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Afterword: Lyric Place

We have seen that the form of the New Nature Writing has largely been that of the essay, a form which has its roots in the sixteenth-century writing of Michel de Montaigne. For Montaigne, the essay was founded on digressive and uncertain curiosity about the world: 'If my mind could gain a firm footing, I would not make essays,' he wrote (qtd. in Bakewell 2010: 36). Sarah Bakewell suggests that the germ of Montaigne's essays, as a literary form, lay in his recognition that even the 'apparently solid physical world exists in endless slow turmoil. Looking at the landscape around his house, Montaigne could imagine it heaving and boiling like porridge' (2010: 34). She goes on: 'To try to understand the world is like grasping a cloud of gas, or a liquid, using hands that are themselves made of gas or water, so that they dissolve as you close them' (35). The writer of essays makes these various *attempts* and approaches, offering them in the knowledge that his or her word will not be final, but that it might, nonetheless, contribute to the ongoing life of its protean subject.

In a chapter on Tim Robinson's prose work, Karen Babine draws attention to what Mark Tredinnick describes as 'the essentially lyric work' of the essay: 'Its success depends not upon the tale so much as the telling. The essayist imagines and tries to render what is real – deeply, structurally, poetically, eternally real – in a moment, in a place, in a life' (qtd. in Babine 2016: 128). 'Rendering' the real is a term that has layers of significance here: the verb 'to render' carries overlapping meanings: to express or create; to depict or represent; and to read or translate (*OED*). In these layers of meaning there is an intertwining of the given and the made. The lyric makes its own truth at the same time as it reads and represents the given world. The lyric produces its art in 'the telling' rather than 'the tale': it energizes and remakes the given with contemporary, personal, localized life. There is a parallel here between the essay as a lyric form and the understanding of place as a creative process of inhabitation that this book has presented. For example, we have considered place as described by Doreen Massey as 'the unavoidable challenge of negotiating a here-and-now'.

It is a phrase that draws attention not only to the 'endless slow turmoil' of the 'apparently solid physical world', but crucially to our agency in directing the course of that turmoil (2005: 140).

The 'challenge of negotiating a here-and-now' is a challenge for us all. This is a warning that Common Ground offered when it launched *Second Nature* all those years ago, intent on 're-open[ing] the debate about our relationship with the land and with nature' as a 'practical and philosophical concern for us all' (Common Ground 1983). Thirty years on, this seems to be a lesson of the environmental movement that has gradually been taken on in a variety of ways. Grassroots projects of eco-localism have seen a surge in popularity over the last two decades: there is the Transition Towns Network, the Plunkett Foundation, the Network of Wellbeing, regional Wildlife Trusts and the Ecological Land Co-operative – not to mention a range of local and community energy initiatives and other community land trusts. In Frome, in Somerset, there was something of a political coup in 2015 when all seats on the town council went to independent candidates tired of the traditional party politics and keen to see more progressive policies on the environment (Harris 2015: n.p.). In a context of global ecological crisis, the work of these groups represents a groundswell of activity confronting this 'challenge of negotiating a here-and-now'. They are struggling to build alternative forms of social and political architecture that are small in scale, uncertain in form, but networked and progressive. This too is an attempt to 'render what is real'; to articulate, to bring forth, to translate a possible vision into a geographical reality. These small-scale shifts recall Richard Mabey's description of 'microcosmic' cultures of local distinctiveness, which he suggested might be 'not just powerful metaphors, but actually the nano-bricks for rebuilding things' (qtd. in Douglas 2005: n.p.).

It is no stretch to see these forms of networked localism as 'archipelagic thinking', a devolved, decentred and connective organization of space. Such thinking manages to be both globally aware and keenly attuned to local distinctiveness, to a *fineness of grain*. This thinking is open without capitulating to the more homogenizing effects of a logic of free trade globalization, what Bill Gates described in the 1990s as 'friction-free capitalism' (Gates, Myrvhold and Rinearson 1995: 181). Place, as this fineness of grain, represents a kind of friction that is to be celebrated. However, it is a friction based, not on the

obduracy of place alone, but rather on its responsiveness. The refusal of the people of Harris to capitulate to the plans of Redland Aggregates was not immediate and stubborn. It was a slow process of both inward-looking and outward-looking cultural creativity that brought a new version of the same place into being through common consensus. The battle of the islanders was small in scale but progressive, challenging this push towards 'friction-free capitalism' by rethinking and reappraising the meanings of the place in something that could be described as a form of lyric activism. The idea of lyric activism foregrounds a connection between the aesthetics of place writing and the cultural activities of local grassroots projects of conservation and heritage. This connection is something that I have endeavoured to draw attention to throughout this book.

In Chapter 1, I argued that a shift in attitudes towards the local can be registered in works of 'New Nature Writing' from the rise of the environmental movement onwards. This shift is something very different from the insular turn towards domestic affairs that Jed Esty dates to between 1930 and 1960. Informed by a sense of global crisis, work of this period turned to the local as a scale at which to confront this sense of crisis. It was not a mode of escape. A fresh urgency began to fuel the struggle for new ways of thinking about landscape and nature, and new ways of articulating the meanings of place. In Chapter 2, I showed that wildness, in a distinctively British register, has provided a fertile resource for such fresh and inventive articulations. I showed the way in which they can trouble convention and, in doing so, can stray beyond literary aesthetics into challenges to conservation policy. This was a subject picked up again in Chapter 3 when I turned to the ambiguous *terrain vague* of the edgelands, contested spaces in which the binary opposition of the country and the city breaks down, forcing a new reflexivity, both in terms of literary aesthetics *and* conservation and heritage practices. The argument developed across these chapters should be instructive for those curious about the word 'New' in the New Nature Writing, and to those too ready to dismiss the form as 'bourgeois escapism' (Poole 2013). Perhaps more importantly, I hope it might be instructive to authors of nature writing themselves, for whom there is a task set to challenge and to innovate, to search for ways in which their writing can engage with the big, difficult questions facing us today. Richard Mabey, Sue Clifford, Angela King, Tim Robinson and Roger Deakin

set the bar high with their work over the last decades of the twentieth century. With an echo of Eliot in the air, the *tradition* of this New Nature Writing has become a tradition of *innovation*, from Mabey's *The Unofficial Countryside* in 1973 through to Robert Macfarlane's *Landmarks* in 2015.

In all three of these chapters, I showed how a subtle indeterminacy slipped into the understanding of place through the search for those 'new descriptions, fresh thoughts' (Dee 2011: 22). This indeterminacy has served as a vital resource for reimagining our relationship with a changing world. Place has come to blur its edges as it has come into relationship with ambiguity, plurality, wildness, reflexivity and with other places. Why call it place at all then? We might recall Timothy Morton's argument for 'a poetics of anywhere' in which place dissolves as it is interrupted by its own 'uncanny' double (2010: 50–2). But the point of interest is the very moment of tension that this doubleness provokes. It is in this tension that a lyric quality 'renders' a place anew. It recreates a place as it unsettles it. Where a place is recomposed from adventurous angles, where it is made strange through close attention to the particular, where it is enlivened by an author's attention to wildness, then that place shines all the more brightly, like phosphorescence, for having been disturbed. Think of the pluriform ways of relating to place embedded within the language of that 'counter-desecration phrasebook' made by the islanders on Lewis. This inspires Macfarlane's glossary for the whole country, *Landmarks* (2015), in which a fresh linguistic map of the archipelago summons a new sense of place alive with vernacular detail and playful poetry. This is an extraordinary work of grassroots heritage available to be used, as the Lewisian's 'phrasebook' was intended to be used, in making arguments for conservation.

The connection between place writing and place activism was something developed in Chapter 4 when I examined Tim Robinson's whole oeuvre as a practical form of 'deep mapping' on the margins. Tracing the route from his abstract visual art in London galleries across that 'bridge to the real world', I argued that Robinson's quest for 'Space' showed a radical inclusivity. His work breaks down the boundaries between art and life as it breaks down the spatial organization of centre to periphery. Chapter 5 continued this spatial reorganization as I examined the essays, poetry and artwork of the contemporary literary journal *Archipelago*, showing a landscape vision

of Britain and Ireland at an argumentative tilt to its usual orientation. This opened up the possibility of new, fluid, translocal connections between places across the Isles. Chapter 6 offered another example of translocal alliance that emerged from the most unlikely of fluid sources: stone, what James Hutton once called the ‘fracture, flexure and contortion’ of geology in deep time. Kenneth White’s theory of ‘geopoetics’ served as another bridge between place writing and a form of local activism that set out to stimulate the gradual shift in consciousness on the Isle of Harris. In these three chapters, I showed the way place, as that ‘unavoidable challenge of negotiating a here-and-now’, has been made all the more creative and self-reflexive through its relationship to literary aesthetics.

We might think of the idea of lyric place as one that shows both the influence of activism on literary form and the influence of literary form on activism. I offer it here at the end of this book as a way of thinking through the future direction of the New Nature Writing. We have seen, in the essay that Mark Cocker published in *The Spectator* in 2015 (discussed in the Introduction), that there is a need for nature writing to think carefully about its relationship to a damaged landscape and to the conservation practices that seek to intervene. But we have also seen in Macfarlane’s response to this essay that a retreat from aesthetics would be counterproductive. As Macfarlane makes clear, the lyric qualities of the best recent nature writing are imbued with important meanings and provoke searching questions. Rather than retreat in fear of the lyrical quality of nature writing, we might be better served to ask what more it might do. In the many examples that this book gives, the relationship between place writing and place activism has been one of mutual enrichment. Remembering this ought to be instructive for the direction of the form in future.