

WRITING WATER, WRITING FOREST, WRITING MOUNTAIN



W H Auden once said that, among scientists, he felt like “a shabby curate . . . [in] a roomful of dukes”. When I am with serious conservationists – the people at the delivery end of saving the planet – I often feel like that shabby curate. I also ask them what switched on their passion for protecting nature and the answer is almost always the same: an encounter with a wild creature and an encounter with a book.

(Robert McFarlane)

Magic consists in this, the true naming of a thing.

(Ursula Le Guin)

She forgets who she is.
She could be so small
she almost has no smell.
She feels like anyone at all.
When you walk up to her,
she keeps quite still,
but what she answers to
is never loud enough to know.

Eaten away by outwardness,
her eyes are empty.
They could be watching you
or not. They work indifferently,
like lit-up glass and if you ask
why she won't speak, why should she?
When what she really wants
is silence.

You know what women are like:
Kay, Moira, Sandra.
They move through a dark room,
peering round under
the hoods of their names.
Alcestis, Clytemnestra.
She could be either of those.
She scarcely knows.
She goes on thinking something
just over your shoulder.
This could be the last night
before you lose her.
But what's the use
of saying one thing or another.
When what she's really after
is you to love her.

From Alice Oswald, 'Full-length Portrait of the Moon'

The same summer I was on Lewis, a new edition of the Oxford Junior Dictionary was published. A sharp-eyed reader noticed that there had been a culling of words concerning nature. Under pressure, Oxford University Press revealed a list of the entries it no longer felt to be relevant to a modern-day childhood. The deletions included acorn, adder, ash, beech, bluebell, buttercup, catkin, conker, cowslip, cygnet, dandelion, fern, hazel, heather, heron, ivy, kingfisher, lark, mistletoe, nectar, newt, otter, pasture and willow. The words taking their places in the new edition included attachment, block-graph, blog, broadband, bullet-point, celebrity, chatroom, committee, cut-and-paste, MP3 player and voice-mail. As I had been entranced by the language preserved in the prose-poem of the “Peat Glossary”, so I was dismayed by the language that had fallen (been pushed) from the dictionary. For blackberry, read Blackberry.

Robert McFarlane, *Landmarks*, 2015

Why should this loss matter? You can't even use crizzle as a Scrabble word: there aren't two "z"s in the bag (unless, of course, you use a blank). It matters because language deficit leads to attention deficit. As we deplete our ability to denote and figure particular aspects of our places, so our competence for understanding and imagining possible relationships with non-human nature is correspondingly depleted. To quote the American farmer and essayist Wendell Berry – a man who in my experience speaks the crash-tested truth – “people exploit what they have merely concluded to be of value, but they defend what they love, and to defend what we love we need a particularising language, for we love what we particularly know.” Or as Cocker punchily puts it, “If acorn goes from the lexicon, the game is up for nature in England.”

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For all of these writers, to use language well is to use it particularly: precision of utterance as both a form of lyricism and a species of attention. “I want my writing to bring people not just to think of ‘trees’ as they mostly do now,” wrote Deakin in a notebook, “but of each individual tree, and each kind of tree”.

The best of the recent writing is ethically alert, theoretically literate and wary of the seductions and corruptions of the pastoral. It is sensitive to the dark histories of landscapes and to the structures of ownership and capital that organise – though do not wholly produce – our relations with the natural world. One might as reasonably expect to meet the geographer Doreen Massey or the philosopher Gilles Deleuze in its pages as Gilbert White or the bar-tailed godwit. Nor does this literature advocate a Luddite environmentalism: it tends to be anti-technocracy but not anti-technology.

Some of this writing is kick-up-the-arse furious, some is elegiac, some is about disease and dispossession, some is about dignity and the deepening of knowledge. Across its range, moral engagement and hope are consistently in evidence. Every contemporary writer about nature of my acquaintance is not “only” a writer but is also involved in political agitation, campaigns and volunteer work on behalf of the living world. This is far from the caricature of the 18th-century picturesque, in which moneyed artists sketch the Wye while peasants expire at their ankles and gouty aristos gaze dreamily through their Claude glasses.

Robert McFarlane, ‘Why we need Nature Writing’, *New Statesman*, 2015

She is trying to fly away as fast as possible. Brought up short by her jesses she twitters in high-pitched distress as the realisation of her hateful circumstances strikes. She can't get away. I lift her back onto the glove. Under her feathers is sinew, and bone, and that fast-beating heart. She bates again. And again. I *hate* this. In these first few minutes there's nothing you can do but accept that you are terrifying the hawk when it is the very opposite of everything you desire. After three more bates my heart is beating like a fitting beast. But she's back on the glove, beak open, eyes blazing. Then there is a long moment of extraordinary intensity. The goshawk is staring at me in mortal terror, and I can feel the silences between both our heartbeats coincide. Her eyes are luminous, silver in the gloom. Her beak is open. He breathes hot hawk breath in my face. It smells of pepper and musk and burned stone. Her feathers are half raised and her wings half open, and her scaled yellow toes and curved black talons grip the glove tightly. It feels like I'm holding a flaming torch. I can feel the heat of her fear on my face. She stares. She stares and stares. Seconds slow and tick past.

Helen Macdonald, *H is for Hawk*, Jonathan Cape, 2014

The great American activist and writer Rebecca Solnit, a hero of mine, explains the limits of this view. “A lot of activists expect that for every action there is an equal and opposite and punctual reaction,” she writes in *Hope in the Dark* (2005), in a passage to which I find myself often returning:

[They] regard the lack of one as failure . . . But history is shaped by the groundswells and common dreams that single acts and moments only represent. It’s a landscape more complicated than commensurate cause and effect. Politics is a surface in which transformation comes about as much because of pervasive changes in the depths of the collective imagination as because of visible acts, though both are necessary . . . Writers need to understand that action is seldom direct. You write your books. You scatter your seeds. Rats might eat them or they might just rot . . .

Some seeds lie dormant for decades because they only germinate after fire.

Robert McFarlane, ‘Why we need Nature Writing’, *New Statesman*, 2015

Subjects that the author and essayist Rebecca Solnit has written about, some at considerable length, include Irish history, atlases, Alzheimer's, a traveling medical clinic, natural disasters, urban planning, tortoises, walking, gentrification, Yosemite National Park and Apple Inc.

“There’s something interdisciplinary at best and wildly wandering at worst about how I think,” she told me recently over the phone from San Francisco, where she lives and works. “I am interested in almost everything, and it can sometimes seem like a burden.” She cited Virginia Woolf and Henry David Thoreau as the writers most important to her: “Each of them wrote exquisitely about experiential, immediate encounters with the tangible world but could also be very powerful political polemicists. And the arc of their work describes a space in which you can be both.”

Alice Gregory, ‘How Rebecca Solnit Became the Voice of the Resistance’, *NYT Style Magazine* 2017

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she tries leaning
pouring pure outwardness out of a grey urn
little lapping sounds yes
as of dry grass secretly drinking try again

little lapping sounds yes
as of dry grass secretly drinking try again

Roman bone figurine
year after year in a sealed glass case
having lost the hearing of her surroundings
she struggles to summon a river out of
limestone

little shuffling sound as of approaching slippers

year after year in a sealed glass case
a Roman water nymph made of bone
she struggles to summon a river out of
limestone

From Alice Oswald, 'Dunt: a poem for a dried up river'

little shuffling sound as of a nearly dried-up
woman

not really moving through the fields
having had the gleam taken out of her
to the point where she resembles twilight
try again

little shuffling clicking
she opens the door of the church
little distant sounds of shut-away singing try
again

little whispering fidgeting of a shut-away
congregation
wondering who to pray to
little patter of eyes closing
try again

very small and damaged and quite dry
a Roman water nymph made of bone
she pleads she pleads a river out of limestone

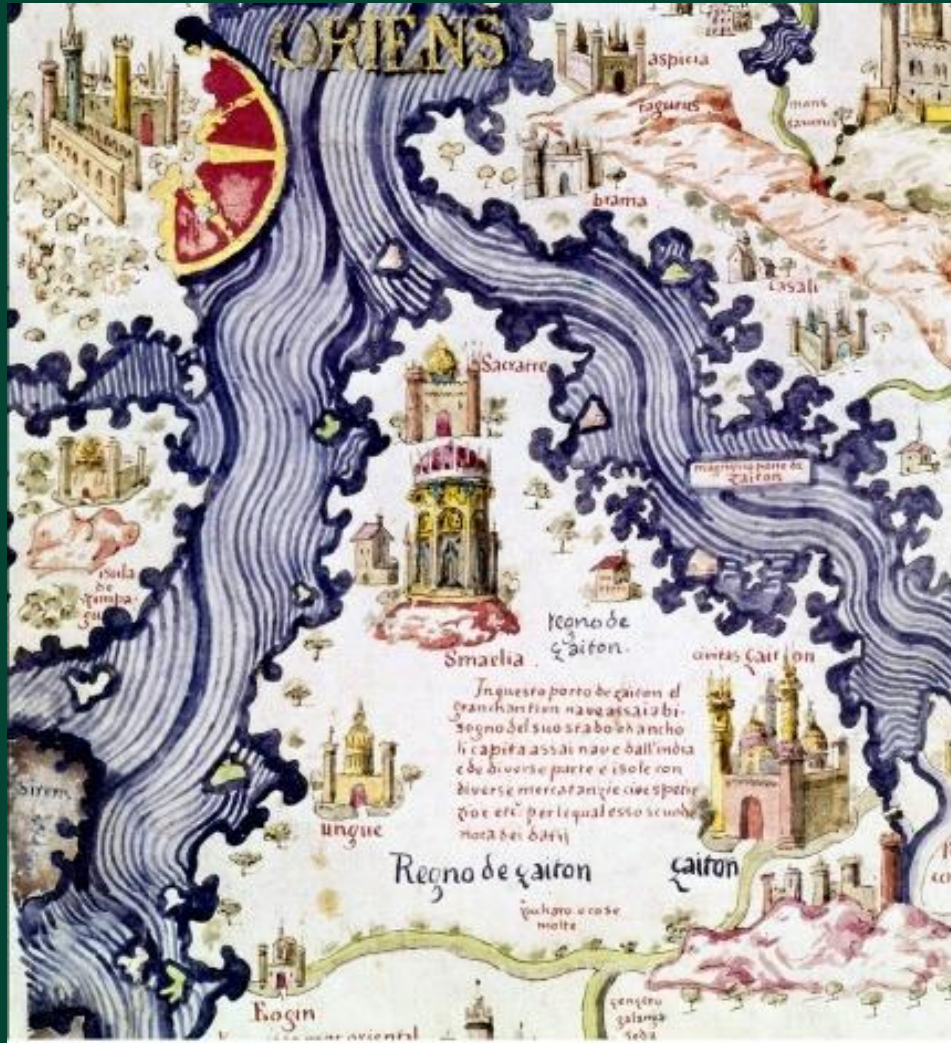
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DISCUSSION

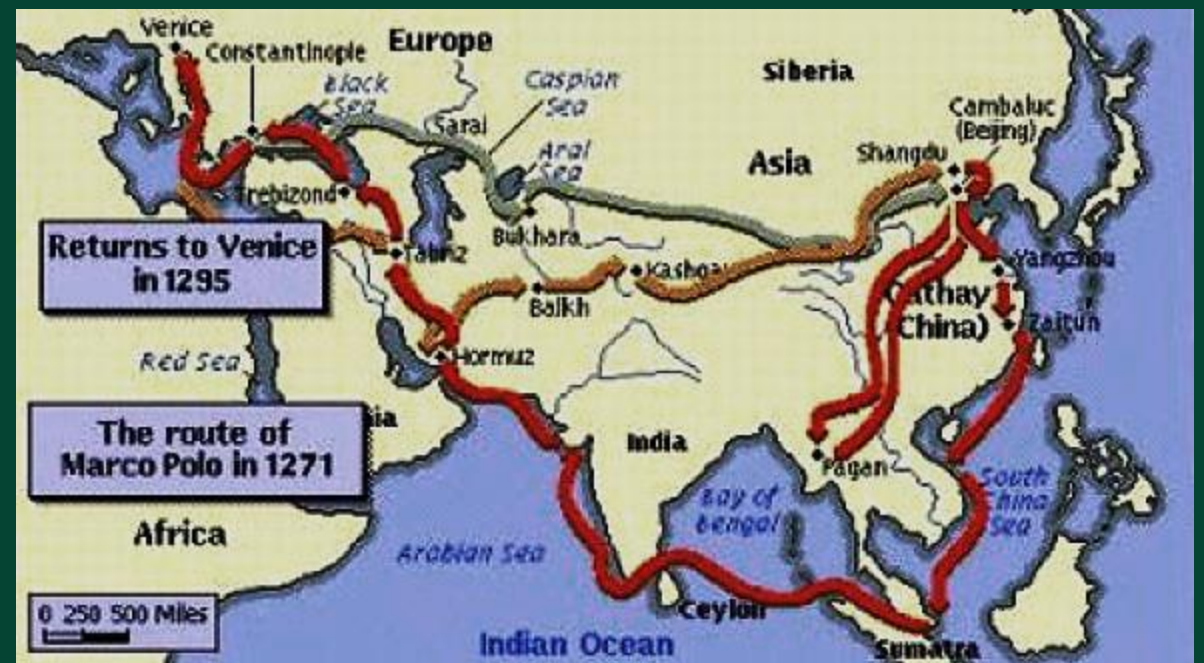
TRAVEL WRITING

John Harrison, *Cloud Road*, Parthian, 2010

(Marco Polo – the exotic
George Burrows – the exotic at home)



MARCO POLO



On the Sunday morning, as we sat at breakfast, we heard the noise of singing in the street; running to the window, we saw a number of people, bareheaded, from whose mouths the singing or psalmody proceeded. These, on inquiry, we were informed, were Methodists, going about to raise recruits for a grand camp-meeting, which was to be held a little way out of the town. We finished our breakfast, and at eleven attended divine service at the Cathedral. The interior of this holy edifice was smooth and neat, strangely contrasting with its exterior, which was rough and weather-beaten. We had decent places found us by a civil verger, who probably took us for what we were—decent country people. We heard much fine chanting by the choir, and an admirable sermon, preached by a venerable prebend, on “Tares and Wheat.” The congregation was numerous and attentive. After service we returned to our inn, and at two o’clock dined. During dinner our conversation ran almost entirely on the sermon, which we all agreed was one of the best sermons we had ever heard, and most singularly adapted to country people like ourselves, being on “Wheat and Tares.” When dinner was over my wife and daughter repaired to the neighbouring church, and I went in quest of the camp-meeting, having a mighty desire to know what kind of a thing Methodism at Chester was.

GEORGE BURROWS *WILD WALES* 1854

I found about two thousand people gathered together in a field near the railroad station; a waggon stood under some green elms at one end of the field, in which were ten or a dozen men with the look of Methodist preachers; one of these was holding forth to the multitude when I arrived, but he presently sat down, I having, as I suppose, only come in time to hear the fag-end of his sermon. Another succeeded him, who, after speaking for about half an hour, was succeeded by another. All the discourses were vulgar and fanatical, and in some instances unintelligible at least to my ears. There was plenty of vociferation, but not one single burst of eloquence. Some of the assembly appeared to take considerable interest in what was said, and every now and then showed they did by devout hums and groans; but the generality evidently took little or none, staring about listlessly, or talking to one another. Sometimes, when anything particularly low escaped from the mouth of the speaker, I heard exclamations of “how low! well, I think I could preach better than that,” and the like. At length a man of about fifty, pock-broken and somewhat bald, began to speak: unlike the others who screamed, shouted, and seemed in earnest, he spoke in a dry, waggish style, which had all the coarseness and nothing of the cleverness of that of old Rowland Hill, whom I once heard. After a great many jokes, some of them very poor, and others exceedingly thread-bare, on the folly of those who sell themselves to the Devil for a little temporary enjoyment, he introduced the subject of drunkenness, or rather drinking fermented liquors, which he seemed to consider the same thing; and many a sorry joke on the folly of drinking them did he crack, which some half-dozen amidst the concourse applauded.

'Welcome to the City of the Dead,' a young woman said cheerfully, 'that's what Ayash means. One of the Inca's virgins was on a journey and fell ill here, and died. There's no café. I'm Marlana. Sit down, the company doesn't know who's drinking its coffee.'

As Elaine tethered the donkey, a smart four-wheel-drive drew up. A tall, bespectacled man stood rooted to the spot when he saw us. He burst into smiles and strode across to us. 'Eliseo López Correa, I work at the Altamina mine. Are you having a coffee? Come in! The mine is quite new; it's one of the biggest in Peru, in fact, in all of South America. There's copper and zinc, molybdenum too, it's used in light filaments and high-strength steels.'

'Are you from Lima?' asked Elaine.

'I live in Lima, but I'm Argentine, and I work for the Canadian company BHP. It works Altamina in partnership with the Peruvian Government and a Japanese firm. Lima's a long drive, so I work twenty-one days on, seven days off. This really is the City of the Dead. Up until five or six years ago, before the mine came, the village was so primitive. They never saw any whites, and they stared at us like aliens. Some locals sold land to the mine company. Once they'd drunk the money, they started agitating to have the land back, saying it belongs to the community.

CLOUD ROAD 1

'They can't understand that they took the money and the land is gone. They threaten our drivers now and again, but they're usually too drunk to hurt anyone. Our contract stipulates that we provide a certain number of jobs for locals, but they have had no education, and few had ever worked for wages. Even with simple jobs like sweeping up, it was difficult to get a day's work out of them. We have provided them with everything, mains water, a proper road, a trout farm and a bridge, but most of them resent us.'

'Has any money been spent on the school, so that they will be able to compete for proper jobs in the future?'

'We've given it a new roof, but there is no one from the community to teach them. If they ever existed, they left. Outsiders won't work here, it's too remote and primitive.'

'We have to get on.' I got to my feet. We were filthy, mud splashed to our knees, we smelled of donkey and sweat. Without thinking, I said, 'I am looking forward to getting to La Union and cleaning up.' He looked himself up and down: he was dirtier. He slapped me on the back, laughing. 'You're fine, real country people!'

Poverty can make simple things very difficult, like keeping yourself clean. I began the trip thinking people were grubby in their persons and their clothes. I soon wondered how they stayed so clean. As the house is dark and has little furniture, you spend the day outdoors unless it is raining. The children play in dirt or mud. You handle animals much of the day and pick up the grease from their

CLOUD ROAD 2

wool, the sweat from your horse. Your handshake tells the other person what animals you own. In the morning and evening the temperature at altitude is close to zero, and you can only warm water on the fire, filling the house with smoke, and your clothes stink of whatever you are burning, which includes dried animal dung. Dirt is ground in, and cold water doesn't shift it unless you scrub long and hard, and even then you cannot get it out from under your nails. On warm days you can bathe in the river, but it is icy. I found I could keep little cleaner than the locals. Carrying just one change of clothing, I wore clothes until they were filthy, or until it rained and freshened them up. When I checked into hostels in the small towns, the first thing I did was hand-wash my clothes to get my hands properly clean.

DISCUSSION

WHOLE MODULE?