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The Local

In the autumn of 1984, three debates were held at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in London on successive Thursday evenings to launch the first publication of a new arts and environmental charity that went by the name of Common Ground. The book being launched – *Second Nature* – was an anthology of largely prose non-fiction essays and artworks by some forty authors and artists, all exploring landscape, nature and place in a contemporary context. Though it was not advertised as ‘nature writing’ per se, it nonetheless represents the first collection of British nature writing to have been published after the rise of the environmental movement in the UK throughout the 1970s. Central to the interests of the book was the charity’s guiding principle, ‘local distinctiveness’, foregrounded in the first paragraph of the preface, a principle almost ubiquitous to British conservation and heritage organizations today¹ (Clifford and King 1984: vii). For Common Ground, the idea of ‘local distinctiveness’ held an intertwining of nature and culture, the personal and the political, the local and the global, and the past, the present and the future. ‘We have all become well-informed about the world’s ecological crises,’ claimed Richard Mabey in the introduction (he had been invited by the charity to edit the anthology’s written contributions),

about the destruction of the tropical rain forests, the pollution of the oceans, the profligacy of agribusiness, and even about the economic connections between all these. Yet this knowledge has remained curiously remote, not connected in any obvious way with our ordinary everyday experience. [*Second Nature*’s] origins lie in the need – widely felt, and focussed as a theme for this book by Common Ground – to bring the argument in a very literal

¹ A study undertaken by Common Ground in 2005 showed over two hundred uses of the term ‘local distinctiveness’ in the official documents of government agencies and local authorities (Common Ground 2005: n.p.).

sense back home, to the local landscapes that are most people's firsthand experience of nature and to the variety of personal meanings which they hold for us. (1984: ix-x)

The emphasis on the local was intended to make the more general issues of environmentalism immediate and tangible.

The book, and the three public events at the ICA, were, as the charity claimed, an effort to 're-open the debate about our relationship with the land and with nature', not just as a discussion for professionals with a specialist interest but as a 'practical and philosophical concern for us all' (Common Ground 1983). Press releases and posters of the time had asked provokingly: 'Nature: "red in tooth and claw", polluted and exploited wasteland or pastoral haven, repository of a lost golden age?', 'Who Owns Nature?', 'Who should decide the future of the countryside? Is it a public or private responsibility?' (Common Ground 1983). The debates were free and encouraged anyone who wanted to join in while the editors of the book promised to 'freshen perception' and to help readers 'to see nature and landscapes in new and exciting ways' (Clifford and King 1984: vii). Together they endeavoured to balance the general and the particular, inviting people to look at their own relationship with nature wherever they might be from, rural or urban alike.

Far from promoting that 'ethic of proximity' that Ursula Heise has found to be so detrimental to certain place-based writing in the American tradition (that sense that 'the nearer has priority over the more remote – in space, time, culture, species'), Common Ground's principle of 'local distinctiveness' emerged precisely from a much wider global concern and a desire to put that concern to work in practical ways (Naes qtd. in Heise 2008: 28). It was promoting the idea that the local was something always already embroiled in cross-cutting struggles with national and international issues. Common Ground itself had been founded a year earlier in 1983 by Sue Clifford, Angela King and Roger Deakin in an attempt to address what they felt was an emerging blind spot in the conservation movement of the time. All three had been active members of Friends of Earth in the 1970s, King as their first wildlife campaigner, Clifford as a member of the board and Deakin later as a creative consultant. But all three had begun to feel that Friends of the Earth was putting undue emphasis on statistical and scientific evidence and a professionalized terminology (Smith 2012: n.p.).

The intention, for Friends of the Earth, was to productively engage with national bodies and political administration but these three felt that increasingly this risked alienating people at a time when environmentalism needed to work itself up from the grassroots in local and everyday situations as well. They also felt that emphasis on statistically endangered species of plants and animals, and on Sites of Special Scientific Interest and national parks, important as they all were, left more ordinary and commonplace landscapes exposed and unprotected. A bluebell wood or a primrose bank, a local common or a village green, might not show up on the list of priorities for national conservation and heritage but that did not mean that these places were any less valued by the people who lived locally and drew pleasure and meaning from them. And this was at a time when 'agribusiness' was working its way into both the British vocabulary and the landscape itself, making pervasive changes at an alarming rate. In fact, agricultural developments were exempt from the planning process brought in by the post-war Town and Country Planning Acts leaving people with little recourse to oppose these changes (Shoard 1981: 85).

The cover of *Second Nature* wore a ballpoint-pen sketch of sheep by Henry Moore and might have suggested to some that this would be a collection of essays on the sedentary virtues of the southern English countryside but this was far from the case. In fact, the essays brought together a wide variety of traditional, political and intellectually sharp perspectives on British landscapes, rural and urban, north and south, agricultural, industrial, post-industrial, even militarized, from rural historians such as Ronald Blythe to passionate defenders of nature such as John Fowles to Marxist literary critics such as John Barrell and Raymond Williams. The book offered diverse attempts to explore ways of writing about place, nature and even the rural that went beyond what Williams had called 'the sentimental and intellectualised accounts of an unlocalised "Old England"' but that were instead politically alive and engaged with a distinctly localized and changing, modern world (1973: 20). The book quite self-consciously emulated a nature writing tradition in its non-fiction prose form while at the very same time, in its engagement with the wider 'environmental crises', it refused to reproduce such nostalgic nationalism that nature writing had, at times throughout the middle of the twentieth century, become conflated with.

Jed Esty has shown a particular tendency in rural writing of the period 1930–60 to search out a romantic and insular nationalism during the period of declining imperial power. He describes this as a small and quite retrograde part of that wider ‘anthropological turn’ (which also included the attempt at ‘social and aesthetic renewal’ in the later work of Eliot and Woolf) (2004: 3). It was one in which, faced with the dramatic contraction of the British Empire, English artists and authors began to redeploy ‘colonial tropes’ such as exoticization and primitivism to, among other things, the English rural landscape itself (41). The result in this case was an introverted domestic tourism and something of a retreat into ‘a preservationist national past’ through which ‘the island itself became one large museum’ (42). It was the way in which just such preservationist nationalism had inveigled its way into the conventions of landscape aesthetics that *Second Nature* was resisting. It refused to engage with landscape and place as something to be consumed in a generalized form by a spectator or tourist, rooting its aesthetics, instead, in more local attachments. Esty singles out H. V. Morton’s hugely popular *In Search of England* (1927) (which in ten years had seen twenty-three editions) as an example of the domestic tourism that would take new owners of automobiles out of the city in search of relics and traces of a timeless rural nation that is held aloft above an alien and daunting wider world.

Morton begins *In Search of England* with an image of the country revealing itself to him while suffering from what he fears might be meningitis in Palestine while it is still under British administration: ‘Perhaps in instinctive contrast to the cold, unhappy mountains of Palestine, there rose up in my mind the picture of a village street at dusk with a smell of wood smoke lying in the still air and, here and there, little red blinds shining in the dusk under thatch’ (1927: 2). He puzzles over why, being from London, he would return to such an image of the countryside as home in his mind rather than something more urban, concluding: ‘I have learnt since that this vision of mine is a common one to exiles all over the world: we think of home, we long for home, but we see something greater – *we see England*. This village that symbolizes England sleeps in the subconsciousness of many a townsman’ (2). A search for such a psychological, generalized national archetype, then, inflects the book’s breathless travels with a sensual and emotional romanticism in which place names ‘curl themselves around [the] heart’ and places themselves are, again and again, ‘felt’ as soon as they are entered (77).

Patrick Wright gives an account of such bracing, sensual nationalism, full of 'mythicising vagueness' in his attack on an emphatically national heritage industry, *On Living in an Old Country*, written during the Thatcher years and published just a year after *Second Nature* (1985: 79). He describes it as 'a kind of sacrament encountered only in fleeting if well remembered experiences' (79). He quotes from H. A. L. Fisher's essay on 'The Beauty of England', published in a collection edited by the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England in 1932:

The unique and incommunicable beauty of the English landscape constitutes for most Englishmen the strongest of all the ties which bind them to their country. However far they travel, they carry the English landscape in their hearts. As the scroll unwinds itself, scene after scene returns with its complex association of sight and hearing, the emerald green of an English May, the pellucid trout-stream, ... the church spire pointing upwards to the pale-blue sky, the lark rising from the plough in the March wind, the morning salutation of blackbird or thrush from garden laurels. These and many other notes blend in a harmony the elements of which we do not attempt to disentangle, for each part communicates its sweetness to the other. (Fisher quoted in Wright 1985: 79)

Here we have Williams's 'unlocalised "Old England"' in a sensual reel of garish ('emerald green') but vague ('blackbird or thrush') spectacle.

It is never to the same gushing extent but we can nonetheless find similar *moments* of mythification and insular retreat in Henry Williamson's *An Anthology of Modern Nature Writing* (1936). There is much to distinguish this collection from the sentimental work of Morton and Fisher as Williamson is a circumspect editor, endeavouring to bring to the public a selection of the best writing about nature, from authors of 'integrity' whose 'powers of observation' keep things 'fresh, interesting, living' (x). Nonetheless, there are notable moments that fall foul of this generalized rural imaginary as well, suggesting that it was part of a wider cultural and historical structure of feeling that began to shift later on. Williamson reproduces a section from Edward Thomas's *The South Country* and ends it on the image of a mythic, rural old woman sat symbolically between an historic stately home and the new modern road: 'Just beyond, a gnarled lime avenue leads to a grey many-windowed house of stone within a stately park. Opposite the gate an old woman sits on the grass, her feet

in the dust at the edge of the road; motor-cars sprinkle her and turn her black to drab; she sits by the wayside *eternally*, expecting nothing' (103; emphasis added). Raymond Williams addressed a similar conceit in Thomas when the poet created the figure of 'Lob' in his poem of that name, a 'single legendary figure' and 'immemorial peasant', 'a version of history which succeeds in cancelling history' (1973: 256–7).

Likewise, later Williamson reproduces an introductory paragraph from George Bourne's *Memoirs of a Surrey Labourer* (1907) in which Bourne explains why the man whose lively tales he so carefully transcribes 'never knew that he had been made the subject of a book'. 'It would have been a mistake to tell him,' he suggests, since 'obscure and unsuspecting he continued his work, and his pleasant garrulity went on in its unaccustomed way'. It is as if the labourer's primitive state was something to be protected from the modern world of publishing (104). The anthology even opens with a series of extraordinarily vivid scenes of rural life and labour excerpted from Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) but the effect is to feel you are reading a rather strangely abridged version of the novel in which all class consciousness and social relations have been censored, their particular tensions swallowed up by something much more diffuse and generalized (1–15).

Compare these to *Second Nature's* opening essay which begins in Cumbria but not with the Cumbria of the Lakes so familiar to the Romantic explorer and the modern tourist, a region Andrew Gibson has described as 'that privileged repository of the national soul' (2017: n.p.). It begins further west near the coast, appropriately enough just outside the national park with an essay by the poet Norman Nicholson who describes his childhood home of Millom, a mining town on the Duddon Estuary. Millom was a centre for the mining of iron ore during the Industrial Revolution and the industry's mark still sits on the landscape confusing traditional notions of the rural with a more complicated accretion, 'a world of rock and bare fell-sides, slate walls and threadbare pasture, of half-bankrupt farms, deserted mine-shafts, short-time working and the dole' (9). Millom is a place on the periphery in a range of different ways. And yet Nicholson finds it interwoven with a tenderness and beauty as 'the rarest flowers were to be found among the old mines, [and] the best place to see wildfowl was the reservoir of the ironworks' (10). Even the geology of the place, the local slate in its full variety of texture and colour,

is best examined in 'the walls of the back streets which were built with it' (10). Nicholson's town in all its 'local distinctiveness' is a place in which the earth and its flora and fauna are conspicuously intertwined with the human and historical landscape, its industrial and economic upheavals. By beginning *Second Nature* with Nicholson's intensely local essay about Millom, a town on the overlooked margins of one of the most symbolically *national* landscapes in the UK, and a town in which the pressures of modernity are overtly on show, something of an editorial bias shows through. Here the local seems a contested space at odds with a nationalist landscape aesthetic and a reading of *Second Nature* as an intervention in the very tradition to which it is contributing offers itself up. The local asserts its distinctiveness in all its difficulty and complexity as a tough survivor of the changeable global economy of commodities. The local is not, in this sense, a retreat from modernity here but its very currency, the material being composed and recomposed by it.

Second Nature's later and much tighter focus on 'local distinctiveness' had an urgent contemporaneity that set it apart from the broad-brushed generalizations of Morton and Fisher. Its authors were also rarely to be found 'looking in' on the local in the manner of Morton's pacey and impassioned blur but were more often than not personally invested in some way in the places they wrote about. In fact, what emerges through the book is a busy, heterogeneous vision of contrasting localities that question and break down the binary opposition of country to city and in its place show much more discrete, complex and individual values. Kim Taplin's essay and poems for *Second Nature* describe what she calls 'the new enclosures' of land imposed by the US and UK governments at new military sites, particularly those of Lakenheath in Suffolk, High Wycombe in Buckinghamshire, Falsane in Dumbartonshire and of course Greenham Common in Berkshire (119–31). There are vividly observed images of, for example, a warbler ('is it a marsh warbler or a reed warbler?' she wonders) on a river bank over a patch of sprouting water-mint ('I saw down its throat as it sang') but it is also framed 'under the roar of the F-11 bombers' (120). This particular desire to get the intensely local *right*, even down to the particular type of warbler, while the machinery of nuclear war passes overhead is, to an extent, quite eccentric but it also hammers home a point.

'Any natural thing truly seen and told conveys essence,' she argues in a phrase carrying echoes of John Ruskin (119). The military occupation of land misunderstands this 'essence,' so her argument goes, but forces its misunderstanding into reality nonetheless, imposing it on the land. For Taplin the daunting scale of this international military intervention makes getting the local *right* all the more important. The struggle to convey that elusive 'essence' stands for a desire to do justice to a place that means something to her, and is, as she goes on, 'one reason why we need art as well as committees in defence of nature' (119). The difference between these unconventional, urgent and localized writings in *Second Nature* and either the fleeting domestic tourism of works by Morton, or the generalized nationalism of Fisher's essay for Campaign for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE) – elements of which at times crept into the kinds of nature writing being promoted in the 1930s – makes for a striking contrast. We can read in this contrast something of the shift in nature writing that emerged after the environmental movement. It is a shift characterized by a move towards the local, not as a retreat from modernity, but as a return to it from the generalizations of a national landscape aesthetic.

Second Nature would be set the difficult task of straddling two traditions, using each to intervene in the other. On the one hand it was an anthology of nature writing like Henry Williamson's; on the other it was a collection of environmental essays in the (more recent) tradition of Edward Goldsmith's *A Blueprint for Survival* (1972). As nature writing it was more politically and globally conscious; as an environmental call to arms it was more personal and localized. For Common Ground, the local was important because it was the scale at which 'the reference is reality, indifference is unusual, [and] detachment is difficult' (Clifford 1996: 6–7). Arising from the culture of protest and activism that had characterized the early years of Friends of the Earth, Common Ground put a premium on the global citizenship and participatory democracy embodied by the influential slogan 'think globally, act locally'. Landscape aesthetics were not something to be divorced from such a commitment to action and the emphasis on 'local distinctiveness' as the principle driving *Second Nature* was an attempt to provoke new ways of looking at and thinking about landscape, nature and place in the hope that they, in turn, might lead to an intensified identification with place and an accompanying surge in local cultural activity.

Following the particular version of the local that emerged in Britain out of the environmental movement, and more particularly out of Common Ground's rooting of environmental thought in a British tradition of nature writing, I will trace the idea of the local through three literary texts in this chapter: Roger Deakin's *Waterlog* (1999), Alice Oswald's *Dart* (2002) and Tim Dee's *Four Fields* (2013). The first two of these texts arose in close connection to a local community conservation and heritage project by Common Ground called 'Confluence' which ran for three years from 1997 to 2000 along the River Stour in Dorset. By examining the connections between this elemental and watery project and, in particular, Deakin's and Oswald's influential books, I will show the way some of the 'heterodox and experimental' leanings of the New Nature Writing can be traced to, and have taken inspiration from, a particular intersection of environmentalism and the arts rooted in this new localism (Cowley 2008: 10). All three of these books, though, offer experimental attempts to reframe the landscapes they are writing about, grounding them in the aesthetics of local distinctiveness, often at an argumentative tilt to the aesthetics of nationalism. Far from leading to a form of localism founded on an insular assertion of fixed identity, in these books this produces work that is eager to experiment, that is playful and alive to ambiguity, that attempts to include marginalized voices and problematic conflicts and that is vitally connected to the wider world. In the end, drawing on the work of Fiona Stafford, I argue that, far from being what divides us, the local is precisely what we have in common as a global community and that this is something that has come to find an important register in the work of contemporary nature writing.

The British tradition of nature writing, as it has been inflected by that generation of environmentalists and conservationists of which Mabey and Clifford, King and Deakin were a part, has foregrounded socially and politically contested sites, plural meanings and values of place heritage, and new ways of looking and writing that have helped to stimulate a fresh culture of localism. In this tradition the local is not a site of retreat but a vital scale at which we can apprehend the changing world in which we live. Among geographers studying the rise of what has become a very broad spectrum of activity covered by the term 'new localism' (which can include anything from grassroots anarchism to top-down government planning initiatives), the definitions of 'localism' and the ways in which it is framed and understood

have become increasingly nuanced. Nick Clarke has recently surveyed these different definitions and suggested that among the most recent (and, I would argue, the most useful) is that given by post-structural geographers who view the local and localism 'as open, porous, permeable, heterogeneous, incoherent, dynamic and incomplete; a product of mixture, encounter, intermingling [and] characterised by juxtapositions and co-presences' (2013: 499). In this, Clarke is influenced by Doreen Massey's more progressive understanding of place which has, for some time now, argued that 'the identities of places are always unfixed, contested and multiple' (1994: 5).

In the 1990s, Massey interrogated what she called a 'reactionary' view of place (that emerged in relation to the rise of local studies) 'as bounded, as in various ways a site of an authenticity, as singular, fixed and unproblematic in its identity' (1994: 5). It is just such a critique of place and locality that has been extended by environmentally minded literary critics such as Timothy Morton and Ursula Heise in their respective moves towards a more fluid and decentred 'ecological thought' and an 'eco-cosmopolitan' sense of planet, both of which were addressed in the introduction. Building on the work of these important critics, I argue that Deakin, Oswald and Dee show that such fluid and cosmopolitan moves can come precisely *through* local work. However, it is worth gesturing here to a debate between Massey's view of places as open and unfixed and the work of Arif Dirlik who has argued for what he calls a 'critical localism' in which a place might be, if not bounded, nonetheless 'grounded'. The local, 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' (1996: 155). Though it might seem strange to begin an exploration of such watery and riverine localism with such an earthy metaphor, it is precisely through such a 'grounded' and 'critical localism' that place and the local begin to open up in intricate and relational ways. But Dirlik's point is that they can do so – they can be 'open and relational' – without simply becoming *space*. For the people that live in these places or are invested in them, these places can maintain something of their autonomy, their capacity to assert, contest and create identity and meaning for themselves, whether through community activism and conservation work, or through written and artistic representations, or even through those lively points of intersection between the two.

Confluence

In 1997, Common Ground began work on a three-year celebration of the River Stour in Dorset. Its project 'Confluence' was a celebration more broadly of water itself and the vital but often overlooked role it plays in our lives, but as ever it sought to explore the broader theme through a lens focused on the local. In this case though, the local implied a shift both up and down the scales of place, both down the scale to a fluvial register that drew attention to one particular aspect of the towns and villages it focused on but also up the scale insofar as it drew a number of these places into relation with one another and with wider, water-related issues. In an introduction to the project's anthology of poetry *The River's Voice* (2000), Clifford and King gestured towards some of the emerging concerns around global water security that were being aired in environmental debates at the time: 'Consider the melting of the ice caps, the damming of the Hwang Ho, the dramatic retreat of glaciers in the Himalayas and the Rocky Mountains,' they proposed; 'consider the drying up of the world's fourth largest inland sea, Lake Aral in Central Asia' (where 60,000 square kilometres of water had evaporated over three decades). 'Then look at the spring, stream or river which is the reason why your settlement is where it is' (14). It was also in 1997 that the social historian and contributor to *Second Nature* Colin Ward published his book *Reflected in Water*, a critique of the creeping privatization of water in Britain and a study of the wider displacements of millions globally through dam-building.

Clifford and King and Ward were concerned that water, something they believed to be a common good belonging to all, was being abused and mismanaged in private hands and undervalued as a fragile global resource. They felt that the long history of local communities' relationships with water was being lost and with it a body of knowledge and culture that might be of value in an increasingly unstable-looking future. This prompted an attempt to find imaginative ways of reacquainting people with the rivers, streams, wells and springs in their local areas; ways of opening the idea of a river up into a more expansive and interconnected view of the whole catchment, its geology, its histories, its people, its uses; the many different names and their meanings, the wildlife, flowers and trees; and all of these things as a part of what the charity described as an 'assemblage', one founded again on that principle of local distinctiveness (Clifford and King 1999: 8).

The fluid subject matter of the project also set out to draw attention to the living process of place itself and led to the form of the project being focused on music and performance. Not only this, but it was also choreographed carefully across space and time. Confluence saw Common Ground commission and organize around forty, mostly musical, participatory events running from source to sea along the River Stour over a period of three years. The project set out to unearth and celebrate local and oral histories of rivers, farming practices, folklore, names of even the smallest streams, architecture and archaeology, customs such as well dressings and baptisms, and the languages and cultures of the kinds of livelihood associated with rivers, all as a way of opening them up imaginatively. It also, however, opened the places themselves up as well, drawing attention to the fact that all of these disparate places in the catchment of the Stour were connected by the same water on which they depended. The emphasis on music encouraged the widest participation and soon new choirs were formed, and new ballads, carols, poems and drinking songs were written and performed by residents that drew on their memories, local knowledge and research of the river catchment.² From source to sea, it had people working together to produce one long living performance that, early on, looked ahead to the later events and, later on, reflected on the events gone by. The project was trans-local then, but more than that, it served as a living metonym for much wider interconnections around water itself. While the emphasis of the project seems to have been, at times, a little too emphatically celebratory, perhaps at the expense of the darker side of river stories – histories of drownings, for example, or contemporary battles against pollution – it did nonetheless encourage a dynamic and outward-looking view on the local, encouraging people to consider the influx and outflow of water through a town, a parish, a street, even a house.

Rivers have long been deployed in the traditional 'high culture' of Europe to demonstrate power and territory, and to support and establish national myths and their imagined communities. We might think of the classical statues of the Tiber and the Nile unearthed in Rome in the early sixteenth century and placed

² Detail about this project comes from two key sources: first, it comes from the booklet *Rivers, Rhynes and Running Brooks* (Clifford and King 2000a); and second from selected editions of the *Confluence Newsletter* editions 1–10 (Common Ground 1998–2000). These are to be found in the Special Collections Library at the University of Exeter.

next to one another in the Vatican by Pope Leo X. In an anthropomorphized display of power and prestige they proposed the association of one great civilization with another. From that moment on, as Claudio Lazarro has shown, rivers featured as speaking parts in civic and political theatre, symbols of their localities and public mouthpieces of territorial relations under the power of the state. This tradition found its way to England when, in 1545, John Leland wrote his long poem *Cygne Cantio* praising Henry VIII in the voice of a swan swimming the River Thames from Oxford to Greenwich, a route that takes in Windsor, Hampton Court and the Tower of London on the way. By the nineteenth century, the same route had become a two-day excursion by boat for wealthy passengers providing what Simon Schama calls ‘an entire course of gratifying instruction in the history of the British constitution’ (1995: 363). It was John Leland, too, who had first ventured out in 1539 to travel England and write a topography of the country, gathering the nation into one comprehensive text in the hope that King Henry VIII would ‘have ready knowledge at the fyrst sighte’ of his domain, a project that would soon be continued by William Camden and Christopher Saxton (qtd. in Schwyzer 2009: 244).

We might also think of Michael Drayton’s early-seventeenth-century poetic atlas of Britain *Poly-Olbion* (published in two parts in 1612 and 1622) in which the geography and a certain imaginative history of the country is spoken in the voices of the rivers themselves, gathering the country into a harmonious unity comparable to Saxton’s first *Atlas* (1579). The River Dart in the West Country, for example, tells the tale (repeated from Geoffrey of Monmouth) of the founding of Britain by Brutus and his boat full of soldiers after the Trojan war. It is an originary myth intended to secure a classical lineage for the nation. They make landfall at Totnes a little upstream on the River Dart, kill the aboriginal giant Gogmagog and discover the race of Britons, so called after Brutus (we will return to this tale when we look at Alice Oswald shortly) (Drayton 1612: 11–12). Each of these allegorical representations of a river performs its own riverine aesthetic in order to lay claim to territory or to assert an identity, to gather in and govern the nation.

However, in such nationalist aesthetics, rivers become entities symbolically separated from their material reality. They seem fixed in a reified and idealized air at odds with their everyday treatment and use. In his *H₂O and the Waters of*

Forgetfulness (1986), the Austrian critic and philosopher Ivan Illich sets out to explore the 'dual nature' of water through what he calls a 'historicity of matter' (4). In understanding the history of water, rather than inquiring after its cultural representations, images and meanings that might offer an ideal and figurative account, he inquires after the material processes that *produce* water in its civic and social form. How do we treat it and change it from one thing into another? What does it become through us and how does that new thing relate to its earlier form running down from the moors or mountains? Thinking along these lines we might ask what it means, then, when a contradiction occurs between the symbolic representation of rivers as, in the words of Simon Schama again, 'the arterial bloodstream of the people [of a nation]' and the state of crisis that had emerged in the 1970s and 1980s in the UK over the pollution and degradation of its actual rivers (1995: 363). By the time of *Confluence*, great improvements had been made in water quality but it was nonetheless reported in 1995 that nearly a quarter of all drinking water in England and Wales was failing to meet the requirements of a new pesticide test (Ward 1997: 120). The government had also begun to bend and undermine European conservation laws. The EU had set environmental standards on how much pollution was permitted to be drained into rivers as opposed to the open sea so, as Colin Ward recounts, the Secretary of State for the Environment, John Gummer, in 1994 declared forty-eight inland kilometres of the River Humber in the north and a similar distance on the River Severn in the west to be open sea. It was a decision that was later to be found 'unlawful' in the High Court (119–20).

In opposition to such national manipulations of the cultural geography of rivers, *Common Ground* were keen to explore a riverine art grounded in the very localized ways in which ordinary life was connected to water. *Confluence* would not be a project *about* the River Stour so much as a project *on* and *with* the river, involving the people who lived on its banks or along its tributaries. The project began at the river's source, in the landscaped gardens of the Stourhead estate and the first event saw a storyteller take people on a walk around the appropriately mythic structures of the park telling creation myths from various different cultures in a tour focused on the idea of origins. Downstream at Fontmell Magna, at the crack of dawn on 1 May, people were invited to take a guided walk along the river to listen to the chorus of birds before settling down over breakfast to a performance of a new piece of music

based on the song of the riverside birds they had been listening to as they walked. Collaborating with a local historian, the resident composer Karen Wimbhurst wrote a new choral work for a ruined watermill in Sturminster Newton that resurrected an historic glossary of working terminology associated with the mill. It was performed one evening when the mill itself was floodlit and recordings of its working parts were amplified across the river to people on the far bank. A new eight-piece group called the Cutwater Band made a number of public appearances over the three years working their way downstream playing river-based folk songs on the many bridges to groups of picnickers sat in meadows on the banks. In the evenings there was a raucous 'Fish Cabaret' in Gillingham which was so popular it was followed a year later by a similar 'Rain Cabaret' in Winterborne Stickland. Musicians and a group of plumbers came together in one instance to develop a range of musical instruments made from household plumbing. Performances were led by the 'boghorn' which made use of the inflow and outflow of a toilet bowl and was accompanied by a calorifier adapted with a top-mounted trombone slide and various percussive instruments made from dolly tubs, steel pipes, a galvanized immersion heater and a set of ballcock maracas.³

Perhaps the largest and most surprising event of the project was in the summer of 2000, when the streets of Blandford Forum were taken over by a 'Water Market' where a diverse array of perspectives on the river found themselves exhibited together for the day. At the Water Market you could take to the river for canoe lessons, try your hand at water divining, seek advice from plumbers and hydro-energy engineers or learn about riverbank wildlife conservation; you could try organically grown local watercress, freshly caught trout and a range of different mineral waters from natural springs in neighbouring counties. Confluence was an intensely local project but by the end it had received coverage in a number of national newspapers, the idea of water markets had caught on in other counties and the sound of the boghorn had been heard across the country on BBC Radio 4. There was something captivating about its heterogeneous way of thinking about, and working with, landscape and water in imaginative but quite ordinary ways. Albeit rather

³ Detail about these events comes from selected editions of the *Confluence Newsletter* editions 1–10 (Common Ground 1998–2000). These are to be found in the Special Collections Library at the University of Exeter.

celebratory, Confluence stimulated a dynamic creativity at the heart of the places in which it worked. It generated a revitalized exploration of how the people of the places identified with their locality that was simultaneously grounded in reflections on local history, culture and wildlife and outward-looking and global in its thematic concerns.

There are two books associated with this little-known project that have come to be much better known than the project itself and that themselves have served as important precursors to the wider New Nature Writing as it came to be identified later on after 2005. They are Roger Deakin's *Waterlog* and Alice Oswald's *Dart* both of which were pioneering in their own way. As has been mentioned, Deakin had worked with Clifford and King at Friends of the Earth and in 1983 had founded Common Ground with them, working on projects associated with trees especially. *Waterlog* was not a part of Confluence and Deakin, by that time, was not working particularly closely with Common Ground but it is a book that emerged from those early attempts to turn a fresh eye on landscape and revitalize a tradition of topographical writing, and Deakin would visit Dorset for a launch of the book at a Confluence event in 1999 (both Clifford and King are also thanked in the acknowledgements as well) (Common Ground (December 1998–August 2000) 4: 2).

Waterlog is a book of domestic British travel writing with a difference. Unlike the first topographical and chorographic works of Leland, Saxton and Camden, and unlike the much later works of domestic tourism by H. V. Morton and J. B. Priestly in the twentieth century, Deakin was not in search of the nation. *Waterlog* is not a book that views the land as dominion to be summed up and mapped, or as scenery to be consumed at arm's length. On the contrary, Deakin immersed himself completely and set out to swim a fairly ad hoc selection of the country's lakes, seas, channels, tarns, rivers and ponds. Though the book travels, it does not attempt to bring together a consistent national geography of Britain. Rather, it is an attempt to alter our perspective, to localize it in a distinctly corporeal way, looking for what he calls a 'frog's-eye view' (1999: 1). Deakin was, as his friend Robert Macfarlane has suggested (borrowing a phrase from John Hanson Mitchell), an 'explorer of the undiscovered country of the nearby' (2010b). Deakin describes swimming as 'a subversive activity' because it breaks out of the 'signposted, labelled, and officially "interpreted" ... virtual reality of things' (1999: 4). Swimming appeals to him because it offers

a more 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' (1999: 4). Wordsworth casts a long shadow over the book and the search for such intimate geographies stems from a fear that 'the world is too much with us' and that we might be better guided by something closer to the earth, or nature, that which subtends our human environments. The style of thinking that comes from swimming with its 'overwhelming' experience of the present is a loosening of the usual human, rational grasp. It too offers an intense localization of experience that opens out onto something much larger but, for Deakin, it is a form of personal, embodied experience opening out onto a lively and enchanted sense of wonder at elemental creation. The book flirts with the idea of retreat, escape, refuge but it is not so much the refuge that is of interest as the liminal edge between the world and the elemental immersion.

Escape gives way to trespass in Deakin's desire to get under the driven and purposeful geography of modern life and he is not afraid of the conflicts this throws up. 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' (1999: 31). Elsewhere he coins the verb 'to quive' ('I *quived* silently into the reeds and floated there up to my nose like a crocodile until they had gone') from the name of the relentless pursuer of the protagonist in Geoffrey Household's *Rogue Male*, Major Quive-Smith (1999: 60). Running through the book is a certain self-confessed 'boyish pleasure' (another phrase from Wordsworth) that is exuberant and playful and seems to wave its truant pages at the 'getting and spending' of the inland world (60). It is this exuberance perhaps that has made the book so influential on the wild swimming movement that seems to have flourished in the book's wake (see, e.g., Kate Rew's guidebook *Wild Swim* (2008) which acknowledges a debt to Deakin and *Waterlog*).

However, like the Confluence project that was contemporary to it, it does also make a powerful argument for becoming better acquainted with our waters in their modern form, at times with a level of pollution '240 times over the recommended safe limit' (Deakin 1999: 141), at times drastically 'over-abstracted' (175) or 'humiliated' in 'outsized concrete canyons' (67–8). The Romantic theme of 'getting back to nature' is complicated throughout by that

dual identity of water again, reminding us of Jamie Lorimer's multiplication of 'natures' discussed in the introduction to this book (2015: 7). After swimming in the River Lark in Suffolk and discovering that it was once known locally as the Jordan for the baptisms that had been performed in it until 1972, Deakin phones the Environment Agency to enquire whether it might once again be safe to do so only to be told that his question is 'multifunctional and could not therefore be answered over the telephone' (1999: 66). After following up the inquiry with a letter he is warned of a whole list of diseases associated with sewage effluent and advised not to immerse his congregation (he is mistaken for a priest) (66).

One of the most striking passages in fact comes towards the end when he visits Camden Council's Oasis leisure centre in Covent Garden where, in the late 1990s, you could swim in an outdoor pool for only £1. As he looks up at the city, juxtaposed with such a built and developed environment, something of the ambiguous and liminal geography of water is amplified. Immersed in water he is at the interface of the human and elemental environments, looking in from a partial outside. If one of the achievements of the new form of nature writing to emerge from *Second Nature* was to overcome the binary opposition of country and city established by a metropolitan perspective on the rural, here it is turned on its head in an elemental and liminal 'frog's eye view' on the capital city itself. *Waterlog* is a book about our capacity to feel enchanted by that most local of all apprehensions, personal immersion, 'full of mysteries, doubts and uncertainties' (86).

All around, London was breathing, clicking and buzzing under an orange sky. Floating on my back in the pool and looking up, I saw the balconies of council flats and bright offices lit up with people at computers in the windows, and, up above, a black starry sky with now and again a jet. As a swimmer, I felt connected to everyday life in a way I never do in an indoor pool. (317)

The immersion in water seems oddly continuous with an immersion in the 'everyday life' of the city and yet it seems to revitalize that everyday life as well. It seems balanced ambiguously between presence and suspension, intimacy and hiatus. Like the riverine localism of the Confluence project that frayed the edges of the places it connected along the route of the river, the identity of

place becomes a slippery thing, always ready to be reconstituted by fresh ways of looking. Deakin's sense of enchantment is always grounded in local detail, but the local itself is a Heraclitean and replenishing thing.

In a review of a number of New Nature Writing books, and responding to a conference in Cambridge in 2007 on 'Passionate Natures' (organized and run by Robert Macfarlane in memory of Deakin), David Matless addresses 'questions of affect, enchantment and animation' that were becoming characteristic of the form (2009: 185). He proposes setting out a continuum of 'wonder' on which books of the genre might be placed, with 'Wonderful!!!' at one end and 'I wonder???' at the other (184). His concern is that 'for all its joy and elation, [enchantment] can carry a submissive quality' and his words are directed at Deakin's (and Macfarlane's) boyish and exuberant prose style (185). However, there is also room here for a nuanced understanding of enchantment in a modern context. Jane Bennett has recently made a claim for enchantment as, in fact, 'a state of interactive fascination, not fall-to-your-knees awe' (2001: 5). She concedes that the charge of 'naive optimism' that is most often raised against it does suppose 'links between enchantment and mindlessness, between joy and forgetfulness' but adds that sometimes 'a certain forgetfulness is ethically indispensable' (10), especially in pulling us out of 'enervating cynicism' (13). *Waterlog* seems to operate in that space of 'interactive fascination' and it gives the book an individual but strong moral charge that will no doubt encourage its readers, not only to take pleasure from, but also to care for, their local rivers. Its connection to Common Ground's 'Confluence' project is a reminder of that – emerging from a convergence of the arts and the conservation movement – it is a book that poses a challenge to more top-down projects of chorography or the urban preoccupations of picturesque tourism, the agendas of which have been related to stabilizing or homogenizing aesthetics of national identity.

Dart

In December 2003 Robert Macfarlane published something of a call to arms in defence of British nature writing. He began this by offering a strong defence of Alice Oswald's book-length poem *Dart* (winner of the 2001 T. S. Eliot Award)

from an attack by A. N. Wilson. For Macfarlane, *Dart* might have been a long poem rather than a prose work but its vivid and innovative representation of place aligned it with a resurgent interest in the literature of landscape, place and nature. In a gripe over the relationship between poetry and nature, Wilson had 'blamed Wordsworth' for the expectation that 'poets ought to be country dwellers' and 'lovers of unwrecked England'. The vitriol was surprising. Wilson goes on:

When the radio performance of *Dart* was over, I sat down and read the book through. For half an hour, it produced in me the novel sensation of wishing, quite passionately, that the rivers of England could be filled with nuclear waste and the countryside concreted over. Of course the feeling evaporated. But it reminded me that there are more ways than one of being corrupted. (2003: n.p.)

Macfarlane was curious about where this was coming from and traced it back to Stella Gibbons's *Cold Comfort Farm*, a 1932 parody of the popular rural novel that planted suspicion of rural representations generally in the British psyche. This, of course, speaks to the kinds of warnings offered by Williams in *The Country and the City* as well but what Macfarlane suggests is that this prejudice had eclipsed a whole body of work that explored what he called 'sanctity in the human relationship with the natural world at a time of cultural cynicism and disconnection' (2003: n.p.). A certain prejudice was preventing people from acknowledging the world of difference between, for example, the stereotypes of Mary Webb's rural novels (it was Webb more than anyone, though also the lingering influence of Hardy and Lawrence, that *Cold Comfort Farm* was attacking), or the distant, idealized urban perceptions of the countryside that Williams was so careful to historicize, and a more sensitized, intelligent tradition of which Macfarlane felt Oswald's *Dart* was a part. He mentions a handful of British and Irish authors for whom landscape and place have featured importantly in subtle and complex ways, and who have themselves featured importantly in the post-war canon, among them Seamus Heaney, Geoffrey Hill, Ronald Blythe, Gavin Maxwell and Bruce Chatwin.

Macfarlane's argument recalls the agenda of *Second Nature* twenty years on, though also, perhaps, it suggests how that earlier work was slipping from memory. In fact, a subsequent series of essays that he published in *The Guardian* in an attempt to revise and revitalize the popular perception

of landscape writing is collected on *The Guardian's* website as his 'Common Ground' essays now in a nod of allegiance (Macfarlane 2005a). That he singles out Alice Oswald (as well as, it should be added, Roger Deakin and Richard Mabey) is no surprise. As a poet Oswald has shown that same experimental search for new perspectives, new ways of thinking about and writing about place and this is nowhere more evident than in *Dart*. She reflects, in a Ted Hughes Memorial Lecture, on her desire to break down a sense of distance that she attributes to a 'lyrical, romantic, pastoral tradition of "Nature poetry"', one that she suggests feels 'as if the poet was sitting on a rock on a hill looking at the world through a telescope' (2005b: n.p.). Again, then, we have an author writing about landscape anxious about the particular 'Nature' tradition she draws on. Hughes was a great influence on her attempt to break down this distance, but so too had been Sue Clifford and Angela King with their work on *Confluence*, though this is less well acknowledged. In fact, Oswald had contributed two 'river poems' to Common Ground's anthology *The River's Voice* edited by Clifford and King and published as a part of *Confluence* in 2000. One of her poems had even been illustrated and printed on a postcard for the project's publicity. *Dart* itself also makes reference to two of the more obscure sources from a reading list on rivers published by Common Ground as a part of the project, but perhaps most striking is the fact that in its draft stages Oswald was also thinking about *Dart* in musical terms. Early on she described her attempt 'to orchestrate [the poem] like a kind of Jazz, with various river-workers and river dwellers composing their own parts' (1999: n.p.). This immediately brings to mind the participatory musical events that Common Ground had been choreographing along the Stour, the choirs writing new watery ballads and drinking songs, the musical plumbers and the local history groups, all collaborating together on new musical works celebrating the river and the cultures and working landscapes that it has drawn to its banks.

The reason for drawing this connection with Common Ground is not to undermine the originality of what Oswald was doing – the poem goes far beyond these connections and takes the voice of the River Dart in the poem in its own remarkable direction – but rather it is to see the poem's use of a heteroglossic or polyvocal form not, as some critics have suggested, as drawing on Eliot's *The Waste Land*, but within its rightful context of collaboration between the conservation movement and the arts, a collaboration that helped to shift the British literary aesthetics of landscape away from a generalized

nationalism towards more experimental practices working in thoughtful ways with real people and emerging out of distinctive place cultures. Oswald no doubt saw the value in Confluence's multifaceted approach to the Stour catchment, its locally distinctive assemblage of cultural history, wildlife and natural energy and, much as Clifford and King would have wanted, her poem emerged as something of a parallel project in the catchment of the Dart. She does something very different with *Dart* in the end but the imagination and community participation in the 'Confluence' project do seem to have inspired something in her.

Dart is one long book-length poem that follows the West Country river from its source in the upper reaches of Dartmoor down through the villages and towns of south Devon to the sea on the south coast at Dartmouth. Like Michael Drayton's seventeenth-century *Poly-Olbion* it is articulated in the first person and Oswald claims in an introductory note that 'all voices are to be read as the river's mutterings' (Oswald 2002a: ii). However, the voice is based upon a carefully crafted composite of tape-recorded interviews that she conducted with people along the river:

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. (1999: n.p.)

This is language figured collaboratively and with an unusual self-restraint ('very against my grain'). The craft itself becomes a matter of negotiating between artistic vision and real voices, an inclusive balancing act.

The poem begins in the mode of a question – 'Who's that moving alive over the moor?' – and continues with an animalistic curiosity nosing its way into sense like Ted Hughes's 'Wodwo', less an articulation of meaning than one long listening inquiry.⁴ Deryn Rees-Jones has noticed this parallel too, as both

⁴ 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.

(Hughes, 'Wodwo' in 2003: 183)

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' (2005: 235). Like 'Wodwo' then, *Dart* must discover itself through articulating what it encounters, in this case the language of others. It is a fugitive voice in search of its own continuity, moving from being to being: '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' (2002: 7). This 'soft' listening voice of the poem was there right from its methodological beginnings in research. As the ferryman between Dartmouth and Kingswear said when asked if he recognized 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 2002b).

One of the particular achievements of this method is to bring to bear in the poem a range of surprisingly intimate working vocabularies and turns of phrase: from the poacher's dialect term 'voler' meaning the 'unique clean line a salmon makes in water' (2002a: 38) to the water abstractor who describes the way sewage is 'stirred and settled out and wasted off, looped back, macerated, digested, clarified and returned to the river' (2002: 30). Or the following drawn from conversations with a worker at the woollen mill:

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)

In each there is embedded a distinct way of thinking about and apprehending the river in which the river's cultural meanings begin to proliferate in intricate ways. The poacher's predatory and quiet watchfulness, the water abstractor's machinic efficiency or the wool worker's bouncing, kinetic energy: each reveals a dialogue with qualities that the river affords for different communities of people. This micro-localism is so very far removed from the riverine chorography of Michael Drayton's *Poly-Olbion*, even subversively so. By choosing to present the many voices of the poem as the river's one voice, *Dart* emulates Drayton's own many-voiced, many-rivered Britain, but the difference is one of scale. While Drayton gathers the many regions into one voice, Oswald shows even the one region to be intricately

composed of disparate voices, striking up an interesting intertextual dialogue with *Poly-Olbion*. A closer look at the way this dialogue plays out shows a curious tension at work in the way that Oswald inflects the traditions she is working within.

Poly-Olbion was published in parts from 1612 onwards, following a wave of chorographical writings⁵ and Christopher Saxton's *Atlas* of 1579, the first collection of county maps of Britain. However, while it fits in with these other projects that helped to bring the nation as a whole under the purview and control of a centralized authority, *Poly-Olbion* was also subversive in the way it asserted its own authority and in this sense it does bear closer comparison with Oswald's *Dart*. Drayton is preoccupied with rivers, most of his text being given over to their description in one way or another. He is quite conscious of their capacity to be, as Andrew McRae suggests, 'at once evocative of place yet curiously placeless' (2008: 508). 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.

(1612: 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 itself. 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

⁵ 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* (1602–1603); and William Camden's *Britannia* (1607).

that Cornwall is the queen's, Hampshire the queen's, Dorset the queen's and so on' (Helgerson 1986: 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 even 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 head of sovereign power. Oswald, then, takes one of what were many voices united under the myth of the nation state in Drayton and recreates it as *itself* many voiced. At a glance this appears to be a challenge to nationalist chorography in favour of local allegiances, 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 challenging an externally imposed national unity with an intricate and inclusive localism. 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 this sense 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. (1989: 239)

Totnes is perhaps the most notable urban centre on the River Dart and as the heart of the Transition movement it comes coded with a certain significance regarding autonomy and dynamic localism. It is hard to ignore this when we

consider the shifting political landscape alluded to in *Dart's* relationship with *Poly-Olbion*. This becomes all the more intriguing when we consider that not only is Totnes a site of pioneering localism but, according to Drayton, and Geoffrey of Monmouth before him, it is also the site of the landing of the first humans in Britain. After the Trojan war, Brutus and a group of soldiers took flight in search of somewhere to found a new civilization and eventually landed at Totnes and made their mark by killing the last of the uninhabited archipelago's ogres called Gogmagog nearby (in fact the inhumanly over-large footprint that Brutus first imprinted when they made landfall is preserved in concrete as a tourist attraction in the town centre). This story of nation-founding arrival is the one aspect of Drayton's account that Oswald chooses to retell in her own way in *Dart*.

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'. The latter phrase recalls Ivan Illich's 'historicity of matter' as it recalls the previous sewage worker's 'macérations' (1986: 30). The epigraph for *Dart* is also from Ivan Illich actually: 'Water always comes with an ego and an alter ego.' Perhaps as strange as the water's 'alter ego' here though is that 'oak trees were men'. Here she seems to be challenging the idea that Britain was unpopulated before Brutus and his men arrived from Troy. In fact, Oswald is very careful to represent the river as busy with life as Brutus arrives: 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' (2002: 31–2). The implication is that the myth of nationhood that builds up around Brutus and secures a classical origin for the British eclipses these pre-existent 'races' of wildlife. There is also the implication that the infrastructure of the nation requires that we materially reconstitute that 'race of freshwater' (abstracting water into its alter ego) to serve such needs of the nation as sewage processing and waste disposal. Perhaps for this reason then, Brutus and his men are described, in the same breath, as 'outcasts of the earth, [and] kings / of the green island England' (30). This is a curious juxtaposition of phrases that addresses Englishness in a surprising way. One cannot be English and of the earth since the two are opposed here.

After the retelling of the Brutus myth, she moves into the voice of the stonewaller in a stiff gear-shift of voices between the metred lines of the heroic narrative and the slow prose of the stonewaller obliviously at work. The hinge between Brutus and the stonewaller, though, is the giant Gogmagog himself who, we know already, is to have his ‘throat slit’ (2002: 31).

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

stonewaller

You get upriver stones and downriver stones. Beyond Totnes bridge and above Longmarsh the stones are horribly grey chunks, a waste of haulage, but in the estuary they’re slatey flat stones, much darker, maybe it’s to do with the river’s changes. (32)

The stonewaller *is* Gogmagog. The shift from the more classical, rhymed quatrains to prose 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. It engages with the forms of the land carefully to make its own narrative. And the stonewaller is under threat from the origin myth of the nation about to impose itself. These new kings of England are outcasts of the earth and the stonewaller, for his attention to the earth, becomes an outcast of England.

Dart is a poem that uses a river’s indeterminacy – its doubleness, at once placed and placeless – to look at locality. Like Common Ground’s ‘Confluence’ project it shows the local to be an intricate and ongoing performance that commends itself to wider appreciation, but one that is sometimes at odds with the ambitions of the nation at large, or at least caught in a tension between the two. What both of these projects, and Deakin’s *Waterlog*, show through their interactions with rivers is that a recuperated indeterminacy itself can be an asset and a resource for the renewal of identity. The rivers are material presences passing through the local here, but they are also metaphors for the Heraclitean energy of place as an open-ended experiment in living; and for the

way these experiments are connected and in dialogue with other experiments in other places too. Figured in this way, the contemporary sense of the local that this chapter is exploring, in fact, meets Timothy Morton's argument for 'a poetics of anywhere' in which place is always interrupted by its own 'uncanny' double (2010: 50–2). But the point of the uncanny is that it is both at the same time, the energy arising from the tension between the two identities. The recession of the familiar into the unfamiliar can reveal, for sharp moments of clarity, the excess that lies beyond our conventional ways of apprehending or of living out locality and stretch the imagination to do things differently, or just deliberately. But this means not seizing locality too tightly, not asserting it so much as working with the indeterminacy in ways that can be outward-looking and inward-looking, forward-looking and backward-looking at one and the same time.

What better example of the slippery indeterminacy and excess lying in wait beneath the familiar apprehension of place than this passage in *Dart* when the river speaks to the canoeist, trying to lure him out of his canoe into the rough water? There is danger and mortal dread to it, certainly, but there is also an anarchic *genius loci* seducing the tourist away from his comfortable distance towards a sea-change:

come falleth in my push-you where it hurts
 and let me rough you under, be a laugh
 and breathe me please in whole inhale

 come warmeth, I can outcanouvre you
 into the smallest small where it moils up
 and masses under the sloosh gates, put your head,
 it looks a good one, full of kiss
 and known to those you love, come roll it on my stones,
 come tongue-in-skull, come drinketh, come sleepeth

(Oswald 2002: 15)

The passage is an upward radiation and a lure downwards at one and the same time. Its plays on language show a voice capable of bending the structures and rules of language to its will. It is a voice speaking across the slippery line between the familiar and the unfamiliar, between place and placelessness, that site of creative energy in which the local may be redreamed and remade.

Four Fields

Fiona Stafford's writing on the literature of the Romantic period has explored the way in which, towards the end of the eighteenth century, a cultural shift took place in the British literary tradition in which 'local detail ceased to be regarded as transient, irrelevant, or restrictive, and began to seem essential to art with any aspiration to permanence' (2010: 30). Recourse to values, feelings and meanings that were grounded in distinctive cultural geographies began to be understood as what authors and works and even publics, wherever they might be, had in common. Far from dividing and isolating people, locality came to be understood as the very difference that we share. It is true that not all forms of localism operate in such an outward-looking way and she warns that 'if the indigenous becomes the goal rather than a starting point, local art is in danger of seeming divisive or oppressive' (9). But we can see in the kinds of work that this chapter has discussed so far that, for some, the local offers a source of enchanting beauty and social energy that radiates upwards and outwards. We have seen that those qualities which can make the local so vulnerable to being marginalized and overlooked – its subtle and intricate distinctiveness, its difficulties and complexities – can also be precisely those that give an art founded on such qualities its enduring meaning. In the Confluence project and in *Waterlog*, locality was bound up with an intimate process of rediscovery, a way of being, thinking, listening and writing with fresh eyes for the elements on which it, and we, depend. In *Dart*, locality was revealed in the overlooked fine grain of a place and the underappreciated lives that make up its social and cultural fabric. The poem attempted to do justice to this, even to the extent of expressing an argumentative relation to the more homogenizing movements of nationalist art. In each case, the vividness and inventiveness with which the authors commend these places to their readers, the confidence that they have in the value of local detail, make them easy to appreciate and relate to elsewhere.

We might think of this as 'parochial' in the sense that Patrick Kavanagh famously suggested, in that the word might refer to someone 'never in any doubt about the social and artistic validity of his parish' (2003: 237). It is in this sense of the term 'parochial' that Stafford describes 'the life-giving work of local artists' that 'grows unshowily from the ground, quiet, unobtrusive, but

ultimately strong enough to resist the distortions of an invasive regime, and sufficiently mobile to reach out to those who can respond sympathetically' (2010: 11). She recalls, for example, James Currie, who assembled the first edition of Robert Burns's work in 1800, praising the poet's ability to convey his attachment to Ayrshire and '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' (123). There is an intriguing relationship here between Romantic literature's arrival at an awareness of its global circulation and the much later 'new localism' that emerged from the environmental movement's emphasis on thinking globally and acting locally. The sense of an international community rooted in local attachments and the authenticity of personal experience that arose in the Romantic period established for the much later localism of the environmental movement some of its grounded and moral weight, its ethic of autonomy and individual responsibility. One example of this at work is to be found in Elizabeth Kolbert's *Field Notes from a Catastrophe* (2006) which sets out to show global warming at work by making localized visits to places that are suffering the worst effects. Locality is a scale at which evidence is registered in its indisputable authenticity and communicated to an international community.

Tim Dee's *Four Fields* is a book that works in the midst of this relationship as well, energizing the local with the international and the international with the local. The 'four fields' of the book's title are in the reclaimed but shifting terrain of the fens of eastern Britain near his home in Cambridgeshire, in the bush and scrub of Zambia on a lapsed farmstead, in the prairie-become-battlefield-become-farmland near the border between Montana and South Dakota and in the poisoned and abandoned landscapes of the Exclusion Zone around Chernobyl in northern Ukraine (2013: 208). Each in its own way is a landscape with a complex recent history of change in which human and animal, and commercial and elemental, forces are in a tension that is shaping the world of the field. The book describes a year in its structure and form, beginning with the fens in springtime before moving out to Zambia (and Kenya), returning to the fens for summer, travelling to North America, returning to the fens again for autumn, travelling again, to Ukraine, and returning one last time to the fens for winter. In doing so it offers an internationally punctuated pastoral calendar of the fens bringing in, or travelling out towards, a much wider world

alive with fish and birds and large mammals but fraught with unstable human economies, violent clashes of civilization and devastating pollution. The places are opened up and connected by natural and by social forces – migrating birds seem to move between them like a common backdrop; people cleared from one land move into another as an occupying force – and yet each is given to the reader in its distinctive qualities of weather, wildlife and topography. What the fields have in common though is that they are *made* landscapes. Like Common Ground's central theme of 'local distinctiveness', fields offer a way of thinking about the human relationship with the natural world that refuses to separate 'Nature' as an object isolated from everyday human affairs.⁶ Kathleen Jamie goes so far as to suggest that the book 'is proof that really, there is no such thing as "nature writing"', if we are to understand nature writing as being concerned with only non-human affairs (2013).

The fens are a cluster of places that Dee shows, at various times, have been either ocean floor or forest or farmed fields. Evidence of the different layers rises to the surface from time to time, as when a Mesolithic farm tool is found sunk in a freshwater peat brick on the ocean floor by fishermen (2013: 22), or when the ancient, preserved trunks of oaks are found lying 'beneath a wet treeless place' (216). The subtle ways in which this is a constructed landscape are there under the fields but they are there in the language of the area too: 'Drains beneath the grass vein the ground, while pumps and ditches and a thousand cuts (reaches, eaus and lodes, conduits and leams, fosses and sewers, washes and sluices) fetch rain and river water from the fields and beyond and bear it away' (19–20). There has even been talk of rewilding initiatives in future intended to bolster the area's biodiversity and that will no doubt add another layer of meaning to the story of the place (46). In this sense Dee gives the fens to us as a vertical landscape that we forage down through, its story one that is read through its interpenetrating strata of natural resource and human resourcefulness.

Dee never forces the comparisons between the places but their juxtaposition invites speculation. In Zambia the English farmer of a tobacco plantation has

⁶ In fact, Common Ground had promoted their own investigation of fields in a three-year project called 'Field Days' in the mid-1990s which toured an exhibition of ideas for investigating and celebrating fields and published a 'Manifesto for Fields' and an anthology of poetry about fields (Clifford and King 1997).

recently died leaving no money to plant the prepared fields and no money to pay the workforce which lives uncertainly nearby in their one-room huts. On the farm next door, the failure of a pension scheme and the unstable price of wheat on the global market lead to tensions and a crop of seven hundred tobacco plants is destroyed in the night. This farmer is experimenting with a dam and irrigation system now and encouraging a local chief to give away land to the people in the hope that they might take on a sustainable stewardship of its woods. The fields here are as unstable as the fens in different ways, dry bush and scrub ready to creep back in like the water of the fens if they're left alone. They are the outcome of perpetual negotiation, the expression of strained labour relations and local imagination in adversity.

In Montana, a very different story reveals the battlefield sites of war between the Sioux and the American armies, representative of a wider landscape change where the deep history of prairie gives way to the wires and fences of the settlers. Today 'less than five percent of the original tall grass prairie (the eastern prairie type) remains. A few unploughed acres rise above the surrounding land, like the islands of wet undrained fens in Cambridgeshire that are higher than the farmland around them' (123). The fens and Montana are also bound by a shared history of enclosure, Dee suggests. 'Landless but enclosed people left one continent for another and there sought fences. ... We, the Europeans, wanted the grass the Indians had, and if we could convince ourselves that they didn't actually own it (since they weren't subduing the earth enough, as God commanded man to do in Genesis) it made taking it from them that much easier' (126). The theological underpinnings of the acts of enclosure, giving to the capitalist thrust of 'improvement' an air of transcendent virtue and sublimation, were redeployed in a North American context to justify what would become genocide. For Dee, this is written into the enclosure of the prairie and the making of the fields.

In Chernobyl, he is put to work by research scientists counting grasshoppers in the Exclusion Zone. He is told he is safe, that the background radiation is less powerful than an X-ray in a hospital, but he is also told not to chew grass stalks, or his own nails, since 'ingesting radiation is the best way to absorb it' (191). The Exclusion Zone is a place that is pervaded by a generally invisible threat that he finds 'ineffably strange: to be in a calm clearing that could kill you, where soil is dangerous, where the air might violate you, where standing

under a blue sky is risky'. Occasionally the threat visibly reveals itself in traces of startling uncanniness: a forest has been turned red by the radiation (188); catfish in the cooling ponds around the reactors grow to ten feet long in the heat (211); some swallows have their toes facing the wrong direction (185); and the abandoned buildings of towns and villages nearby have filled with little walled forests (199). In a passage searching for some kind of historical parallel to this most modern of disasters in Prypiat, the empty town where the nuclear plant's workers used to live, Dee searches for the underlying feeling of the place:

Piranesi's Roman ruins; Mayan temples lost in the jungle; monkeys overrunning other gods in India; Max Ernst's vegetable-slime paintings; the ever renewing Golden Bough; Ozymandias's instructions to the deaf desert; the revenge of Gaia – it all crowds in as thick as the pressing trees but nothing can truly assist with the profoundly unsettling task Prypiat puts before you. To stand in the forest that was once a town is to look *after* us. Down the wooded streets of Prypiat's arrested past you are bowled into the aftermath of man, into a future that has already arrived. (209)

Enthusiasts for rewilding are excited by stories of wildlife pouring back into the Exclusion Zone '*after* us', since the humans have vacated the area, but the scientists he is with are more critical and Dee himself reminds us that this is a 'poisoned rewilding' of sterile eagles and swallows with visible tumours (209). It is something that informs his understanding of rewilding more generally and we might think back to his reservations about such projects in the fens where 'what is proposed is a description of our profound separation from the fens and the fields, a terminal version of the pastoral' (51). He even describes such fenced rewilding as an 'exclusion zone ... an enclosure beyond enclosure, the darkest arcadia' (51). Such extreme versions of rewilding forfeit the heritage of fields as a part of our cultural history (good and bad) and clear them of the human knowledge, skill, interest and meaning that have been an important shaping influence. The challenge for Dee is not to withdraw from the field but to become conscious of, to struggle with, to redeem and refine *the art of the field* wherever that field might be.

Four Fields explores a tension between, on the one hand, fields as 'a few hundred acres standing for the world' and, on the other, fields as 'site-specific,

idiomatic and accented' (17). Dee is alert to the distinctive qualities of each of the fields he is exploring while at the same time looking for 'the common ground they make, the *midfield*', as he calls it (4). What do these disparate places have in common? What, through their 'idiomatic' differences, connects these fields, and connects us as citizens of the fields internationally? The answer is not an easy one, and not an easy one to hear, and perhaps the only cheering news is that in a world of fields that are ever on the move in the Heraclitean sense – with inundation, reclamation, enclosure, evacuation, migration, colonization, agriculture, technology and conservation all wrestling their different shapes into the shapes of the fields – the people local to those fields are among the agents of their future. Whether those people wish to recognize this or not, whether they wish to act in response to this recognition, whether they are even empowered to act in response to this recognition, is an open-ended question. In this sense, Dee comes to write fields as opportunities all too often overlooked and taken for granted: they are

old but apt; imposed but giving; made in proportions that fit the Earth and us, that bring us together, that allow us to belong, that take the oldest and most searching human measurement – how much land does a man need? – and say, this can be yours, these acres, this plot, your field, man's not nature's, but the best thing of man, and the thing of his that is nearest to becoming nature. (13)

Fields are long braids of human history and the elements there to be read, there to be worked and written over, but they do not wait for anyone to work them. They change and grow to exist at all. Dee is drawn to the particular fields he writes about because 'each is now at a more angled point in its life' (14). And its life is our life too. This is the local as volatile, vulnerable, but full of potential as well.

Towards the end of the book, Dee draws out a character from the historic Cambridgeshire landscape as an unlikely figure to be so well equipped to apprehend the shifting shapes of fields. John Ray, author of the first ever county *Flora* (of Cambridgeshire), was one of the earliest parson-naturalists in England. Unlike many philosophers of the natural world who saw their work as collecting and reproducing knowledge from book to book, his method was to get outdoors and look with his own eyes, to undertake field work, *simpling* as he called it (a word Dee tells us Ray used to describe searching for – especially

medicinal – flowers) (233). Writing in the seventeenth century, Ray's work preceded (and would influence) Carl Linnaeus and therefore preceded some of the organized certainty with which Linnaeus would help the Enlightenment lay out the known species of the natural world. Ray was working in a period when, as Dee describes, 'Plant nomenclature and taxonomy were as unstable as the ground,' the ground, that is, in the watery fens (234). The uncertainty with which Ray was faced at this time required of him a resourcefulness that was a mixture of careful attention and imaginative improvisation and it is this that makes him, we are told, an author from whom we can learn a great deal today. Dee describes his work as 'stuffed with looking and thinking about looking' and as 'beautiful in both its precision and its vagueness'. The combination of 'precision' and 'vagueness' speaks to the stretched imagination and the attempt to rediscover the local beyond the usual conventions of representation that we have explored throughout this chapter. Dee dramatizes a lengthier example of Ray's technique:

Look at the bunch he has picked of 'small foxtail grass' and 'lesser bastard Fox-tail-grass' and 'small rough-eared bastard Fox-tail-grass'. See how sometimes on the fen even the great naturalist was lost for words, or rather flooded with them. Pay attention to 'Water-grasse'; 'Float-grass'; 'Great water Reed-grasse'; 'our great Reed-grasse with chaffie heads'; and 'the marsh soft Rush with a round blackish head,' you know the one. (235)

These carefully differentiated and improvised names represent a searching for new descriptions, new ways of apprehending the local and Dee edits them into a syntax here which seems to emulate a curious child. There is an innocence to it, but one that has made a serious and resourceful art of its innocence, alert to the revelations of that 'undiscovered country of the nearby'.

It is an art we have seen privileged as the guiding orientation of the authors commissioned to produce new writing for Common Ground in *Second Nature* and one that was put to work in the community of the Stour on the Confluence project. We have seen it inform Deakin's intimate and watery counter-map of loved places in *Waterlog* and we have seen Oswald break out into a whole new form of inclusive and socially engaged poetry using such an art. For Ray, the book knowledge of the naturalist's discipline was insufficient to the fields as they were to be found outdoors and he hoped to offer a more intricate account based on fieldwork. For Dee, it is about extending the range of the nature

writer's prose to speak to a *midfield* that is worldly and local at once; a *midfield* that, today, is also more fluid, constructed, contested and imperilled than it is often thought to be. A local art, in this sense, is not only about searching for a fresh way of seeing but it is also about weaving together the complexity of the freshly seen, and doing so in a form that does justice to its difficulty and its richness at one and the same time.