



Sacred Geography

Haunted Landscapes and the Anthropocene

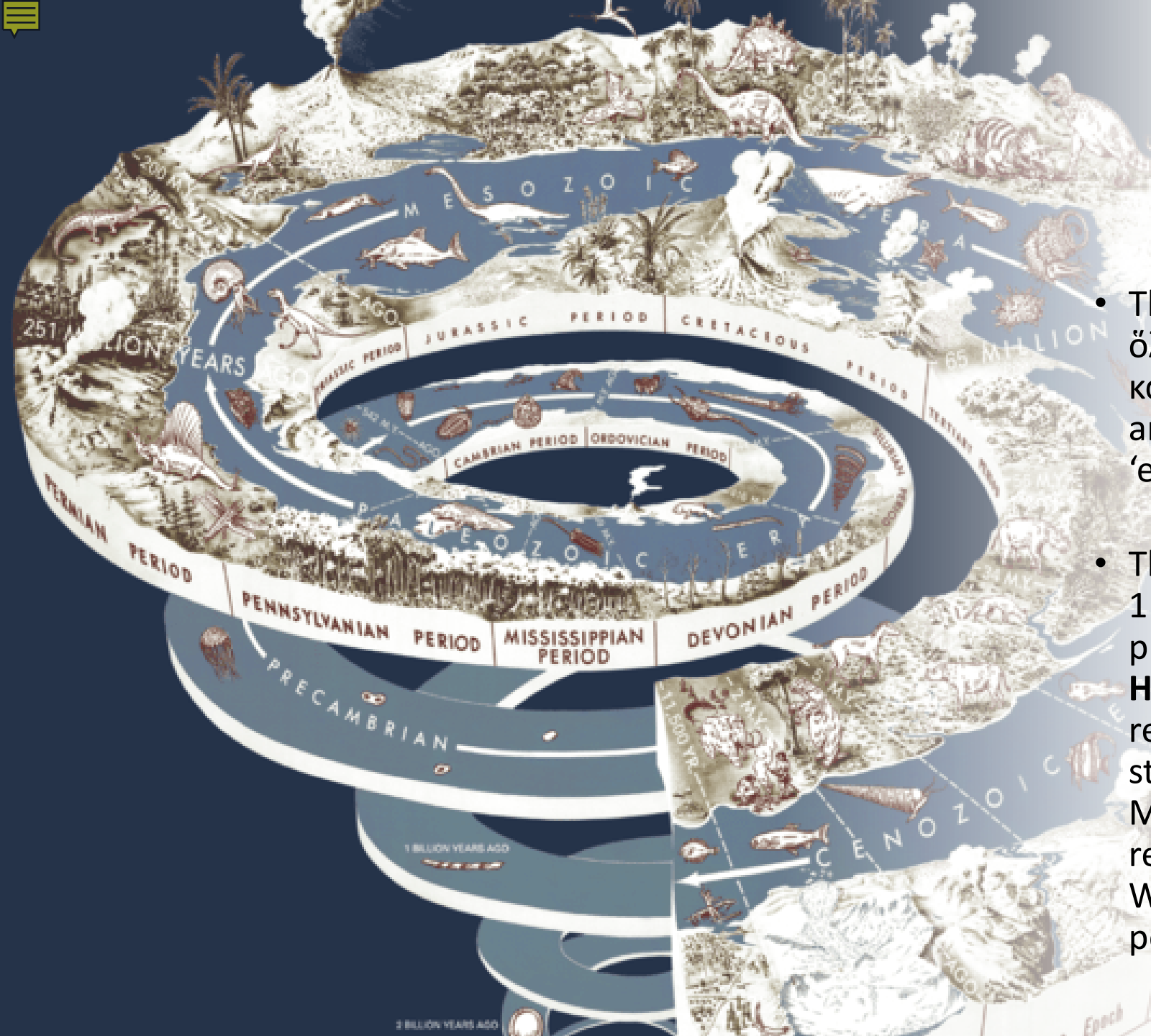


Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

Canolfan Sophia
The Sophia Centre

Holocene

- The word comes from Ancient Greek ὅλος (hólos), meaning 'whole', and καινός (kainós), meaning 'new, recent' and used to define an epoch that is 'entirely new'
- The Holocene was said to have started 11,650 calibrated years ago before present with an event known as the **Holocene glacial retreat**. This glacial retreat scarred the earth in ways that we still see today. For example, the lakes in Minnesota and Wisconsin, and the remnants of glaciers in Colorado and Washington are all remnants of this period.



Anthropocene

- In the early 2000s Nobel laureate Paul Crutzen (Dutch meteorologist and atmospheric chemist) coined the term Anthropocene, replacing 'holos' with 'Anthropos'
- The proposed name for a geologic epoch in which humans have become the major force determining the continuing liveability of the earth.



Paul Crutzen in 2008. Source: © Leber/Ullstein Bild via Getty Images

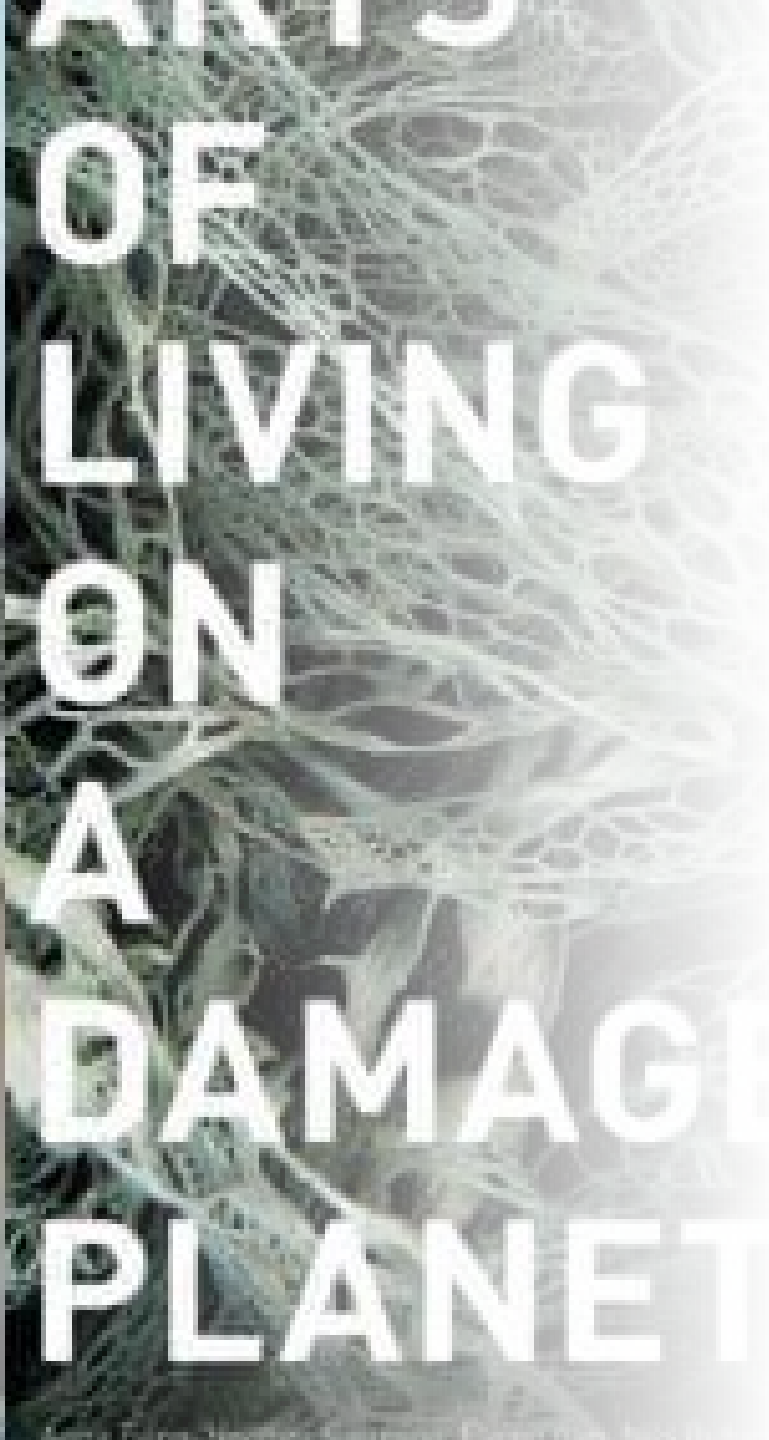
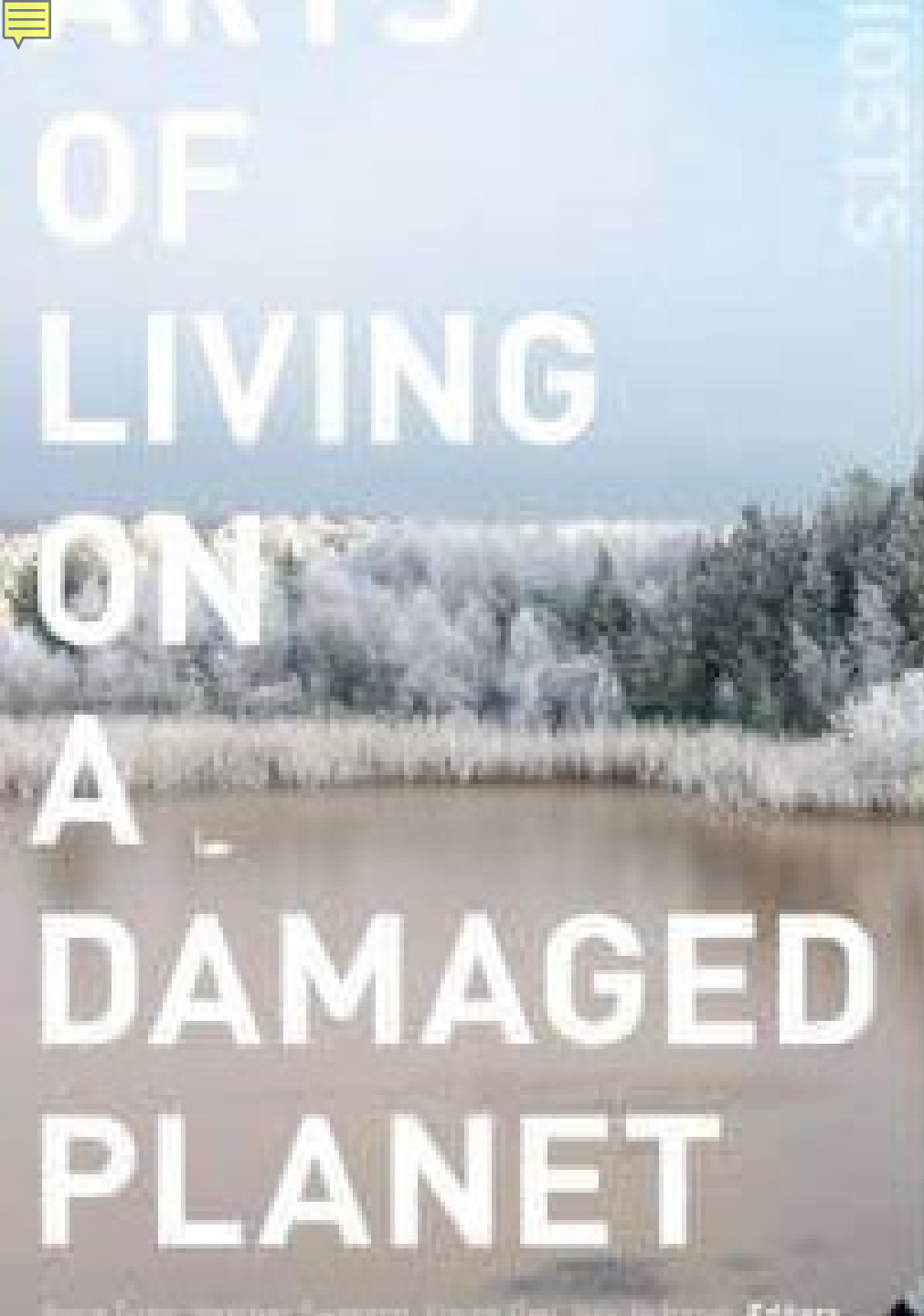


Anthropocene

The proposed name for a geologic epoch in which **humans** have become the major force determining the continuing liveability of the earth.



Sustainability can be thought of as **a set of values, outlooks and behaviours** that meets the needs of people and environments alive now, **without compromising or damaging** the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.



Gan, Elaine, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, Heather Anne Swanson, and Nils Bubandt. 'Introduction: Haunted Landscapes of the Anthropocene.' In *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet : Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*, edited by Heather Swanson Anna Tsing, Elaine Gan and Nils Bubandt, 1–14. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.



Living arrangements that took millions of years to put into place are being undone in the blink of an eye. The hubris of conquerors and corporations makes it uncertain what we can bequeath to our next generations, human and not human.



How can we best use our research to stem the tide of ruination?

How can we pay better attention to overlaid arrangements of human and nonhuman living spaces, which we call 'landscapes'?



‘... the constant barrage of messages asking us to *forget*... to allow a few private owners and public officials with their eyes focused on short-term gains to pretend that environmental devastation does not exist.

There is constant pressure to **move forward** and **grow**.’



'Buy less!': why Sewing Bee's Patrick Grant wants us to stop shopping

Paula Cocozza



Patrick Grant photographed at the Cookson & Clegg Factory in Blackburn, Lancashire. Photograph: Gary Calton/The Guardian

THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLER

Patrick Grant



LESS

Stop Buying So Much Rubbish:
How Having Fewer, Better Things
Can Make Us Happier



Our era of human destruction has trained our eyes only on the immediate promises of power and profits. This refusal of the past, and even the present, will condemn us to continue fouling our own nests.

How can we get back to the pasts we need to see the present more clearly? We call this return to multiple pasts, human and not human, 'ghosts'. **Every landscape is haunted by past ways of life.**

We see this clearly in the presence of plants whose animal seed-dispersers are no longer with us. Some plants have seeds so big that only big animals can carry them to new places to germinate. When these animals became extinct, their plants could continue without them, but they have been unable to disperse their seeds very well. Their distribution is curtailed; their population dwindles.

This is an example of what we are calling **haunting**.



Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, 2025.

The recognition of the need for polyphonic assemblages, or liveable collaborations, Tsing argued, is the driving force for staying alive. Collaboration means working across difference which leads to transformation and transformation occurs through encounter. Without collaboration we all die. The important stuff for life on earth happens in those transformations.

Some strategies of approach to collaboration a landscape and sensing its hauntedness:

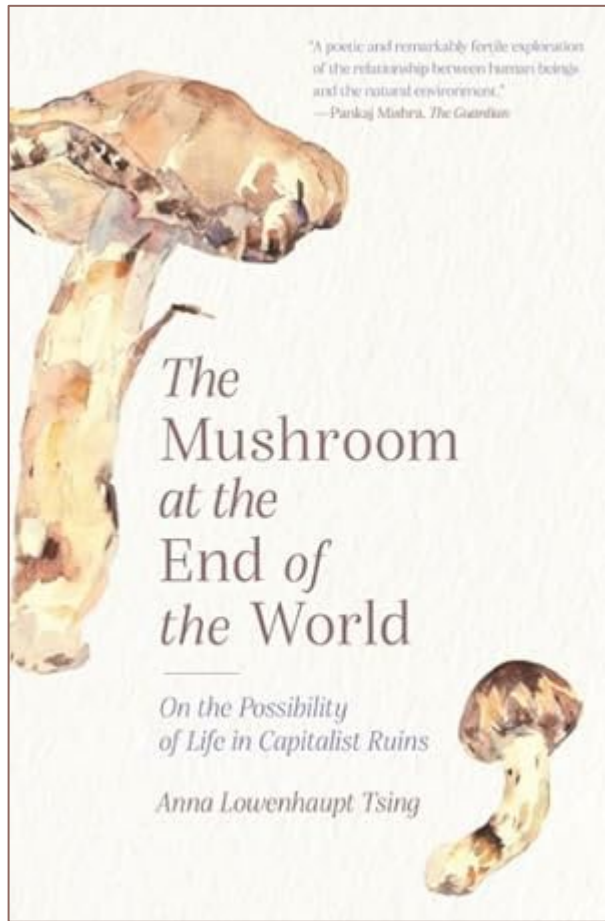
Recognising that a landscape is alive with other than humans

How we listen to a landscape

How we walk through a landscape

Being at ease with strangeness

To know what we might lose makes it more precious



As life-enhancing entanglements disappear from our landscapes, ghosts take their place.

Sometimes these are life-enhancing, such as the sought after matsutake mushrooms that now grow as a weed in human-disturbed forests across the Northern Hemisphere.

Tsing points out that fungi are famous for changing shape in relation to their encounters and environments. Many are potentially immortal, meaning they die from disease, injury or lack of resources, not old age. Even this little fact can alert us as to how much our thoughts about knowledge and existence just assumes determinate life forms and old age. We rarely imagine life without such limits and when we do we stray into magic.

Mycologist Alan Rayner suggests that some aspects of our lives are comparable to fungal indeterminacy. Our daily habits are repetitive, but they are also open-ended, responding to opportunity and encounter. What if our indeterminate life form was not the shape of our bodies but rather the shape of our motions over time? Such indeterminacy expands our concept of human life, showing how we are transformed by encounter.

Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015, pp.46-47.



Healthy ancient cultivated chestnut orchard/selve, Fosciandora, Lucca, 2013. Photograph by Andrew Mathews.

Imagine walking through Monti Pisani in Italy, where pines and abandoned chestnut orchards mingle through **form, texture, colour**, a process of **constant speculation** as pattern. Ghosts become tangible through the form of ancient chestnut stools. Centuries of grafting, cultivation, trade, taxation, and disease are inscribed onto their structure and shape. The landscape emerges from ghostly entanglements: the many histories of life and death that have made these trees, this place. **Learning to trace 'ghostly forms' in landscapes, he argues, might allow us to envision more liveable futures.**

Andrew S. Matthew, *Ghostly Forest Histories*,
<https://www.fieldsinfields.com/features/2019/05/07/ghostly-forest-histories>

'This is a place where people, trees, and other nonhumans have been entangled for a very long time.'

'The forms of trees, as of other beings, emerge from relations with others.'



As humans reshape the landscape, we forget what was there before. Ecologists call this forgetting the ‘shifting baseline syndrome.’ Our newly shaped and ruined landscapes become the new reality. Admiring one landscape and its biological entanglements often entails forgetting many others. **Forgetting, in itself, remakes landscapes, as we privilege some assemblages over others.** Yet ghosts remind us. Ghosts point to our forgetting, showing us how living landscapes are imbued with earlier tracks and traces.

Gan, Elaine, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, Heather Anne Swanson, and Nils Bubandt. ‘Introduction: Haunted Landscapes of the Anthropocene’, p.6.

Barcelona and the Basílica de la Sagrada Família



Dr. Ingrid Parker, Professor in the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology and the Jean H. Langenheim Endowed Chair in Plant Ecology and Evolution at the University of California Santa Cruz.

The native American flowers that are now missing from the Great Meadows of the University of California campus in Santa Cruz are ghosts to ecologist Ingrid Parker. Remembering missing flowers alerts her to the amnesia that distorts our perception of landscapes. Today, the Great Meadows are places of beauty and leisure, protected by law as natural havens. But the meadows are recent products of human disturbance. Almost devoid of the native plants that used to grow there, they are grasslands of colonially introduced species. **The lifeworlds of indigenous flowers and the Native Americans that lived with them are spectres in these grasslands.**

All of these ideas related to Sacred Geography through connection to the landscape as a felt sense of what is there, and what is not there and how we classify and understand the haunted landscapes we encounter through engaging with them.



Figure 23. Looking north across the Bristol Channel from Woodlands hill, August 2023.

Photo: Dan Broadbent.

‘As I emerged onto the top of the hill, my trepidation began to leave me, replaced by the sensation, perhaps illusory, that more than ever I had the hills entirely to myself. I could not help but notice the interaction of sky and land, even more dramatic than during daylight (Figure 24). As the light faded, the detail of the landscape began to be lost, replaced by subtle tones of colour which mirrored those of the sky in its final minutes of sunlight. The sense of otherness which I had experienced at Longstone Hill was only amplified in this fading light. Once again Coleridge’s suggestion of the hills bringing us closer to heaven was easy to recognise, perhaps closer than ever at this time of day. I was witnessing a more subtle beauty than I had recognised at Longstone.’



Figure 24: The evening sky above Longstone Hill, viewed from Woodlands Hill, August 2023.
Photo: Dan Broadbent.

‘However, my sensations here were less concerned with the visual than with a feeling which I have again struggled to put into words. One word that did come to mind was ‘soul’ – as if an indefinable essence of myself was communicating directly with the divine. It was certainly an experience that could be described as ‘ineffable’, one of the four ‘marks’ of an authentically religious or ‘mystical’ experience as defined by William James (1842-1910). James described ‘ineffability’ as a negative state of mind in that the experience is impossible to be adequately described in words. I am less certain that my experience possessed the second of James’ marks: the ‘noetic’ quality of some form of knowledge being imparted. However, it was certainly ‘transient’, James’ third mark of religious experience, and created in me a sense of ‘passivity’ **as if I ‘were grasped and held by a superior power’**, James’ fourth identifying mark.

Broadbent, Dan. *‘Beneath the wide wide heaven’: Can the Quantock writings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth be interpreted as examples of Dark Green Religion and, if so, how might this add to current debates in Green Romanticism?* 2024. Dissertation submitted for the M. A. in Ecology & Spirituality. University of Wales Trinity Saint David.

SACRED GEOGRAPHY
Conversations with Place



Edited by
**Bernadette Brady &
Jack Hunter**



Are haunted
landscapes
akin to the
theories of
Durkheim or
Eliade?