

From the *Times Literary Supplement* No. 5471 (8 February 2008) p. 26:

Jay Griffiths

WILD

An Elemental Journey

374pp. Hamish Hamilton. £20.00.

978 0 241 14152 6

Roger Deakin

WILDWOOD

A Journey Through Trees

391pp. Hamish Hamilton. £20.00.

978 0 241 14184 7

Robert Macfarlane

THE WILD PLACES

340pp. Granta Books. £18.99.

978 1 86207 941 0

Fred Hageneder

YEW

A History

320pp. Sutton Publishing. £25.00.

Hb: 978 0 7509 4597 4

Pb: 978 0 7509 4598 1

As these fine books show, a renaissance in British nature-writing is now well underway. Their authors join some distinguished company, including Richard Mabey, Fraser Harrison and the late John Fowles, but they can do so unabashed. The only shadow is an unavoidable suspicion that our cultural appreciation of nature is gradually increasing in tandem with its destruction – and with it, our own.

The boldest new arrival, *Wild*, is well-titled. With enormous moral and physical courage, Jay Griffiths spent seven years travelling to extraordinary places on the planet, and places in the psyche, where the vast majority of her readers will never go. She hunts whales (albeit with deeply mixed feelings) and shares raw meat with the Inuit; she takes the powerful hallucinogenic *ayhuasca* with Amazonian shamans and becomes a jaguar; she goes walkabout with aborigines in the desert and nearly dies climbing the West Papuan Highlands. Yet this is no literary version of the anodyne tribal exotica on television, which she rightly excoriates; these people are inseparable from politics and power. In each place she is confronted with an unholy alliance of government officials, corporate executives, soldiers and hired goons, and evangelical Christian missionaries. The last of these, whose malignity Griffiths lays bare, are busy destroying the animism which is the only really ecological kind of religion and turning out obedient consumers with privatized souls. (First destroy the local shamans – something that Stalin too, in his programme of Siberian domination, knew and practised.)

Everywhere from the Arctic to the Australian Outback, Griffiths finds a natural world that is carnal, sensual, ecstatic, wilfully feral, almost always female, and under dire threat. But nowhere does she find a wilderness. Rather, it is home – known, respected and celebrated – for the indigenous peoples there. Their lives, which she briefly shares, are hard but essentially dignified and impressively sustainable. (The contrast with the violent masculinism of these places' European so-called discoverers – “assaulting”, “conquering” and “penetrating... virgin land” – could hardly be clearer.)

The motor of the destruction that she uncovers is private profit. One Warlpiri aboriginal man tells her, with grim acuity, “We say money is the whitefella Dreaming.” No matter what their hardships, none of the wild places Griffiths recounts are as dispiriting as the vast tracts of single crops, open-pit mines like wounds, and filthy urban slums riddled with drugs, prostitution and despair. In West Papua, she was in considerable danger from the vicious Indonesian soldiery and paramilitaries who occupy that country, protecting the transnational mining companies with tacit international support. Shamefully, that includes £41 million in arms sales from the British government. Imperialism, enclosures and forced privatization are clearly all still happening in the so-called developing world, and their victims are nature and humanity alike.

Poignantly, the surviving indigenes Griffiths meets show that it is quite possible to live in the Earth on its terms, and live rich lives. Underlying that ability is what she found among the Inuit, for example: they “felt *lilira* – an awed, respectful and slightly nervous feeling – towards nature, and lived accordingly.” Her account suggests that our collective survival depends on enough people rediscovering and reincorporating, soon enough, just such a feeling. That seems a tall order, however. The attitude still dominates of Australia's conquerors, who perceived only a *terra nullius*: an empty land for the taking.

There are problems with Griffiths's own prescription. They lie in her uncompromising dualism – “Either for life or against it” – and her romantic assertion of the former. But this is already to betray the wild. (She must surely know the monotheistic provenance of “He who is not with me is against me.”) By the same token, merely inverting the dualism leaves untouched its pathological underlying logic: pure civilization vs. pure nature. To defend the wild, whether human or non-human, requires defending plurality, ambiguity, irrelevance and uselessness. Empire is nothing if not the imposition, as Griffiths herself notes, of “a single way of knowing”. That in turn demands more than just the inversion of carnivalesque confrontation, which is easily contained by the powers that be. I would add, too, that the “thunder and cock, cunt and lightning” she extolls are indeed magnificent, but wildness lives as much in silence and in peace. Indeed, pure orgasmic lyricism is no more sustainable than pure technological exploitation. We can only actually live in the domestic (to use philosopher Jan Zwicky's term), which mediates these extremes.

At first, Griffiths's fervidly partisan approach stands in striking contrast to that of Robert Macfarlane's *The Wild Places*. His cool and classical tone accompanies an impression of social and educational privilege which could grate. But Macfarlane's style, spare and elegant, combines with an acute eye to produce some wonderful writing: “The air smelt bright”, and a flock of white doves rises “applauding into the air”. It is also difficult to be unmoved by his sincerity, to say nothing of his

athleticism, as he sets out to find the remaining wilderness in the British Isles. This finds him walking or climbing, swimming and sleeping bivouac-style, usually very alone, in some bleak if beautiful places: Ynys Enlli island off the Welsh coast, Rannoch Moor and the Black Wood, the Flows in northernmost Scotland, the Burren in western Ireland, Ben Hope mountain, and the East Anglian coast.

The resulting account centres on what Macfarlane calls story-maps, each one personal, telling the story of a particular place in terms that are equally natural and cultural. These he contrasts with the disenchanted grid-maps which, together with physical development, reduce the land to mere resources for our purposes. Their effect is both dehumanising and denaturing, and Macfarlane finds that we are steadily losing the sense of being part of a much greater world that results from “a passionate and precise relationship with nature”: a loss that is both grievous and dangerous. The disappearance of unique places also entails that of the memories, metaphors and stories which give lives their unique meanings, and by which those places in turn can be valued and protected.

Nonetheless, by the book’s end Macfarlane has come to realise – and his conclusion resonates strikingly with that of Griffiths – that whereas there is no absolutely pristine wilderness left in Britain, and probably the world, it by no means follows that the wild too is extinct. Wilderness is a quality, and it continues “as process, something continually at work in the world, something tumultuous, green, joyous.”

Macfarlane’s principal mentor was the late Roger Deakin, one of the country’s most active and best-loved people working to further the cultural celebration of the natural world. He was a co-founder of Common Ground, a tiny but influential organization linking the arts and nature, in 1982-83, and his earlier book *Waterlog*, an account of swimming his way around the British Isles, is an endearing original. *Wildwood* is his parting testament.

Deakin’s life, personal and professional, was rooted in twelve wooded acres in Suffolk, including a Tudor oak-framed farmhouse which he painstakingly rebuilt in 1969. Place emerges in all these books as a taproot of both cultural and natural integrity, and Deakin’s peregrinations in its honour introduce us, for example, to the writer Ronald Blythe in nearby Essex, who inherited his house from the artists John and Christine Nash, and through them the wood sculptor David Nash, working in (and with) Blaenau Ffestiniog. We also meet the forebears of these workers with wood and word: Cobbett, Ruskin, Morris and Edward Thomas.

Deakin travels abroad finding other woods, and while these chapters feel a touch add-on, they too bear witness to the inseparability of human and natural history. Particularly vivid are Deakin’s accounts of his trip tracing the origins of the 60,000 varieties of domestic apple in the wild apple forests of the Tien Shan mountains of Kazakhstan, and his time in the ancient walnut forests of Jala-Abad in the south of Kyrgystan, where the local way of life is still organic and sustainable in an entirely unselfconscious way.

His book is rich in grace-notes, such as Kyrgystan’s seven species of plum (“yellow, golden, pink, crimson, two shades of violet and black”), the arcana of cricket bat willow (the best of which, to Australian chagrin, still requires the climate and soil of

East Anglia), the burr walnut veneer fascia in Jaguar XJ's (which look back to the tradition of English cabinet-making) and hedge-plashing and thatching, not to mention the delightfully esoteric Essex Moth Group.

Typically, upon his return to Walnut Tree Farm, Deakin remarks, "Back home, and almost the first tree I met was..." Alas, it was a short-lived stay; as Macfarlane movingly recounts, Deakin died of an aggressive tumour last year, aged sixty-three.

Fred Hageneder's *Yew: A History* is the sort of artefact that gives coffee-table books a good name. Well-researched, clearly-written and sumptuously illustrated, it is a loving invocation of an extraordinary fellow-creature. Yews are among the oldest living inhabitants of the planet, with some dating back thousands of years, and the British Isles are uniquely blessed in this respect. The sacrifice made by the trees used for its pages seems, in this case, fully justified.

Overall, however, it is impossible to read these books other than in the context of crisis. The nonhuman natural world is everywhere threatened with either industrial appropriation or extinction, and all nature-writing now is elegy. The chief argument against despair, in one man's wise words, is probably that it "is only for those who see the end beyond all doubt. We do not." In any case, insofar as hope for renewal exists, it does so not only in direct and sustained contact with wilderness – something which, in circumstances of unprecedented urbanization, will only be possible for a relative few – but rather more in various cultural forms, including books such as these. That is where rewilding must begin.