberts' new book 'Edgeland' may give some insight, too.
I'm sorry this is a hasty muddle. One day I would like to work it all out in my own mind! - But maybe you will get there first! Let me know how your thought turn...

All best for now

Kathleen
Dear Jos

First of all, I must apologise for being so slow to reply - I've had a hectic summer and just don't seem to have had the time to sit down and respond to your message in the thoughtful way I want to.

I suppose writers are not generally great at reflecting on their own methods and processes - certainly it feels a difficult thing to do - so I'm not sure how useful these thoughts will be to you, but here goes, for what they're worth:

The book I'm writing now, which looks at things found on the beach, is a new departure for me, not in terms of its subject matter (this stretch of coast, and the things I notice as I walk there, have been finding their way into my poems for some time), but in terms of form and purpose. I'm interrogating the objects, asking questions about their nature, their origins, the journeys they've made and the possible significance of their presence here.

I too like 'walking without premeditation'. When I first began to think about this book, I characterised it as a travel book, but on an unusually small scale. I already had in mind some of the things I wanted to write about - things I'd been visiting and thinking about for ages - but central to the concept were also the aimless walk and the random find.

I do carry some of the objects home with me. I have on my desk in front of me a slab of dried prehistoric sediment, a sample of the stuff in which you can see Neolithic footprints at low tide. I have a chipped china teacup thrown overboard from one of the Cunard liners, and a small collection of dry (but still odiferous) seaweeds. To be honest, though, I don't spend much time staring at them - I use them to check the physical facts, but I don't look at them interpretatively or contemplatively very much - I think I do more of that stuff during the walking or the actual writing, or at other times when I'm away from the things themselves. Here on my desk they just sit there, stripped of context and therefore less exciting to me than my memory of their discovery.

There are other kinds of object or phenomenon I can't carry home and keep. I photograph them, sometimes, but similarly I find I rarely refer to the photographs. The images I carry in my head are more useful to me, perhaps because by the time I get home and upload the pictures onto my computer I've already, inevitably, begun to work on the images of the objects in my head, at least to the point of having
latched onto them imaginatively, or found what it is about the object which grabs me. I probably wouldn't be able to articulate it yet, but I've found that latching-point.

Thinking about this now, it seems to me that context matters very much to me - that the place, the time, the weather, the sounds and textures and smells present at the moment of discovery are key somehow to my engagement with the object - and that having the object itself at home can sometimes help me re-engage, get back in touch with the moment and what it meant.

Is any of this relevant or useful to you, I wonder? It's been interesting to spend time trying to work it out. It's a bit like trying to look at the back of your own head in a mirror!

all best wishes
Jean