Smith, Jos. "The Wild." *The New Nature Writing: Rethinking the Literature of Place*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. 71–101. Environmental Cultures. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474275040.0008>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 12:31 UTC.

Copyright © Jos Smith 2017. Released under a CC BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>). You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

The Wild

In Seamus Heaney's translation of *Buile Suibhne*, the old Gaelic tale of *Sweeney Astray* first written down in the seventeenth century, the Irish king Sweeney is exiled from human society by the Christian priest Ronan. When, in a rage, Sweeney throws the priest's psalter into the sea, kills one of his psalmists and cracks the bell he hangs around his neck, Ronan places a curse upon the king, turning him from the protection of the social sphere to a life naked and mad in the wilderness: 'Bare to the world he'll always be' (Heaney 1992: 92). Exiled and exposed to the elements, he roams without rest and from time to time is described as half-bird as well, literally 'bird-brained' and taking refuge in a hawthorn tree. Sweeney's curse is to occupy these paradoxical layers of living ambiguity, neither one thing nor another: king but exiled; free but mad; man but bird. They are liminal conditions that Heaney himself comes to identify with as a poet: 'It is possible to read the work as an aspect of the quarrel between free creative imagination and the constraints of religious, political, and domestic obligation' (87).

Always on the outside, Sweeney's is a life of restless suffering under one or another form of elemental discomfort:

shivering; glimpsed against the sky,
a waif alarmed out of ivy.
Going drenched in teems of rain,
crouching under thunderstorms.

(97)

And yet, there are also times when 'the Bann cuckoo' is 'sweeter/than church bells that whinge and grind', when, Sweeney reflects:

I prefer the scurry
and song of blackbirds

to the usual blather
 of men and women
 ...
 the squeal of badgers
 in their sett
 to the hullabuloo
 of the morning hunt.

(96, 104)

Jane Bennett has written of such ambiguous ‘crossings’ between the animal and the human in literature, suggesting that ‘under propitious conditions, you might find that their dynamism revivifies your wonder at life’ and that ‘their morphings inform your reflections upon freedom’ (2001: 32). Sweeney’s are rarely ‘propitious conditions’ but there are certainly moments of vivification, and it is the ‘sweeter’ birdsong here that reveals, by contrast, the unpleasant noise of human matters (‘whinge’, ‘blather’, ‘hullabaloo’). Beyond the social order of domestic obligations (and yet somehow still peripherally influenced by it), such moments of enchantment that come from encounters with the non-human can have lasting effects that might yet be meaningfully fed back into reflections on those very same obligations. Bennett goes on: ‘Their charm energizes your social conscience, and their flexibility stretches your moral sense of the possible’ (32).

Again, this is enchantment understood less as a quality of submission and more as ‘a state of interactive fascination’, as we saw in relation to Roger Deakin in the last chapter (Bennett 2001: 5). If Chapter 1 drew attention to the vital and fluid indeterminacy that is often overlooked in relation to the local – but that can be a powerful resource for reimagining (or continuing to imagine) what the local might be – then this chapter will look a little more closely at the point of contact between the human and the indeterminacy of the wild. I will argue that, for a number of authors, a critical attention to activity at the human/non-human interface leads wildness to yield subtle reflections that can unsettle and revitalize the human sphere as well. This interface between non-human and human has the *potential* to challenge the social order and open new avenues of thought and feeling, provided the non-human is not domesticated and appropriated beyond all recognition. It is helpful, in this sense, to think of the wild as a qualitative effect felt in the mode of relationship rather than as an identifiable space or place.

On the surface there might be something slightly counter-intuitive about a chapter on the wild in a book about place in Britain and Ireland. Could there, for example, be something oxymoronic to the idea of a 'wild place' if we take place to be the known, inhabited and familiar? Of recent years, the book that perhaps takes to the subject in the most committed and passionate way is Jay Griffiths's *Wild* (2007). For Griffiths, the wild is a subject that takes her to the Arctic, the Amazon, the Indonesian Ocean and to West Papua. It is a subject unbounded by national or regional allegiance; in fact, it is often shaped and determined precisely in resistance to regional and national administration full of the kinds of localized tensions we explored in the previous chapter. If Griffiths does hold true to any allegiance, it is to those, especially women, who have spoken up for the wild, and who have been often very violently attacked for doing so. In the sense that the wild might be what precedes or resists a violent, colonial or corporate intervention, Griffiths draws attention to the plight of people involved in such battles.

In Britain, however, true to the very relative and contingent nature of wildness, authors have treated the subject very differently and in this book I am concerned with the British and Irish landscape in particular. Britain and Ireland present landscapes long deforested and developed for agriculture, with difficult histories of clearances and enclosures, and on a scale very small and densely populated relative to other countries. As Jamie Lorimer has argued, in contrast to the United States, 'The imagined purity of wilderness is less significant' in Europe because 'the valued baseline tends more toward the premodern than the prehistoric' (2015: 22). Britain and Ireland offer intensely layered historical landscapes rife with cultural and political tensions that, as we have seen, problematize the idea of nature, let alone wild nature. In a broad review of the New Nature Writing as a form in 2008, Boyd Tonkin warned that 'an innocent quest for the beauty of wild things' in this 'densely-peopled heartland of vandalistic industry' is, and should be, a complicated pursuit (n.p.), all of which has meant that a distinctive and at times quite uncertain version of the wild has grown up in recent years that reveals its close intertwinement with human society. The contemporary existence of the wild, for example, is not something that is taken for granted and in some of the books this chapter will consider, authors find themselves making an argument for its recovery or resuscitation. The 're-' of 'rewilding' is articulated especially strongly in Britain with an acute awareness of what has been lost and of our role as humans in intervening.

Influenced by Jane Bennett's work, queer theorists have recently been turning to the idea of 'wildness' as a productive interruption of discourses of state power that seek to control and produce sexual or racial identities. The disruptive ambiguity of the wild holds a politically radical, anarchic and emancipatory appeal and, for Jack Halberstam, it offers a 'space/name/critical term for what lies beyond current logics of rule' (2014: 139). Halberstam reflects on wildness in an essay dedicated to the late Michael Taussig whose death brings to the fore of Halberstam's mind 'a wild space of unmeaning and un/being where darkness and light, self and other, order and chaos slip out of their orderly opposition and the symbolic order of signification itself falters and collapses' (139). She quotes Taussig who argued that wildness can bring on a revelation in which 'objects stare out in their mottled nakedness while signifiers float by. Wildness is the death space of signification' (137). It becomes a space for what she calls, after José Esteban Muñoz, 'disidentification', through which subjects, as well as objects, can appear in their 'mottled nakedness', in styles of being that underlie their social signification as black, white, heterosexual, homosexual and so on (143).

This tradition descends via Bennett from Henry David Thoreau and his famous decision to 'live deliberately' in the woods at Walden Pond. In Bennett's first book, about Thoreau's idea of wildness, she sees the liminal place of his cabin as open to the 'sensuous intensity' which he nurtured 'as a counterforce to the powerful lure of convention, tradition, normality' (2002: xxiii). This is not a reading of Thoreau as getting 'back to nature' as much as it is a reading of him looking ahead in an ambitious thought experiment. In fact, the personal and deliberate nature of *Walden* as a whole venture situates it halfway between a thought experiment *and* a lived place; the life lived in the place is as much a part of the project of writing the book as the book is a part of the process of living there. For Thoreau, for Bennett and for some of the authors that this chapter will discuss, wildness is concerned with just such a deliberate experiment in place and in writing, one that endeavours to unlock what Bennett calls the 'eccentric and decentering potential within any object of experience' (xiii).

For Robert Macfarlane, British life in the early 2000s calls out for precisely such an 'eccentric and decentering' experiment in alternative thought. Macfarlane turns to the Sweeney myth and finds that the mad king's

'journeying from wild place to wild place, his wintering out, his sleeping close to the ground' make 'inspiring sense' in a modern context (2007d: 46). Under the priest's curse, Macfarlane suggests that Sweeney 'became "revolted" by the thought of "known places," and ... "dreamed strange migrations"' (45). Such 'strange migrations' might be understood as a queering or, in Muñoz's term, a 'disidentification' of normative organizations of space and a search for a revitalized understanding of place in its own 'mottled nakedness.' Towards the end of his first book *Mountains of the Mind* (2004), Macfarlane describes some of the 'known places' from which he is trying to shake free: 'Most of us exist for most of the time in worlds which are humanly arranged, themed and controlled. One forgets that there are environments which do not respond to the flick of a switch or the twist of a dial and which have their own rhythms and orders of existence' (275). He comes to see these 'themed and controlled' environments as a form of 'amnesia' (275). 'So many forces,' he suggests in a later article, 'now warp us away from direct experience of the land on which we live. Urbanisation, habits of travel, modern farming practices, footloose industries, the internet' (2007a: 13). The echo of Thoreau is apparent here too as the search for wildness is aimed at puncturing these modern organizations of space, loosening their hold on our experience. Macfarlane's 2007 book *The Wild Places* becomes, itself, a thought experiment in the form of a domestic travelogue attempting to decentre a conventional spatial orientation of Britain and Ireland. The first part of this chapter, 'Inter-animation,' traces a movement in Macfarlane's book from an initial, rather straightforward, search for these 'wild places' to a more careful reflection on wildness itself. I argue that this move is an important one in understanding the relationship between wildness and place in a British context.

Placing the wild is no easy matter and doing so begins to lean precariously close to the more dubious idea of wilderness, one that has come under fire from, particularly American, historical geographers. In William Cronon's memorable critique of the idea in the United States, wilderness emerges as, contrary to popular wisdom, 'a product of civilization' (1995: 69). For Cronon, the meaning of wilderness is historically loaded, produced and reproduced in the land itself by various means. In fact, it might be understood as the social, cultural and spatial *formalization* of wildness itself, which is of course a paradoxical act of domestication that others have read in Foucauldian terms of

utopian and heterotopic discourses (Whatmore 2002; Chaloupka and Cawley 1993). At different times, Cronon shows us, this has involved the development of an aesthetically coded mythology of national heritage, the establishment of projects and processes of bureaucratic conservation, even the violent dispossession of Native American peoples and the erasure of historical and archaeological evidence (1995: 71–80). As we will see in the second part of this chapter, ‘Intertwined’, Kathleen Jamie has brought an equally critical eye to the Scottish landscape, one that has come into conflict with Macfarlane’s *The Wild Places* and in doing so has arrived at a different way of thinking about the wild. For Jamie, understanding the wild has meant challenging assumptions about spaces deemed to be wild, and challenging assumptions about spaces deemed to be domestic, in ways that are inflected by gender and national identities. ‘Wild and not-wild is a false distinction, in this ancient, contested country,’ she writes, echoing Boyd Tonkin’s concerns above (2008a: 25). Here, I explore this complication of wildness through a reading of her prose and poetry together.

In the third part, the chapter builds on both Macfarlane’s and Jamie’s explorations of the wild in relation to George Monbiot’s controversial manifesto for ‘Rewilding,’ *Feral* (2013). Monbiot critically evaluates conservation policy and practices in Britain by broadening the temporal scale at which they set their baselines. Rewilding emerges as a future-oriented and experimental practice being led by individuals and groups of pioneers self-consciously collaborating with the non-human. What we see is Monbiot exploring the real-world implementation of many of the ideas that emerge in Jamie’s and Macfarlane’s books. I conclude by returning to other writings by these two that have explored issues over community land rights to suggest an emergent politics of wildness that extends the previous chapter’s exploration of dynamic localism. Rewilding shows very clearly how wildness in Britain is about interface and interconnection between the human and non-human. Lorimer has even recently argued that we might ‘think of the wild as the commons, the everyday affective site of human-nonhuman entanglement’ (2015: 11). These books on wildness show an intensification of activity out on the frayed edges of place, temporally, spatially and conceptually, that can feed the imagination as it destabilizes convention.

Inter-animation

Robert Macfarlane's *The Wild Places* begins by setting out an agenda to counter the sense of landscape in modern Britain that has arisen through car culture and the mentality of the road atlas. 'There are now thirty million cars in use in Britain, and 210,000 miles of road on the mainland alone. ... The roads have become new mobile civilisations in themselves: during rush-hours, the car-borne population across Britain and Ireland is estimated to exceed the resident population of central London' (2007d: 10). He feels that this has given way to a certain landscape psychology that ignores most of what it passes through:

Maps organise information about a landscape in a profoundly influential way. They carry out a triage of its aspects, selecting and ranking those aspects in an order of importance, and so they create forceful biases in the ways a landscape is perceived and treated. ... The road atlas makes it easy to forget the physical presence of terrain, that the countries we call England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales comprise more than 5,000 islands, 500 mountains and 300 rivers. It refuses the idea that long before they were political, cultural and economic entities, these lands were places of stone, wood and water. (10–11)

The Wild Places begins as an extended attempt to recover this 'physical presence of terrain', to gather it back in as a corrective geography to a blurred, distanced and alienating motorway vision, a vision so pointedly attacked in J. G. Ballard's *Crash* (1973) or *Concrete Island* (1974) and in Iain Sinclair's *London Orbital* (2002). In fact, *The Wild Places* might thoughtfully be read in relation to these works as a book in a very different form of dialogue with the same modern Britain.

As a foil to such speed the book sets off in search of any remaining wild places in Britain and Ireland, challenging a whole list of authors who, like the American William Least Heat-Moon, have found in Britain only 'a tidy garden of a toy realm where there's almost no real wilderness left and absolutely no memory of it' (qtd. in Macfarlane 2007d: 9). In a culture predicated on the vision of space underpinning the road atlas, Macfarlane feels, it becomes all too easy to pre-emptively call time on the wild when a counterculture that

might nurture slowness and distinctiveness not only draws attention to the remaining wildlife, but begins the process of caring for it too. Macfarlane is very much influenced by Roger Deakin in this book, both by the style and motivation of *Waterlog* and, more literally, in person as Deakin was a good friend. Deakin features quite prominently as a guide and mentor in parts of the book, he accompanies Macfarlane on some of his journeys and the book is dedicated to his memory. *The Wild Places* opens by searching out the rare and remote across the north-western edges of the archipelago but it later performs a homeward narrative arc. Following the late T. S. Eliot, the final chapter claims 'to arrive where we started/And know the place for the first time' (qtd. in Macfarlane 2007d: 313). In the end, the search for wilderness in remote places is replaced by a revelation about the more immanent and omnipresent wild as a living process that subtends everything. The wild is discovered to be our more intimate neighbour if we just take the time to look. Though 'set about by roads and buildings, much of it menaced' (321) it is still there with 'the sheer force of ongoing organic existence, vigorous and chaotic', a reminder of 'luxuriance, vitality, fun' (316). The book becomes an act of conjuring forth this 'sheer force', in rich and kinetic prose and in experimental journeys on foot that imitate Sweeney's 'strange migrations.' The challenge is to find new interactions between body and land, mind and place, language and the wild, as self-conscious and deliberate as Thoreau's own thought experiment living in the Maine woods.

In an essay called 'Nightwalking' that forms part of an early version of the chapter on 'Ridges' in *The Wild Places*, Macfarlane writes of a night spent in the snow in mountains under a near full moon. It is a startlingly vivid essay that captures something of the intense exposure to the night sky that comes with visiting such a high and remote place in the winter, though where exactly the place might be is not apparent. It is the immediacy of the bodily experience of cold mountains and clear sky in winter that really matters here rather than the wider sense of orientation that the road atlas might give us. Lying on his back on a frozen tarn, watching the hail fall 'like pills, then like tiny jagged icebergs' Macfarlane remembers August Strindberg's experiments with night photography when he 'laid large photographic plates, primed with developing fluid, out on the earth, hoping they would take slow pictures of the stars' movements' (2005c: 220). There is, in this photographic exposure, a resonant

metaphor for Macfarlane's particular method of putting himself out in the land and waiting to see what comes.

However, Macfarlane reminds us that, in fact, the photographs Strindberg took were not pictures of the stars as such, but were rather strange, chemical blemishes brought about by frost. It was a coincidence that they looked like stars, the outcome of a complex and unpredictable series of reactions precipitated by the temperature of the exposure (221). But this makes the anecdote all the more interesting for Macfarlane. It recalls Rebecca Solnit's claim that 'walking, ideally, is a state in which the mind, the body, and the world are aligned, as though they were three characters finally in conversation together, three notes suddenly making a chord' (2000: 5). Note the interesting social and musical metaphors of a 'conversation' and a 'chord' here, contrasting the idea of simple receptivity with one of emergent, creative interaction, a busyness at the interface with the wild. What we see is a realization that the 'direct experience' he is looking for is about an exchange and experiment with things that Solnit calls a 'conversation'. Rather than a passive receptivity, this becomes the book's search for corrective experience.

It is also interesting to consider, then, some subtle changes that take place between the writing of this essay for *Granta* in 2005 and *The Wild Places* in 2007, changes that also might be related to a trajectory of thought about what constitutes 'direct experience' in the first place, and how its articulation might be related to a certain political feeling for how we relate to place and the land. One of the most notable things about this 'Nightwalking' essay in *Granta* is the total absence of any place name. We are told it is the north-west of England; it appears to be mountainous, we hear of a 'tarn', so perhaps we assume it is the Lake District, but we are not told so, and we are certainly not told whereabouts in the Lakes. In *The Wild Places* there is more room to elaborate and we are informed it is near Buttermere in the mid-western fells, but in this earlier version we are given only the cardinal directions long after an eerily rich and lucid account of the immediate orientation:

There was the moon, fat and unexpected above the mountains. Just a little off full, with the shape of a hangnail missing to black on the right side, and the stars swarming around it. ... Snow perpetuates the effect of moonlight, which means that on a clear night, in winter mountains, you can see for a distance of up to thirty miles. (2005c: 218)

It is as if Macfarlane is suggesting that we have all the orientation we need in the immediate, intimate account, as if the vivid and carefully articulated perceptual field were enough to serve as a counterbalance to the road atlas.

This is not completely unprecedented. He has suggested elsewhere how influential he feels J. A. Baker's *The Peregrine* (1967) has been on him and one of the techniques he admires is Baker's stripping away of place names from the Essex landscape and his use simply of 'the South', 'the North' and so on: 'He inhabits a cardinal landscape ... he steers himself only by landform and feature' (Macfarlane 2005b: xiv). In fact, Baker does this out of an extreme dislike for the human world. 'My pagan head shall sink into the winter land and there be purified,' he claims early on (2005: 41). The sins of which he is searching to be 'purified' are those of environmental damage, in particular the use of toxic pesticides in agriculture, which reduced the peregrine population in Britain to just sixty-eight pairs between 1939 and 1962 (Macfarlane 2005b: v). So when Macfarlane withdraws the place names in this early essay we might read this as an experiment with Baker's 'pagan' anger and its flirtation with the wild, an attempt to 'disidentify' place with its human history. As Macfarlane suggests: 'Baker hopes that, through a fierce, prolonged, and "purified" concentration upon the peregrine, he will somehow be able to escape his human form and abscond into the "brilliant" wildness of the bird' (viii). Here too, of course, we find the flicker of the memory of Sweeney, and we are reminded of Bennett's description of an 'energise[d] social conscience' (2001: 32).

A similar technique has been employed more recently to different effect by Thomas A. Clark in his exploration of the Western Isles of Scotland (a book Macfarlane refers to in *The Old Ways* (2012)). Each of his short poems paints an extraordinarily vivid and often quite magnified view of, for example, the flowers on a clifftop or the parting mists on the sea, but never discloses a place name, in fact, never even uses a capital letter.

a sea mist closing
every distance
cliffs falling away
from the edge of a world
only half accomplished

(2009: 8)

Or:

a path through the gold
 of bird's foot trefoil
 delayed by the pink
 of thrift or campion

(16)

Interestingly, the title of this collection is *The Hundred Thousand Places* (2009), though 'places' here suggests something beyond, or rather below, the conventional understanding of 'place' as a defined and stable geographical entity. Clark's book demonstrates a *proliferation* of places by way of careful and close attention. Myriad places are always replenishing, always boiling away, under the mapped and named place itself, if only by acute moments of perception. It suggests writing as in some way complicit in the process too, as a way of bringing these places into being *as places*, though there is nothing permanent and named about them. They are as fluid as the 'conversations' that Solnit associates with walking above. They exist to swell up, disrupt and surprise us, almost to defamiliarize and disorientate like Oswald's seductive *Dart*, but they do so in such an immediate way that they already suggest *refamiliarization* and *reorientation*. There is something of what both Baker and Clark are doing in the way Macfarlane is framing his narrative here: 'absconding' into 'brilliant' wildness but also interrupting the familiar with a busy and plural *reorientation* that has an echo of the uncanny to it.

Macfarlane does include place names when he comes to publish *The Wild Places* and each chapter is very carefully situated and named on the map in the end. Not to do so might have come a little close to a reactionary retreat from human affairs, which was never the task Macfarlane set himself. But in the chapter titles – 'Island, Valley, Moor, Cape, Summit, Ridge, Tor' – we can hear an echo of Baker, that close eye on the 'landform and feature' that a bird might steer by. And in the highly particular and vivid prose descriptions, we can hear something of a desire to recognize the proliferating nature of place, of *the places beneath place*; to record one modest moment's view of something much more Heraclitean and, in short, wild. Both of these approaches have different qualities of the wild to them, troubling and resisting a rather blasé glossing over of place as known and somehow done with.

In this recuperation of the physical presence of landform and its close relationship to the body, Macfarlane is also showing the influence of Christopher Tilley's *A Phenomenology of Landscape* (cited in the bibliography at the end of *The Wild Places*). Drawing on both Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Tilley explores the way in which landscape occurs somewhere between objectivity and subjectivity in a way that places an emphasis on the body and its presence in the land: 'Perceptual consciousness is not just a matter of thought about the world, but stems from bodily presence and bodily orientation in relation to it, bodily *awareness*' (1994: 14). Key to this is what David Morris calls 'the crossing of body and world', crossing serving simultaneously as a location and an activity, something suggestive of landscape as a practice to be performed (as opposed to just a representation alone) (2004: 26). For Tilley 'subjectivity and objectivity connect in a dialectic producing a *place* for Being in which the topography and physiography of the land and thought remain distinct but play into each other as an "intelligible landscape", and "a spatialization of Being"' (1994: 14; Tilley's emphasis). We might think of this as the type of place that is being described when Macfarlane uses the term 'wild places', provisional and played out between body, thought and land. This conflation of 'land and thought', their crossing as simultaneously an 'intelligible landscape' and 'a spatialization of Being' is really the ultimate achievement of *The Wild Places*, one captured by the often-quoted realization that 'certain landscapes might hold certain thoughts, as they held certain stones or plants' (2007d: 115).

Macfarlane describes here the 'thought' that plays out in the interplay of large, flat, limestone pavements and their deep, linear grykes on the west coast of Ireland in the Burren: 'Limestone, I found during my time in the Burren, demands of the walker a new type of movement: the impulse to be diverted, to wander and allow the logic of one's motion to be determined by happenstance and sudden disclosure. We learned, or were taught by the ground, how to walk without premeditation' (166). In this sense, a close attention to the limestone might be understood to 'queer' the normal walk from A to B to C. Such prompts from the ground might, in time, prompt instances of place lore and folk culture. In the chapter on 'Forest' he considers the relationship between forests as cognitive spatial experiences and the literature of forests where, in fairy tales, they so often become a space where worlds meet.

There is no mystery in this association of woods and otherworlds, for as anyone who has walked in woods knows, they are places of correspondence, of call and answer. Visual affinities of colour, relief and texture abound. A fallen branch echoes the deltoid form of the streambed into which it has come to rest. Chrome yellow autumn elm leaves find their colour rhyme in the eye-ring of a blackbird. Different aspects of the forest link unexpectedly with each other, and so it is that within the stories of forest, different times and worlds can be joined. (98)

What is being alluded to here is something close to what James J. Gibson describes as the ‘affordance’ of an environment, that is, ‘the specific combination of the properties of its substance and its surfaces taken with reference to an animal’ (where the animal here is a human) (1977: 67). For Gibson, certain features have given meanings for certain animals that arise out of the relationship between the perception of the body and the perceived substance and surface of a given object; this is what the object or landform ‘affords’. One ought to be wary of universalizing here and open to the possibility that the thoughts ‘found’ in a landscape might vary depending on cultural background, or might be affected in different ways by, for example, blindness, deafness or age but such differences are something that might represent ‘variations on a theme’ that will only help proliferate the value of a given place.

For Macfarlane, this affordance runs right up to the level of our imaginative cultures – art, literature, music – and the fact that forests and other ‘wild places’ ‘can kindle new ways of being or cognition in people, [and] can urge their minds differently’ leads to a powerful argument about what he calls ‘inter-animation’ (2007d: 111). As an idea and philosophy about conservation, this ‘inter-animation’ shows a memorable intersection of the humanities and ecology at work. It is an argument not only about the way our lives are underpinned in an everyday way by the wild, but it adds a qualitative cultural layer of value to conservation discourse: ‘Thought, like memory, inhabits external things as much as the inner regions of the human brain. When the physical correspondents of thought disappear, then thought, or its possibility, is also lost. When woods and trees are destroyed – incidentally, deliberately – imagination and memory go with them’ (100). Of course, not all thought inhabits external things, and not all thought inhabits external things in such sensitive and careful ways, but Macfarlane’s book does argue for a productive

rediscovery of this important relationship. And doing so might even suggest ways to *stimulate* the cultural value of the wild in terms of its contribution to heritage, both heritage as our history and heritage as a potential that places might have, tapped or untapped. This is not an argument that should be offered instead of one about intrinsic value but it is a strong supplement that might broaden its appeal. It also does so without capitulating to the accountancy language of the Ecosystems Services movement, which has been criticized for its weaknesses in addressing the question of cultural value (Coates et al. 2014). Macfarlane's spatialization of thought in *The Wild Places* achieves something of considerable value that may well prove yet more important in future. Its interactions and inter-animations of diverse and distinctive landscapes map out intimate topographical experiences that lend themselves to translation and dialogue with other areas of limestone, forest, moorland and so on, wherever they are in the world. His work foregrounds a cultural depth to place on the outer edge of the familiar. It reveals meanings, correspondences and dialogues that are there for the finding in a variety of different ways of *being* in place.

Intertwined

When a bright, healthy and highly educated young man jumps on the sleeper train and heads this way, with the declared intention of seeking 'wild places', my first reaction is to groan. It brings out in me a horrible mix of class, gender and ethnic tension. What's that coming over the hill? A white, middle-class Englishman! A Lone Enraptured Male! From Cambridge! Here to boldly go, 'discovering', then quelling our harsh and lovely and sometimes difficult land with his civilised lyrical words. (Jamie 2008a: 26)

So wrote Kathleen Jamie in a 2008 review of Macfarlane's *The Wild Places*. Until then Jamie and Macfarlane had been spoken of in the same breath as writers somehow collaborating in 'The New Nature Writing' as a movement.¹ There are obvious similarities in their work, of course. They are both concerned with

¹ When *Granta* had published their special edition on 'The New Nature Writing' earlier that year, both Jamie and Macfarlane were foregrounded, as they were in The Wildlife Trust's slightly dewy-eyed *Nature Tales* anthology, and later in the more progressive *Towards Re-enchantment: Place and Its Meanings*, an anthology published by the group Artevents.

the quality of attention that we bring to our environments. And they are both trying to challenge conventional representations of place, to get under the familiar map and rethink certain cultural assumptions. Nonetheless, looking a little more closely, there has been some considerable difference in how they went about these things and this was what the review brought out, reminding readers that, however far we get from the human into the wild, landscape is still a genre fraught with identity politics.

Jamie does herself admit early on to what she calls 'a huge and unpleasant prejudice', but nonetheless, the review prompts a closer examination of what becomes a conflict over the contemporary meanings of 'wild' (2008a: 26). There are various threads that can be drawn out of this quoted passage and followed. Both class and gender have an uneasy relationship with 'nature writing' but perhaps the most relevant issue at stake in Jamie's critique of *The Wild Places* is the 'ethnic tension' that comes from the way the book uses the archipelago as a theatrical space to perform its realization about the wild. *The Wild Places* owes a debt to the form of a bildungsroman, a novel through which the protagonist undergoes a life-changing epiphany in a coming of age or wisdom. There is, at the beginning, the slightly quixotic endeavour of a boyish mountaineer looking for the remaining wild places in Britain and Ireland: remote edges, uninhabited silence, *contact!*, as Thoreau might say (1972: 71). But to a degree Macfarlane sets this up to perform the shift in consciousness to the much more modern and productive idea that we have looked at in detail.

This change comes to a head in a journey to Ben Hope, one of the most northerly and one of the 'least accommodating places' (Macfarlane 2007d: 156) that he travels to: 'There could have been nowhere that conformed more purely to the vision of wilderness with which I had begun my journeys,' he suggests. 'This place refused any imputation of meaning' (157). Here dawn cannot come quickly enough to begin the descent and the return home to the more humanly arranged landscapes of the south. It is after this bleak encounter with what he calls the 'gradelessly indifferent' (157) that he begins to see the wild as something more miniature and closer to home. Another formative trip (this time with Roger Deakin) comes soon after this. In the Burren in Ireland they lay together, belly-down on the limestone pavement staring into one of the flower-filled grykes and Deakin seems to steer the 'Lone, Enraptured' mountaineer's gaze into his more developed realization: 'This, Roger suddenly

said as we lay there looking down into it, is a wild place. It is as beautiful and complex, perhaps more so, than any glen or bay or peak. Miniature, yes, but fabulously wild' (168). This leads to the later realization that wildflowers emerging through cracks in the urban pavement back home might also be emissaries of a planetary wildness lying in wait beneath the shell of modernity. Macfarlane borrows a term from Gary Snyder who senses what he calls 'a ghost wilderness' that 'hovers around the entire planet' (317). This 'ghost wilderness' becomes the image of the elemental archipelago itself subtending our human civilization on top of it. The wild stops being about the spatially remote, about the Scottish north, and becomes about a living omnipresence (but in this case it is realized in the homely southeast). 'This was a wildness quite different from the sterile winter asperities of Ben Hope,' he suggests, 'and perhaps, I thought for the first time, more powerful too.' 'Ach weel,' replies Jamie, perhaps with another groan (2008a: 27). Of course, she admires his revelations of intimate local distinctiveness such as in the chapter on the holloways in Dorset, but for her there is still an uncomfortable spatialization of this narrative that is freighted with a long tradition of English incursions into a Scottish 'wilderness'. In the end, her attack on *The Wild Places* seems a little unfounded and, as she admits, 'prejudiced' given the book's acknowledgement of a shift in the narrator's understanding of the wild emulating that bildungsroman. There is a vulnerability to the inner drama of *The Wild Places* that is tapping into more than just Macfarlane's own confessed innocence about the wild, the likes of which it seems a little rough to judge. Nonetheless, it does draw attention to a broader tension at work in the Scottish landscape for Jamie.

In her 2005 book *Findings*, and in other essays of around the same time, Jamie articulates several challenges to the idea of the wild.

Sometimes you hear this land described as 'natural' or 'wild' – 'wilderness', even – and though there are tracts of Scotland north and west of here, where few people live, 'wilderness' seems an affront to those many generations who took their living on that land. Whether their departure was forced or whether that way of life just fell into abeyance, they left such subtle marks. (2005b: 126)

Some of these 'subtle marks' are the 'findings' of the book's title. This passage comes at the end of a chapter in which Jamie walks up into the hills in search of

shielings, or shieling grounds, clusters of huts that were once occupied during the warmer months when transhumance structured the year and the cattle were brought up into the hills for summer grazing by the women and children. When she arrives at the markings on the map there is 'nothing to be seen' and she checks and rechecks her bearings. Soon though, she gets her eye in and begins to make out a 'rough rectangle of stones' here, a 'green knoll' suggesting a gable-end there, 'small dry-stone humble thing[s], no taller than myself' (120). What she finds here in the Central Highlands is 'not a great vista of peaks and ridges, but a contained place, almost domestic and serene' (120–1) (the whole glen with its river and green grass she comes to describe as 'girlish' (126)). For Jamie, these 'subtle marks' are as hard to recover beyond the idea of a Scottish 'wilderness' as Macfarlane's topographical affordances are to recover beyond the British road atlas.

The relationship between place and the wild is an historically complicated relationship in Jamie's writing, and one inflected by gender as well. The shielings would have been a place of women and children, she tells us, while the men worked the farms down below, before harvest time. Jamie finds herself 'nodding an acknowledgement to the woman of the house' as she enters the ruin of a hut through a gap in the stone wall (124). The book is full of such nods to the domestic that resist the pull of a wilderness aesthetic and this chapter in particular becomes an exercise in empathy, decoding the distinctive associations each lived place might have had from what remains: one has a boulder of shining quartz by the door; another is the nearest hut to the river; some have stone recesses built into the walls, 'cool places to stand butter and cheese' (124). The practice of transhumance died out in the Central Highlands in the latter half of the eighteenth century 'at the time of the Improvements' and these ruins are often all that remains now on the edge of memory with only the slightest of clues to a whole way of life (122). 'What a loss this seems now,' she wonders, 'a time when women were guaranteed a place in the wider landscape, our own place in the hills. ... The presence in this valley of another woman [today] would have surprised me' (122). So wildness, or at least, wilderness, for Jamie, is bound up with a masculine (and often English) ideal imposed on a historically 'cleared' and 'improved' landscape. And it carries with it the risk of erasing an ordinary history of women living together.

William Cronon, writing in 2003 about the Apostle Islands in Lake Superior, observes a related problem that troubles the idea of wilderness in the United States in a way that speaks to this contemporary Scottish context as well. The National Park Service, at the time he was writing, was making recommendations for the designation of the islands as 'wilderness' which, under the 1964 Wilderness Act, would mean they were protected. However, exploring the language of this act, Cronon identifies an important problem in that 'the National Park Service will seek to remove from potential wilderness the temporary, non-conforming conditions that preclude wilderness designation' (n.p.). This includes 'demolishing historical structures' (n.p.). It also includes 'implying that dramatically altered landscapes are much more pristine than they truly are' and the refusal to interpret for park visitors 'the human history of places designated as wilderness' (n.p.), all of which poses a serious problem for a place with a rich history of Norwegian immigrant settlers, French traders and a centuries-old population of Ojibwe people for whom the area served as a spiritual homeland. As Cronon has shown, for the 1964 Wilderness Act 'nature' is something to be made 'untrammelled' and 'pristine', even if it is neither (n.p.). While this presents a case more extreme than the example given by Jamie, it nonetheless reveals a parallel concern for the survival of marginalized histories in an apparently wild landscape. Jamie shows that even before the official work of designation, there are ways in which the imaginative conventions and genres of landscape can intrude on our experience of it.

Jamie's particular interest in this issue might be traced to an essay published the same year as *Findings*. In an edition of *Granta* in 2005, Jamie describes a trip to the mining landscape where her family lived for several generations before she was born. All the mines are decommissioned, she finds, most of the houses have been demolished and there is only farmland, moorland and an opencast site filled with 'sullen green water' (2005a: 92). A local farmer shows her the site of No.41 Darnconner, the house of her great-great-grandparents, and she notes her 'astonishment' at its near disappearance into 'the open moor of dun-coloured grasses and moss' (94). On the way around she describes how 'my foot slipped and released a few flakes of coal slag, so I put them in my pocket, with a notion to take them home to my mother' (95). The flaking off of the coal becomes an intimate moment of recollection, another

'finding' that really belongs to the wider book itself, but more personal this time, almost a recovery of a family heirloom, preserving an ordinary working history against erasure (the place is soon to be buried under a 'biomass' willow plantation to be cropped for fuel for power stations) (97). For Jamie, wild and human landscapes do not come to us separately. They are bonded in the history of labour, whether by the seasonal rhythms of transhumance or the mining community gathered on a geological seam of coal. The always intertwined nature of this history troubles the more literary and aesthetic traditions of the wild as remote.

This tension finds itself played out intriguingly elsewhere in this essay as different layers of landscape history interrupt one another. On her way up to Darnconner, she describes 'hen harriers and busted tellies; a liminal place, the edge of the moor', and it is liminal in a number of senses: on the cusp of old and new certainly, wild and human, definitely, but also liminal in the sense of being caught between genres (92). Looking around the opencast, she recalls Robert Burns rather ironically to herself: "Ye banks and braes," I thought, "how can ye bloom sae fresh and fair?" (92). The question takes on new meanings over and above the Romantic, unpacking some of that astonishment she felt at the erasure of her family history: how can you grow over what was here, it seems to ask, or how can you enfold this blighted, industrial landscape with such an incongruously pastoral scene? This was a working place for her family, the site of a tough, poor existence in conditions that had prompted the union men to recommend closure of the mines. From somewhere, though, adding another layer to this already complicated space, 'I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles' drifts into her head, perhaps an ice cream van on an estate nearby, she guesses later (92). What begins to emerge here and elsewhere is the sense of landscape as always an interrupted form, interrupted by history, family, modernity, the wild and even the landscape genres themselves. These interruptions are part of the cultural geography of place for Jamie and they prevent what she sees as the 'lone, enraptured, male' experience of the wild. It is not that she does not look for those moments of rapture; she does,² but they are punctured and

² In *Findings*, describing a rare bird sighting, she writes: 'Like some medieval peasant granted a vision, I was kneeling in a field, fixated by this uncanny cross in the sky. Then, as it moved slowly out of sight, I raced for home excited as a child, holding its image in my head like a bowlful of blue water – mustn't spill a drop' (2005b: 42).

complicated for her by other factors and those punctures and complications are an important part of the structure of her experience.

Findings is run through with such interruptions, often related to family issues: 'Nana, slipping into dependency, and mother who was adjusting to life at home having been paralysed by a major stroke, and my scared heroic dad doing his best; there were the needs of our small children to be met, and then my daughter had missed her first ever day at school because she was in hospital,' not to mention her husband contracting pneumonia which forms the central chapter of the book (2005b: 164–5). For Jamie, landscape as an interrupted genre is part of being a woman. In an interview on Radio 4 she suggested, with a certain sense of humour: 'So many relationships, women of a certain age, it's all we seem to do, manage relationships, a part of our own ecology if you like' (2006). In her poetry too, enraptured solitude is complicated by relationships and again this finds itself woven into the representation of place in an interesting way. She is as critical of her own tendencies towards Romantic wanderings as she is of Macfarlane's, careful always to make poetry out of what is there rather than what she would like to be there. In the poem 'The Buddleia,' when she pauses 'to consider/a god, or creation unfolding in front of my eyes,' she describes how her close attention begins to evoke

the divine
in the lupins, or foxgloves, or self-
seeded buddleia,
whose heavy horns flush as they
open to flower, and draw
these bumbling, well-meaning bees
which remind me again,
of my father ... whom, Christ,
I've forgotten to call.

(2004: 27)

Landscape never fully unravels itself from the complications of family, community, work, the home. That comma before 'of my father' brings the syntax to a peak before dropping it into the bathos of the ordinary domestic experience of forgetfulness. The 'god' of the beginning of the poem is lost to the expletive 'Christ' of the penultimate line. This is the poet caught again in Heaney's and Sweeney's 'quarrel between free creative imagination and the

constraints of religious, political, and domestic obligation' but played out at the very ordinary scale of a garden (Heaney 1992: 87).

It is a theme that she revisits elsewhere. As far as she tries to wander off, and as far as we expect her to wander off, into the enraptured experience of the wild, she is always pulled back elastically by familial connections 'without whom', she suggests (in the title poem of the collection *The Tree House*),

we might have lived
the long ebb of our mid-decades
alone in sheds and attic rooms,
awake in the moonlit souterrains
of our own minds; without whom
we might have lived
a hundred other lives

(2004: 42)

The Romantic notion of the writer in solitude hinted at in those 'moonlit souterrains' is a myth for Jamie, her desire for which she slightly parodies in 'The Buddleia'. 'The Tree House' describes 'our difficult/chthonic anchorage/ in the apple-sweetened earth', but the anchorage she is describing is our relationship to family as much as our relationship to the planet (2004: 41–2). It is the whole difficult ecology of relationships that forces her to claim that 'wild and not-wild is a false distinction' (2008a: 25). They come at once together. She describes hoisting herself up into a literal tree house in this poem while her children and husband are out, and feels a 'complicity' with the tree 'like our own, when arm in arm / on the city street, we bemoan / our families' (2004: 42). But by the end of the poem we see things from the perspective of the tree, and *we* are the family that *it* makes sacrifices to sustain. Our home, with its garden tree house, a 'dwelling of sorts' is 'a gall / we've asked the tree to carry / of its own dead' (43). Limbs are wrapped around limbs, perspectives shift, lives are intertwined: these are the 'difficult' shapes of our relationship with the wild that we encounter in *Findings* and *The Tree House*.

In the central chapter of *Findings*, Jamie's husband Phil gets pneumonia and is hospitalized. The writing does not shy away from this, and her fear and horror at the prospect of losing him are written as carefully and as sensitively as her earlier explorations of peregrines or corncrakes. She does not distinguish between domestic and natural environments, or rather, she is quick to show

their deep intertwinement since it is within that intertwinement that her own very different version of the wild is to be conjured: 'To give birth is to be in a wild place, so is to struggle with pneumonia' (2008: 27). 'Nature isn't just daffodils and trees and birds,' she explained on Radio 4. 'Growths and cross-sections of the brain, this is also nature. We are incarnated, we are natural creatures, and so I guess if I take nature at its widest definition what else is there?' (2006). In a passage coming to terms with the medical information she has been given about her husband's lungs, she is sat on her back step and there is an imaginative landscaping of the human body that explores a beautiful but unnervingly vulnerable state of intimacy with corporeal wildness:

The alveoli, we're told, if they were unpacked from our lungs and spread out, would cover an area the size of a tennis court, 78 feet by 27. Or from the wall to the hedge breadthwise, and the bench to the shed longways. An area the mellow sun was now casting with long afternoon shadows. I stood with my back to the shed and surveyed the area, tried to imagine, what? ... A fine, fine cobweb, exchanging gases with the open air? And what of our nerves? There are hundreds of miles of neurones in our brains. I tried to imagine them, all that nerve, all that awareness and alertness spread out around me. All that listening. (2005b: 104–5)

The lungs, the nerves, the marriage, the garden, the sunlight are all revealed in such close quarters here, interpenetrating and interdependent. This is not a morbid image but one of total vulnerability and exposure, one of frightening intimacy. It is unsettling, but also a healing prayer of sorts ('Isn't that a kind of prayer? The care and maintenance of the web of our noticing, the paying heed?') (109). It is a recovery of the wildness within us that lies sometimes a little close for comfort beneath our usual domestic life.

In a later chapter she turns to Playfair Hall at the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh to look at the specimens in jars as an antidote to the idea of nature 'out there', and she finds just as compelling and mysterious 'the forms concealed inside, the intimate unknown' (2008b: 141). In an essay for *Granta's The New Nature Writing* she describes being shown various human body parts under the microscope at the pathology lab in Ninewells Hospital in Dundee. Looking down into a human liver she comments:

I was admitted to another world, where everything was pink. We were looking from a great height down at a pink river – rather, an estuary,

with a north bank and a south. There were wing-shaped river islands and furthermore it was low tide, with sandbanks exposed. It was astonishing, a map of the familiar: it was our local river, as seen by a hawk.

'It's like the Tay!' I said. (41–2)

The movement in this short passage is one from estrangement ('another world') and distance ('a great height') to a metonymic familiarity and intimacy ('our local river'). The body becomes as far reaching as a familiar landscape, the land as close as the organs inside us. These two passages, one a projection of the inside of the body onto the land and the other a projection of the land onto the inside of the body, speak of the intimacy we share with the wild in Jamie's very different version.

Rewilding

Macfarlane's exploration of a relationship with the wild based on 'inter-animation' and Jamie's own very careful articulation of something more 'intertwined' and interrupted in form seem to share the conclusion that the wild is closer to home than we might think – even than we might like, at times. It is how they arrive at this that differs. What sets out the separation between the human and non-human is a matter of culture and the way it conditions perception: either entrenched personal habits of perception bred of our immersion in a hyper-mediated society or more focused expectations associated with certain aesthetic genres. In their written work, both develop forms that attempt to reach beyond these and to refresh and revitalize the tradition of nature writing with experiments that *try out* (the original meaning of 'essay') something new. In this, the wild takes on some of that 'counterforce to the powerful lure of convention, tradition, normality' that Jane Bennett reads in Thoreau (2002: xxiii). These works are experimental in challenging their readers to pick apart certain assumptions, to question what they might take for granted and to open their eyes to a richer complexity in plain sight. George Monbiot's *Feral* takes this same cultural work a step further and asks how we might challenge assumptions and intervene in material ecosystems themselves to stimulate some of their stymied or overlooked potential. The book articulates the same challenge to perception, arguing that we need to

'open up the ecological imagination' (183) and resist the idea that 'the dim, flattened relic' (89) of a landscape we live in is the best we could hope for. The book has now even grown into a visionary and controversial charity called 'Rewilding Britain', which is addressing the ecological damage that has been written into land and sea since the deforestation of the late Bronze Age thousands of years ago.

Surprisingly, one of the groups that comes under attack from Monbiot is conservationists themselves. Conservationists, he argues, have been as guilty as anyone of limiting their perception of ecosystems, as the result of cultural norms and uninterrogated assumptions. One of the most striking ideas that the book proposes is that of a phenomenon (coined by fisheries scientist Daniel Pauly in the 1990s) called 'Shifting Baseline Syndrome', something that has been shaping our understanding and our conservation of ecosystems in powerful and perturbing ways for decades (qtd. in Monbiot 2013: 69). This 'syndrome' describes a situation in which, 'when fish or other animals or plants are depleted, campaigners and scientists might call for them to be restored to the numbers that existed in their youth: their own ecological baseline. But they often appear to be unaware that what they considered normal when they were children was in fact a state of extreme depletion' (69). Monbiot scales this idea right up to address the much broader way in which deep views of landscape history such as paleoecology are ignored by conservation institutions like the National Parks Association. Because of this, his argument goes, landscapes that have been devastated by deforestation in the distant past, and excessive grazing that continues into the present, are now being carefully maintained as if that state of damage was their healthy 'natural' state and all they are capable of. There is something quite arbitrary about the levels at which the baselines are being set.

Perhaps the most striking example he gives of this is in contemporary Wales in the upland heath of the Cambrian Mountains. This is an area that was colonized by Neolithic farmers between 6,000 and 4,000 years ago (66). They deforested the land, cleared and burned it back and it has been heavily grazed by sheep and cattle ever since, bar some short periods around the plague years. This grazing, he argues, has depleted the nutrient base of the soil so thoroughly that trees will not grow, plant and animal life is at a minimum and some in fact now describe it as the 'Cambrian Desert' (64).

Nonetheless, the Countryside Council for Wales describes the area's Claerwen nature reserve as 'perhaps the largest area of "wilderness" in Wales today'; the Cambrian Mountains Society describes it as a 'largely unspoiled landscape' adding 'there is nothing to compare to the wilderness and sense of utter solitude that surrounds these vast empty moorlands'; and the chairman of Cambrian Active (invested in the tourism of the area) describes it as 'one of the largest wildernesses left in the UK' (66–8). For Monbiot, this is based on a misunderstanding about what constitutes a healthy ecosystem. His argument here is related to Jamie's critique of Scottish wilderness but on a far greater scale of time. Like Jamie, Monbiot is calling for a better acknowledgement of what thriving ways of life have been forgotten and erased from now empty and denuded areas labelled as 'natural', 'wild' or 'wilderness'. When we take into consideration the way this 'Shifting Baseline Syndrome' can inform regional and national conservation policy, 'wilderness' as it is understood here, can take on a surprising meaning that, in *Feral*, begins to run exactly counter to the meaning of 'wild' itself. The change that *Feral* promotes then is, first, one of scale. It contemplates a much deeper sense of time, challenging that European tendency that Lorimer observes of thinking in terms of 'premodern' landscapes rather than of 'prehistoric' landscapes (2015: 22). This is, again, a process of what Muñoz calls 'disidentification', but for geography rather than subjectivity (qtd. in Halberstam 2014: 143). It calls to the surface a shadowy prehistory that destabilizes contemporary signifying practices.

In many ways, *Feral* is unlike Macfarlane's and Jamie's books. It is more research-led and closer, on the whole, to popular science and journalism. In fact, it is the chapters of personal narrative, in their attempts to animate his agenda, that feel the weaker of the book's strategies for making its case. Likewise, the argument for rewilding based on his own personal sense of being 'ecologically bored' seems a little self-absorbed when juxtaposed with the book's wealth of research elsewhere and its overall vision (2013: 7). Nonetheless it does contribute to the same cultural reappraisal of the role of wildness in our individual and collective lives as Macfarlane and Jamie. *Feral* is rethinking the meanings and social order of place where place interfaces with the non-human, is under the influence of the non-human and is in collaboration with the non-human. In doing so, the book's real strength is in the accounts it gives of the work of key pioneering individuals who have taken

on the replanting of trees, the reintroduction of species and the rehabilitation of land simply out of a personal sense of care. In this there is a wonderfully ordinary vision of rewilding as a force for change that takes root in disparate, localized and self-willed initiatives of the dynamic kind we considered in the previous chapter.

The book's shift in scale is in both directions at once: it demands we think at a much greater timescale about large ecosystems in deep time, while also showing that those beginning to do this are working on small-scale, localized projects at a time when national bodies are not.

Monbiot introduces Alan Watson Featherstone who began the charity 'Trees for Life' which has so far bought up 10,000 acres of the Scottish Highlands for reforestation. According to Featherstone, so overpopulated is much of the area of the Highlands with deer, serving the interests of wealthy landowners and the hunters they draw in, that vast areas once densely forested centuries ago are completely denuded of trees despite the fact that, left ungrazed, they would reforest themselves quite independently within a decade or two. It is in the interests of the landowners that these areas remain denuded in this way and so they do, with a whole Highland wilderness aesthetic that has grown up around them. Featherstone has experimented by simply putting a fence around certain areas to keep out the grazing deer and, as a result, grassland has given way to plants and saplings, plants and sapling have given way to trees and trees to forest. Another pioneer in Wales, Ritchie Tassell, worked in forestry before he and others began collaborating to buy up land, fence it off to prevent grazing by sheep and where necessary to replant the area with native trees, or with trees well adapted to the particular type of soil. Featherstone hopes later to reintroduce wolves and Tassell to reintroduce beavers, because, as keystone species, these animals can have the effect of creating habitat for a whole range of other plants and animals. The book also draws attention to the fact that, in what they are doing quite independently, these projects are also engaged with a much wider global rewilding movement. Again and again, Monbiot draws attention to how strangely resistant Britain has been to rewilding projects that have been almost ubiquitous in Europe. Beavers have been reintroduced 161 times in Europe since 1924, but it is proving a considerable struggle to support even their very minimal reintroduction in Britain, despite the history of British place names suggesting their long association (Beverley in Yorkshire,

Beverston in Gloucestershire, Barbon in Cumbria and Beverley Brook, which flows into the Thames) (79–80). These small-scale, pioneering projects are not the exception when seen in the broader context. In fact, such a shift in scale shows British national policy to be the exception. It is in *Feral* that we begin to see the political implications of landscape practices that are informed by wildness.

What distinguishes the work of these eccentric pioneers of rewilding from traditional conservation practices is a particular approach to the question of agency. Conservation projects focused on the careful control and maintenance of a particular landscape type, such as upland heath, endeavouring to keep it within given measures and parameters, tend to endorse a distinction between powerful, intelligent human beings on the one hand and passive, pliant ‘Nature’, which they control, on the other. But as Sarah Whatmore has argued, the thinking behind such ‘fortifying’ conservation practices risks ‘eras[ing] all but “humans” as agents in the making of these wild places’ (2002: 13–14). For Jamie Lorimer, the recognition of the Anthropocene has brought just such a rarefied conception of ‘Nature’ to an end for conservationists (as it has also brought such a rarefied, separate and ‘objective’ view of the ‘Human’ to an end) (2015: 9). The challenge of the Anthropocene, with its revelation of a much more complicated epoch, he argues, has the potential to ‘catalyse modes of “stewardship” based on diverse, reflexive awareness of the always-entangled nature of humans with their environments’ (4). For both Whatmore and Lorimer, the idea of ‘wildlife’ is offered up to replace the idea of ‘Nature’, describing as it does for them ‘a relational achievement spun between people and animals, plants and soils, documents and devices in heterogeneous social networks’ (Whatmore 2002: 14). Lorimer goes on: ‘Here, wildlife is vernacular, everyday, and democratic. It provokes curiosity, disconcertion, and care. It demands political processes for deliberating discord among multiple affected publics’ (2015: 11).

These corrective descriptions of wildlife conservation ‘in the Anthropocene’ chime with Monbiot’s suggestion that in these pioneering localized projects of rewilding there might be ‘no fixed objective’ (2013: 83). They are concerned with ‘allowing’ a ‘self-willed’ ecosystem to ‘find its own way’, and of course helping it to do so (10). As Featherstone tells Monbiot in Scotland, in phrases reminiscent of Macfarlane’s own exploration of the wild, ‘I asked myself: what’s

the message in the land? What's the story it's telling us?' (qtd. in Monbiot 2013: 105). Such rewilding initiatives explore ways to foreground and promote the agency of animals and plants themselves. In so doing, they also challenge the cool, scientific objectivity of the 'Human' agent as well, and instead tend to suggest the everyday, local, political authority of Lorimer's 'multiple affected publics'. Conservation understood in such 'post-Natural' and hybrid terminology goes beyond 'the instrumental desire to secure the delivery of ecosystem services' and may well find itself considering qualitative cultural values and community heritage as local distinctiveness becomes a more important and defining measure (Lorimer 2015: 9). Stimulating the abundance of forests or animals in a place can have powerful implications for the sense of personal and collective identity and can connect with the processes of dynamic localism considered in the previous chapter.

Scotland offers an excellent example of this overlap between dynamic localism and conservation practices. Featherstone's work in the Highlands has been helped along by changes in land ownership law that came about after the new Scottish Parliament set out the Land Reform Act of 2003. This act was initiated to change a very old and unequal system in which it has been estimated that only 432 people own half the rural land in Scotland, though this number has to be estimated because there is no public record of land ownership in Scotland yet (Monbiot 2014: n.p.). In an effort to change this state of affairs, the new act stipulates that when an area of land comes up for sale in Scotland, the local community themselves should not only have first refusal to buy it, but if they organize themselves to do so, government money will be made available to help them from a new Land Fund.

Kathleen Jamie has herself described an example of this process in action when the community she lives in pooled their money to buy a loch and its surrounding woodland after it was put up for sale by Scottish Water in 2007 (2015: 26). Jamie describes the long process of assessing the community interest, raising the money and voting on the issue which, as it happened, overlapped with the 2014 Scottish referendum on independence. Though Scotland voted 'no' in the referendum, the community around the loch voted 'yes' to buy the land, 95 per cent in favour. 'Our loch is, so to speak, a drop in the bucket,' Jamie says. 'But it's our drop, and maybe it will someday be our bucket' (26). There is a curious collision that happens on that 'our' here, between community,

country and nation, the outcome of which is to imagine the community land trust as somehow its own country devolving from Britain and steering its own fate. It will be interesting to watch how local groups in Scotland who buy their land choose to manage that land and whether they might be more inclined or less inclined to explore imaginative and experimental initiatives, perhaps even reforesting areas of open land and reintroducing species like Featherstone. There is a suggestive relationship here between rewilding and a form of re-commoning, in which connection to the land is stimulating questions about the protection of private or corporate interests that have been taken for granted for too long.

Robert Macfarlane has explored a Scottish community land initiative in an essay published in 2010 by Art Events that has since come to feature prominently in his 2014 compendium of topographical language, *Landmarks*. In this case, it was over the issue of whether a vast wind farm should be placed on the Isle of Lewis by the engineering and energy company AMEC. What is particularly interesting about this case is the way that the recovery of a language and a cultural history at the very intersection of human/non-human interaction became the focus of attention. As part of Scotland's drive to source 40 per cent of its energy from sustainable alternatives by 2020, AMEC filed an application in 2004 to site Europe's largest onshore wind farm down the middle of the north of the island. The journalist and former editor of *Granta*, Ian Jack, took the side of AMEC in this dispute, describing the area known as The Brindled Moor, in language reminiscent of eighteenth-century agricultural improvement, as 'a vast dead place: dark brown moors and black lochs under a grey sky all swept by a chill wet wind' (qtd. in Macfarlane 2010a: 124). In response to this and other descriptions of the moor as a 'wasteland', the leader of the opposition to the planning application, Finlay MacLeod, called for a language to challenge Jack's and AMEC's representation of the moor. He called for the following, from which Macfarlane takes the title of his essay: 'What is required is a new nomenclature of landscape and how we relate to it, so that conservation becomes a natural form of human awareness, and so that it ceases to be underwritten and underappreciated and thus readily vulnerable to desecration. What is needed is a Counter-Desecration Phrasebook' (qtd. in Macfarlane 2010a: 124).

This idea of a 'Counter-Desecration Phrasebook' becomes an important one to Macfarlane since it prompts an investigation of language akin to those

particular ‘thoughts’ that might be ‘found’ in the landscape through processes of ‘inter-animation’. This too is a question of perception but it draws language into the debate as well. For MacLeod there is an intrinsic link between the ‘under-written’ and the ‘under-appreciated’; for Macfarlane, this is a vicious circle: ‘Language-deficit leads to attention-deficit’ (115). As words such as ‘catkin’, ‘conker’, ‘brook’, ‘minnow’ and ‘bray’ are being eroded from the *Oxford Junior Dictionary*, his argument goes, so, gradually, is our ability to see and hear such things (116). There is also a form of Shifting Baseline Syndrome at risk of going on in this loss of detailed and localized topographical language. The argument is a nuanced version of the structuralist belief that ‘nothing is distinct before the appearance of language’ (Saussure 2010 [1916]: 856). To counter such desecration the Lewisians collected a detailed vocabulary of local terminology into a glossary and phrasebook: *Mòine dhubh* is ‘the heavier and darker peats that lie deeper and older into the moor,’ for example; and *éig* refers to ‘the quartz crystals on the beds of moorland stream-pools that catch and reflect moonlight, and therefore draw salmon to them in the late summer and autumn’ (Macfarlane 2010a: 109). Such a glossary of terminology seems to offer more than just nomenclature; it suggests those particular affordances struck between people and land through long acquaintance, but in this case it resists universalizing them by showing their close association with local history and a particular community.

Macfarlane’s *Landmarks* (2014) borrows this idea from Lewis and attempts to scale it up to a national glossary. The book is another image of the nation at large that is heterogeneous, intricate, inclusive and open-ended, founded in vernacular localism but showing its diverse parts in dialogue with one another, like Mabey’s *Flora Britannica*. We can also see this book as a form of cultural rewilding, drawing attention to the linguistic space at the intersection of the human and non-human. Macfarlane draws attention to where the language has thinned, and is thinning still, and attempts to rehabilitate it. In this sense we can understand its composite landscape vision as political, as about identity and the different ways people identify with place, as a part of their intangible heritage. However, it is not immediately clear what one might do with, or how one might read, *Landmarks*. Perhaps this is part of its particular beauty. Like Monbiot’s projects of rewilding the book seems to have ‘no fixed objective’ beyond putting things into circulation, getting things growing again

(2013: 83). It is unlikely that many terms will find their way into the *OED*, but that might make *Landmarks* all the more important as a book, an historical snapshot of an ambiguous, changing, vernacular language that exists on the outer edge of language in its written conventions and form. Like Sweeney under his curse, the language of this 'counter-desecration phrasebook' is between worlds, beyond the security of the normal social sphere yet still connected to it tenuously by ways of seeing and thinking. Like the projects of rewilding and community land initiatives, the uncertainty that comes with this 'word-horde's' (Macfarlane 2014: 3) connection to something beyond our control, and often beyond our everyday perception, is precisely what makes it so vivid and what might make it in the end, to quote Jane Bennett again, 'stretch our moral sense of the possible' (2001: 32).