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Edgelands

Patrick Keiller's 2010 semi-fictional documentary film *Robinson in Ruins* turned a sharp eye on the cultures of landscape and place in Britain. The film takes an unusual form of narrative that, like Keiller's previous two films, uses the fictional character 'Robinson' as its central device. Robinson is a melancholic flâneur of England's cities, industrial estates, dockyards, suburbs and ruins who, in this film, turns his attention to the countryside of the south of England. His name looks to Defoe's shipwrecked and island-bound *Robinson Crusoe*, as it looks to the verb coined by Rimbaud: *robinsonner*, 'to let the mind wander or to travel mentally' (Coverley 2010: 68). As Robinson wanders from place to place reflecting on what he sees, there is also a gesture to Defoe's own *Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, a national survey developed from several years of travel (1724–6) and in the tradition of earlier chorographical works such as Saxton's *Atlas* (1579) and Drayton's *Poly-Olbion* (1612). However, the story that the film has to tell about the English countryside is one fraught with very modern contradictions in which picturesque scenes hide histories of enclosure and violent insurrection, in which agricultural labour has been determined by global agents and economic crisis, and in which the uplifting experience of the kinds of wildlife explored in the last chapter is undermined by figures about biodiversity loss and climate change. One of the ways in which the film unearths these contradictions is by choosing particularly ambiguous edgeland spaces from which to look into this uncertain countryside: motorway embankments, decommissioned quarries, retail parks, even a disused military base. Robinson himself is very often to be found taking refuge in such dilapidated edgelands, in terrain that jars with the more conservative literary and artistic conventions of the rural.

'A few years ago, while dismantling a derelict caravan in the corner of a field, a recycling worker found a box containing 19 film cans and a notebook,'

the film begins. 'A group of researchers have arranged some of this material as a film, narrated by their institution's co-founder with the title *Robinson in Ruins*.' Robinson, it seems, shot these reels before he disappeared. Typically absent, he never speaks himself, but what we watch through the lens of an always completely stationary camera is through his eyes, and what we hear are excerpts from his journal in the voice of a narrator (in this case Vanessa Redgrave) trying to piece together what might have happened to him. Early on, Martin Heidegger's notion of dwelling and his philosophy of 'the fourfold' are employed in a typically paradoxical fashion. The narrator speaks while the camera is fixed on a boarded up and derelict building where Robinson has been living, if not 'dwelling':

Despite his increasing insubstantiality, Robinson had returned from Lidl with two bottles of Putinoff vodka and several own-brand items in illustrated packaging that recalled the dwelling of black forest farmers which, for Heidegger, let Earth and Heaven, divinities and mortals, enter into simple oneness with things. For which simple oneness Robinson began to search by visiting a well.

The satirical juxtaposition of Heideggerean dwelling and the marketing strategies of 'own-brand' budget European supermarket goods bring the idea of 'simple oneness' into question. And yet our protagonist sets off quite innocently in search of exactly this, oblivious, so it seems, to the irony. After finding the well that Robinson is inspired to go in search of, though not, perhaps, the 'oneness', there is a sudden change in the weather and he recalls 'the purpose of his undertaking': 'The next day ten leading climate scientists published a paper warning that then current CO₂ targets were too high for humanity to preserve a planet similar to that on which civilisation developed and would lead, instead, to irreversible disaster'. The narrator moves on but for many the lingering, contradictory experience will be a familiar one: the desire for an innocent connection with the world shot through by an awareness that in our most ordinary behaviour – in our use of supermarkets and energy, for example – we have long undermined the prospects of such innocence. The camera remains staring at the boarded up, derelict building where Robinson has been living. It is a liminal space, not quite a home, not quite a place at all really, in the conventional understanding of the word, neither rented nor

owned, just occupied provisionally by this mysteriously vanished character. It is walking distance from both a budget supermarket and a well and, like the derelict caravan where the recycling worker found these film cans, we place it mentally in that terrain on the edge of the city, a liminal, ambiguous and paradoxical place, one that might trouble any static or stable idea of place itself.

The term 'edgelands' was first coined by the landscape historian Marion Shoard to describe the 'interfacial rim' that lies between city and country, often a very large zone in which planning regulations are relaxed to allow for the building of infrastructure necessary to life on either side of it (2002: 117). 'Waste landscapes' or 'drosscape' are other terms that have been used to describe these difficult-to-define places (Berger 2007). Another helpful term is the French phrase *terrain vague* used by the architect Ignasi Solà-Morales Rubio to describe the vacated and derelict sites in and around a city (1995). 'Edgelands' and *terrain vague* are not quite interchangeable but, as Joanne Lee has pointed out, thinking about edgelands as *terrain vague* encourages us to see the 'edge' of 'edgelands' as plural and labyrinthine rather than as a straightforward border between city and country (two concepts that are themselves already deeply intertwined) (2015: 14). It encourages us to see edgelands as *intricately*, rather than *simply*, liminal. In this sense, military ruins in remote areas, and wastelands in the heart of a city, might also be considered edgelands for the simple fact that they have fallen out of currency. For Rubio, *terrain vague* is, and is not, a place. It is in some sense the undoing of a place like the derelict caravan or boarded up building that Robinson occupies. *Terrain vague* is 'after' a place in the sense that Richard Jefferies's *After London* (1885) imagines a city that has been overrun by wild nature. In this sense the 'edge' is a temporal and historical one as well.

Terrain vague as a term also helps to envision edgelands as a space in their own right rather than as merely defined by what is on either side of them. In this sense it is helpful to think of edgelands as a *type of terrain vague*, one with very distinctive characteristics which contrast the power and activity, the overdetermined functional space, of a city. They represent a space which is 'void, absence, yet also promise, the space of the possible, of expectation' (Rubio 1995: 119). But promise and possibility are rarely permitted to remain promise and possibility for long without being 'realised' as something else, so these are also often sites of conflict and change. They beckon, for example,

to the developer and the conservationist alike to reinvent and restore. It is perhaps this clash of promise and conflict that has seen artists and authors gravitate towards them in recent years.¹

Edgelands are spaces in which the 'event' of place is in unusually dynamic flux, often both in terms of wildlife and modernity (Massey 2005: 140). Far from the careful mediations of the human and non-human in the previous chapter's exploration of the wild, here wildlife and modernity overlap in sprawling, feral and unbalanced ways. On the one hand they are spaces where the pesticides of large-scale agribusiness are not employed. They are not 'productive' land in the agricultural sense and so they are often left alone meaning that biodiversity can come to thrive. The photographer Edward Chell, for example, has spent time recording the proliferation of rare wildflowers in the ribbons of motorway embankment (the 'soft estate') between roads and the surrounding farmland (Smith 2014). On the other hand, as Marion Shoard has argued, the relaxation of planning regulations in the edgelands has meant that they have become 'the ultimate physical expression of the character of our age, unmediated by the passing tastes of elite groups' (2002: 141). Incinerators, sewage works, gasometers, warehouses, or 'big sheds', and retail parks sit side by side with marshland, coastline, flood relief channels and 'restored' nature reserves (former gravel pits or quarries). The composite of ecology, topography and human geography has intensified in these zones in singularly modern ways that reveal and illuminate tensions and contradictions that exist in our conventions of landscape and in our understanding of place. Writing about edgelands is therefore very often a process of self-consciously renegotiating our relationship with landscape and place through complex hybrids of genre, convention and form. It is perhaps for this reason that we so often find Robinson in the edgelands, walking, watching, living, trying to make sense of the conflicts and contradictions of this island-bound existence in his own fugitive way. This chapter will take a closer look at several works by authors and artists who are doing likewise. It will begin by considering 'Modern Nature' through Richard Mabey's *The Unofficial Countryside* (1973) and it will continue with an exploration of 'Feral Modernity' through Paul Farley and

¹ For example, see 'Ruin Lust' (4 March–18 May 2014). Tate Britain, London. 'Soft Estate: Art of the Edgelands' (8 March–3 May 2014). Spacex, Exeter.

Michael Symmons Roberts's *Edgelands: Journeys in Britain's True Wilderness* (2011). However, the account of edgelands that emerges between these two begs a question about not only the contemporary status of edgelands, but also the kinds of history they contain and the kind of future they might have. These are, of course, questions of heritage. In the final part, through a reading of Ken Worpole, and Jason Orton's *The New English Landscape* (2013), the chapter explores the possibility of an edgelands heritage and asks what we might learn about heritage more widely by thinking about it in relation to such ambiguous places.

Modern nature

There, where the tapering cranes sweep around,
And great wheels turn, and trains roar by
Like strong, low-headed brutes of steel –
There is my world, my home; yet why
So alien still? For I can neither
Dwell in that world, not turn again
To scythe and spade, but only loiter
Among the trees the smoke has slain.

In the early pages of Richard Mabey's *The Unofficial Countryside*, we are given these lines from George Orwell's 'On a Ruined Farm Near the His Master's Voice Gramophone Factory' (1973: 19). They describe a particular moment of reorientation in between the country and the city. Orwell is resistant to both of them and stands his ground, circumspect and clear-sighted. The city is a place of modernity, development and ambition but one in which he feels he cannot 'dwell'; and yet there is no going back to a long-past agricultural way of life either. The moment's pause in which he comes to 'loiter' reveals a landscape of its own, a difficult and uncertain space which would not easily conform to the usual literary conventions. This is the *terrain vague*, beginning to break out of the old country/city binary, that Mabey himself sets out to explore, an edge in many sense of the word: between country and city, between past and present, and even between the literary conventions of the rural tradition and the modernist city. Orwell's loitering inspires Mabey to try something new, to find

his way into the gaps, or under these conventions, sniffing out the state of the natural world where it has often come to thrive against the odds. Beneath both country and city, Mabey finds a surprising environment of animals and plants that suggest a prehistoric resilience haunting the edges of an all-too-human world. In so doing, a space is revealed that has almost nothing to do with the country and the city, and yet it is one that subtends both. Mabey's 1973 book is an attempt call up that landscape through the gaps between the worlds which have been laid over it. As he does so, the places he writes about find a purchase in the public imagination and a record is made of their distinctly modern shape and qualities.

The Unofficial Countryside was published the same year as Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City* and between them they represent something of a change in the climate of the literature of the British, and especially the English, landscape. What both Orwell and Mabey are resisting here is a retreat into the idealized notion of the countryside, one that Williams suggests is, in fact, a 'myth' associated with the pastoral idea of a 'golden age', a recently vanished era when everything might have been simpler (1973: 37). F. R. Leavis and Denys Thompson had offered a modern example of such a myth in their idea of 'organic community' in the 1930s. This was a way of life in which social relations were based on craftsmanship and the rhythms of nature, one that was the recent victim of industrialism, urbanism and modernity and yet also, paradoxically, 'right and inevitable' (qtd. in Williams 1958: 252). This is not to say that social relations based on craftsmanship and the rhythms of nature ought not to be something to aspire to but rather that 'organic community', much like the 'dwelling' of Heidegger's Black Forest farmers, somehow misremembers and idealizes a life based on agriculture in the middle of the twentieth century. Such a backward-looking ideal can end up blinding people to the contemporary reality which, as Mabey was to find, offered a remarkable story of its own that was going untold. Williams does concede that a 'myth' like this can serve as a radical call to arms against capitalism, but argues that this is often for those with little experience of rural life, and generally at the expense of an understanding of the actual history of feudal and pre-feudal social organization. It is more often the case, he suggests, that 'an idealisation, based on a temporary situation and on a deep desire for stability, served to cover and to evade the actual and bitter contradictions of the time' (1973: 45).

In an essay examining the environmental tradition 'after organic community', Martin Ryle has argued that our 'sense of loss ... is also a cultural resource' and that, 'rather than dismissing it, we need to confront and understand it' (2002: 22). By doing precisely this and exploring the difficult modern relationship to the urban and suburban environment, Mabey begins to reorient himself in relation to the living landscape free of the nostalgia that Williams warns us against. And it is interesting to note that this begins with loitering. 'Loiter' comes from the Dutch to wobble or wag about with particular reference to a loose tooth. The *OED* suggests that the word began to be used in its modern meaning as slang introduced to England by foreign 'loiterers' themselves. Loitering is what you do when others believe you should be elsewhere doing something else. It is to be displaced, then, and without purpose, or perhaps more accurately, it is to appear to be without obvious purpose. It is not working or travelling, waiting or resting. It is as liminal and ambiguous as the edgelands themselves, not one thing or another. Loitering is often the behaviour of 'suspect' characters, workshy, malicious ('loitering with intent'), obstructing the flow of purposeful life – all of which no doubt looks back to certain xenophobic anxieties about immigrants, tramps, travellers, outsiders. The more industrious, even industrial, a society, the more suspect the loiterer. But loitering might also, in fact, be about acclimatization or reorientation. We might think here, too, of Keiller's use of stationary camera positions in which there is no zooming, no panning, no movement of any kind.

Like the style of writing itself, the style of walking through, watching or apprehending a place read the land differently and can therefore be read themselves as a choreographed (or unchoreographed) performances might be, from a hike along an ancient byway to a local trespass in a landscaped garden; from a search for a folkloric site to the observation of nesting birds from a kitchen window. Mabey begins *The Unofficial Countryside* with this reference to loitering as an expression of his anxieties and uncertainties about how to travel in search of a landscape beneath the usual conventions. He describes planning to 'journey in an erratic circle around London, tacking towards and away from the centre' but soon decides this is a 'ludicrously inappropriate formula' (1973: 26). In fact, he suggests that he wants to distance himself from previous, ambitious expeditions and their subsequent national or regional 'surveys', like Defoe's or William Cobbett's. These, he suggests, are the modes

of travel of the 'official countryside', and after feeling quite embarrassed by carrying the usual day-sack and binoculars in a highly populated suburb he suggests:

Rambling ... was certainly no natural activity in the built-up areas. It tempts you to try and make an adventure out of something whose most important meaning is altogether more intimate and homely. If I wanted to catch that sense it would more likely be in lunch-hour strolls, weeds found in a garden corner, a bird glimpsed through a bus window. It was a change of focus that was needed, a new perspective on the everyday. (30–1)

The 'new perspective' that Mabey discovers comes through a certain resistance to convention, resistance *both* to the countryside ramble with its memory of landscape tourism and the picturesque, and to that of the industrious metropolitan flow of crowds. But it doesn't come easily at first, or from any one sustained style or method of investigation. It comes from a whole spectrum of very ordinary ('intimate and homely') ways of looking and moving.

The book's opening pages describe an author 'locked-up, boxed-in, and daydreaming morbidly', stuck in gridlocked traffic driving out of London. In response to this though, rather than taking to the usual hills and valleys, Mabey heads down to the canal towpaths and gravel pits, the wastelands and municipal parks within the M25. He watches sand martins in a temporary sandbank raised by road works in Middlesex from a Greenline bus as it passes daily (1973: 33). He pulls over in his car to explore an explosion of giant hogweed (*Heracleum mantegazzianum*) among rows of factories (82). He allows himself to get lost and ends up knee-deep in mud on Hampstead Heath. He emerges from the heath for a pint in a pub, filthy, 'feeling smug about my hard morning down t'park' (the turn of phrase playfully juxtaposing traditions of work and recreation, industrial and designed landscape) (115). Essentially, there is no prescribed method but opportunism to get off the beaten track and under the conventional myths. Routes feed out in any direction from the daily routine at the insistence of chance encounters.

There is an obvious parallel here. In Paris, Guy Debord and the Situationists had been developing experimental tactics for a highly politicized walking of the city since 1958, tactics that challenged the usual flow of people and consumption. Mabey's careful consideration of the way in which he was going to approach these modern landscapes, the improvisation according to sudden

chance encounters, does connect to the idea of the *dérive*, or the 'drift', in which ambience or happenstance would lead the walker away from the usual flow of the crowd. Mabey's self-conscious search for a new perspective strikes a chord with that 'moment of life concretely and deliberately constructed', the very 'situations' that gave the Situationists their name (Debord 1958: n.p.). However, just as Mabey attempts to discover a form more singularly adapted to these places than the narratives of the 'official countryside', so he diverges from the deliberate constructions of urban psychogeographers as well. Mabey's real source comes less from post-war Paris than from eighteenth-century Hampshire, from Selborne, and a naturalist whose own extraordinary way of looking at the world broke new ground for the science. Gilbert White, about whom Mabey would go on to write a prize-winning biography, advanced our contemporary knowledge of migrating birds and, by way of the most unquenchable and minute curiosity, discovered numerous species of wildflower and insect in the landscape around his home. It is to White more than anyone that Mabey is directing our attention with the structure of his book as a seasonal year. He here describes White's unorthodox methods, in which there is something of his own search for a new perspective based on 'the intimate and homely'. Mabey describes:

the patient, inquisitive watching, the changes of focus as questions multiply; the answers dawning, from flashes of intuition or plain hard reasoning, and these forming a framework to test against yet more watching. And all these processes not rigidly ordered but advancing together in a kind of continuous feedback loop. (2006a: 81)

This collision of the naturalist and the psychogeographer throws a curious light on a book that was very much of its time in 1973.

Stephen E. Hunt has suggested the term 'psychoecology' for work like Mabey's, and later works by Macfarlane and Deakin. Hunt draws on affinities shared between these nature writers and Iain Sinclair and Will Self, and emphasizes the 'agency of the writer in constructing as well as describing the natural world' (2008: 76). The particular construction of the natural world in this book comes from turning an eye on a very modern version of 'nature' that an emphasis on either country or city had overlooked. While some might have assumed no wildlife would survive in edgelands, Mabey recognized its resilience and adaptability, its 'dogged and inventive survival in the face of

all that we deal out' (1973: 23). *The Unofficial Countryside* offers startling observations or images, visions almost, of the human and non-human worlds tangled together, before which Mabey describes himself at times as 'morbidly elated' (29). We see a heron building a makeshift nest 'on the roof of a captive heron's cage in the nearby Zoo', pointing up an absurd disjuncture between the bird as a spectacle and the bird as a more neighbourly and everyday sight (108). We see 'a calling cuckoo caught in a Lido fence' where the play of alliteration on the c's and l's oddly aestheticizes a disturbing scene: a real, modern cuckoo and the cuckoo of pastoral convention collide (29). There are grebes like 'obsolete Spanish aristocrats' against 'the tasteless backcloth of bulldozers and extraction machinery', a tragi-comic image which brings the wildlife to the foreground and sees the human development recede (62–3). There is the noise of a tree full of starlings 'well nigh blotting out the grind of the concrete mixers a few hundred yards away' (46). Each one offers something of an imagist poem stitching together wildlife and modernity. There is a very particular version of nature here, but it is a long way from 'Nature' as a non-human objectified other 'out there', pristine and untrammelled (Morton 2007: 6).

This book's introduction explored the way 'Nature' has become a problematic term in light of recent developments in environmental criticism. Bill McKibben has argued that the effects of human development have had such far-reaching effects on our atmosphere and oceans that 'our mistaken sense of nature as eternal and separate will be washed away' (1990: 7). Timothy Morton has gone so far as to suggest that it is the very concept of 'Nature' as something 'other' and 'out there' that is holding us back from a truly ecological form of thought (2007: 5). Jamie Lorimer proposed that in light of critical deconstructions, 'multiple natures' might be possible and 'multinatural' thinking necessary for understanding them (2015: 2). Mabey has been a passionate defender of the use of the term 'nature' but he rarely means by it something 'eternal' or 'out there'. The particular nature he offers in *The Unofficial Countryside*, for example, is distinctively placed in the *terrain vague* of Greater London in the 1970s. Kate Soper has endeavoured to balance both 'nature sceptical' and 'nature endorsing' arguments to arrive at some productive thoughts about the idea. On the one hand, she has argued that the nature that ecologists are attempting to conserve is also the nature that has been dominated and destroyed in the name of a certain *natural* order of relations, rights of ownership and forms

of exploitation (1990: 250–1). Here she points out the hypocritical ironies of essentialist arguments that ascribe a moral value to nature. Nature in this sense has always been something conceptually constructed, and historically contingent, and people have often endeavoured to hide its constructed form with such appeals to an organic essence. On the other hand, though it is true that much of what we refer to as ‘natural’ has been shaped and developed by the human hand and the modern world, nonetheless ‘that activity does not “construct” the powers and processes upon which it is dependent for its operation’ (249). It is this latter version of nature as power and process, related to the previous chapter’s exploration of the wild, that Mabey is exploring beneath the conventions of country and city.

In 2011 Tim Dee suggested of the ‘New Nature Writing’ that there were some surprising challenges to be faced by the authors in coming to terms with a contemporary sense of nature:

Country diaries survive in some newspapers but DDT, species losses, and Ted Hughes’ gore-poetics saw off the nice in the 1970s, while nature itself – under the human heel – has been pushed, bloodied, shrunk and ruined to the front of the stage ever since. There, even enfeebled, it has called for new descriptions, fresh thoughts. (22)

Far from being something ‘out there’ offering an escape from modernity, Dee suggests that a new version of nature has emerged, shot through and through by modernity, entrenched with the same complexities and anxieties. If a version of modern nature is showing itself here, it is a long way from the natures (plural) of the past: from, for example, the endlessly replenishing divine nature of the eighteenth-century physico-theologists; or the carefully ordered taxonomies of Carl Linneaus’s *Systema Naturæ* (1758); or even the deified, tutelary ‘Nature’ of Wordsworth. This is a particular, late-twentieth-century version of nature, and Mabey’s *The Unofficial Countryside*, like Hughes’ ‘gore-poetics’ contributed to its reappraisal. Abject and vulnerable perhaps, but also bearing up strikingly under the pressure, this modern nature is a bruised and resourceful survivor. In Mabey’s ‘new descriptions, fresh thoughts’ there is a particular historical perspective. This is, again, a construction of nature based upon historically contingent ways of looking and their concomitant forms of representation, but it is one founded on such values as concern, admiration

and curiosity, arising out of the conservation and environmental movements of the time. Watching those sand martins nest and rear a family of chicks in a pile of sand on a roundabout that would only be there for a matter of weeks before being used in construction, Mabey learns something new about familiar wildlife, about its gall, opportunism and toughness. The book brings this to light, enriching a public understanding of wildlife, connecting that understanding with contemporary experience rather than letting it rely too heavily on the conventions of another era.

Tracing the animals and plant life in and around a city also refreshes ways of thinking about the space of the city as well. That the first summer after the Blitz there was rosebay willowherb flowering on over three-quarters of the bombed sites in London, 'defiant sparks of life amongst the desolation', is a reminder of the earth's capacity for renewal, always just a foot or two beneath the pavement (1973: 35). Kestrels too are found to be nesting quite 'democratically' in 'the Savoy Hotel, gasometers in the East End, Nelson's Column, the House of Lords, various power station chimneys and a ventilator shaft in Broadcasting House' (101). A very different perspective on London emerges inflected by the wildness, both at its heart and on its edges, both under it and surrounding it. Modern nature, as much as it lies 'under the human heel', seems ready to sprout back up and over it as well and there is something consoling and inspiring to admire in its resilience. Far from posing an escape from modernity, an 'out there' to our 'in here', this particular nature, when watched narrowly through Mabey's naturalist's eye, underpins modernity, runs right through it and shows itself in lively and contemporary dialogue with it. The ambiguous *terrain vague* of edgelands allows this distinctively modern nature to emerge, to erupt, in fact, with all its fascinating paradoxes through the landscape traditions and conventions of another era.

Feral modernity

In 2011, the two poets, Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts, collaborated on a book called *Edgelands: Journeys into England's True Wilderness*. The object of the book was to explore, like Mabey, those overlooked and in-between places such as wastelands, business parks, container ports, motorway bridges, sewage

works and power stations: landscapes they felt had been largely ignored by the more conservative traveller in search of picturesque scenes. 'Sometimes they are written off,' they suggest, 'as part of the urban (or suburban) human landscape that has to be escaped, or transcended' (8). Farley and Roberts owe a debt to Mabey but they also develop and grow the project in an interesting way all their own. Marion Shoard argued in 2002 that edgelands offer an unexploited opportunity to connect with the functioning architecture of the ordinary needs on which our day-to-day lives are based in their raw state, and that for this reason they are to be celebrated. For Shoard, a greater appreciation of these landscapes would be beneficial since they represent the reality of our footprint on the immediate environment. Were schoolchildren to encounter the waste dumps and car crushing facilities that are hidden away on these sites, so her argument goes, it might make them more conscious of the impact that they as individuals, and as members of families, are having on the land in which they live. That in Britain and elsewhere all our necessary ugliness is hidden in areas that are largely ignored has led to an embarrassing sense of disconnection with reality, an 'alienation and puzzlement' symptomatic of a bourgeois consumer attitude to place (2002: 142). It is precisely to Shoard's call for an appreciation of these places, then, that Farley and Roberts were responding with their book in 2011.

Early on the authors quote a few lines of poetry by the eighteenth-century Quaker poet John Scott who once described the wildflowers clustered over an enclosure ditch. A friend of the poet struggled with the 'shameless modernism' of remarking on the ditch since it suggested a politically and economically constructed landscape that did not square with a pastoral or a picturesque aesthetic. Farley and Roberts wonder 'how would he have coped with barbed-wire fencing or the IKEA car park?' and with this in mind they set about making such 'shameless modernism' their project (2011: 32). The more they travel through such 'complicated, unexamined places' (10), the more they find they 'admire them' (9). Tim Edensor has argued that the editing out of such reminders of contemporary life is a tactic still largely employed in the representation of rural England in magazines, observing that 'there are no pylons, mobile phone masts, new buildings or telegraph poles to be seen,' all of which are essential to our most basic infrastructure needs (qtd. in Worpole and Orton 2013: 28). Ken Worpole suggests that such omissions may have

‘substantially contributed to the confusion we experience today’ (28) when it comes to modern landscape aesthetics, a confusion no doubt related to that ‘alienation and puzzlement’ that Shoard suggests is a result of our overlooking edgelands (2002: 142). Farley and Roberts were attempting to adjust their aesthetic sensibility, to align it more closely with the state of the land as it is used and encountered by hundreds of thousands every day, walking dogs on the edge of town, driving around industrial estates, looking from the window of a train, or the raised viaduct of a motorway. They are framing what we might see every day but seldom inquire after. Scenes that would never ordinarily find themselves framed or appealing are lifted out of the obsolete and offered up in short passages of poetic prose.

In a strange and playful way then, this is landscape tourism and the picturesque in a modern literary guise, though all is not as straightforward as it seems. Take the following passage, for instance, where the love of ruins and a curious preoccupation with finding surprising new compositions might have been written by William Gilpin himself were it an abbey rather than a factory:

Have you seen the sudden, filmic light effects of low winter sun across a ruined factory, the hard-cut shadows and blinding reflections off broken glass? Late-afternoon sun on a clear day throwing giant shadows like ink fields on the scrubland behind power station cooling towers? Or milk morning sun brushing the tops of willowherb, nettle, thistle, in the unkempt field behind the car-crushers? (2011: 257)

The adjustment in aesthetics here cannot help but remind us that there was also an adjustment in aesthetics taking place in the early days of the picturesque. An artistically minded, largely urban population were beginning to tire of the familiar tamed and productive agricultural landscapes and to travel further afield. Mountainous, craggy and wild landscapes like the Lake District had been described by Ralph Thoresby in 1697 as full of ‘dreadful fells, hideous wastes, horrid waterfalls, terrible rocks and ghastly precipices’ (qtd. in Thomas 1983: 258). In the second half of the eighteenth century, however, they were beginning to be highly valued and written about by, for example, the poet Thomas Gray, who visited on his own in 1769, and of course later Wordsworth and Coleridge. The taste for such landscapes was changing and the rise of the tourist with his or her Claude glass saw the beginning of their consumption as

scenery. In their chapter on 'Water', Farley and Roberts seem to be encouraging a subsequent change that might echo this of the eighteenth century, and though the style of landscape is qualitatively different, the appeal to a class of aesthetic tourist seeking novelty to consume seems oddly identical.

'Water' begins with Alfred Wainwright's much loved 'Innominate Tarn', itself among the Lake District's 'Haystacks', before taking us, by way of contrast and by way of preference, to two other pools in their own 'True Wilderness': one on the edge of the Naylorfield housing estate north of Liverpool and one on the outskirts of Peterborough, just beyond 'a well-used dogging spot' (2011: 72–5). The latter pool is described as a pond 'rich in detail, a Pre-Raphaelite vision with the focus now screwed tight and sharp, now scrimmed and soft, touched by the colours of wild flowers in the summer months' (75). The poets end that particular part reminding us that 'all over England, ponds just like them have claimed the lives of children, on summer afternoons separated by decades' (75). As with all good picturesque landscapes, the rich aesthetic is brought into tension with a background sense of danger or drama, something to bring about what Gilpin called a 'pause of intellect' (1972 [1792]: 50). It is something familiar to the pastoral tradition too, the *memento mori* often spoken by death himself: *Et In Arcadia Ego* ('Even in Arcadia am I') (Dubrow 1999: 194). Farley and Roberts frame the most unlikely of places using well-known landscape conventions. In part there is a nostalgic celebration of a type of edgelands place in which they and many others will have spent childhood afternoons, weekends or summer holidays but the celebration is complicated by the feeling that this also seems to parody the picturesque itself as well. Can it be both a celebration and a parody? Again, the exploration of edgelands unearths a paradox in our attitude to landscape. Childhood nostalgia and adult scepticism can inhabit us at the same time and the uncertainty as to what the edgelands are, what they should be – that sense of conflict and possibility – brings this out.

Mabey's inventiveness in *The Unofficial Countryside* is most apparent in his way of looking and exploring, but with *Edgelands* the inventiveness is most apparent in the written form itself. The book is divided into chapters with edgeland themes or features for titles, such as 'Canals', 'Bridges', 'Pallets', 'Retail', 'Mines' and so on, but each chapter is further broken down into an idiosyncratic structure of smaller sections, and a distinctive form begins to

emerge. Part annotation, part sketch, part diary entry, these are often not more than a page, and never more than three pages, long. This prevents the sense of a continuous journey or a polished, conventional narrative, and feels more reflective, more like a collage of set pieces with the emphasis on thinking and inquiring rather than on a finished thought or an answered question. It is a form that captures something of that 'loitering' Orwell describes above, but the book lacks any of the melancholy and instead sets out to embrace the modern in prose that is heterogeneous and experimental in its figures. The short set pieces become routines, flurries of conversation that try out an idea before receding into silence again. The rhythm seems oddly reminiscent of Samuel Beckett's dialogue at times, punctuated unevenly by pauses as a subject runs out and a new one is concocted. In fact it becomes frustrating to read. You could be forgiven for asking, from time to time, 'what are they doing? Where is this going?' But this is the moment that you are also tuning in to the form. This is not a book that has set out to go anywhere. Like Mabey's, perhaps even more so, it is resistant to the 'going a journey' narrative. In an early review, Geoff Dyer wrote:

It's not just that there is no sense of a developing argument; there is an absolute lack – and I mention this as a shortcoming precisely because I am the kind of reader for whom this is not a priority – of any kind of narrative drive. Two-thirds of the way through, it becomes evident that Edgelands is never going to be more than the sum of its parts – but the parts are often terrific. (2011: n.p.)

The book toys with expectations and forces the reader into a halting disorientation, never quite sure what might be encountered next. In the end its perpetual shifting comes to emulate the ambiguity of the places themselves, ever changing their character depending on what they are being used for (a rough playground for children, a sleeping spot for the homeless, an area to walk dogs or watch birds, meet for casual sex, view stars, get fit, cycle, graffiti or host a rave). This is what Rubio calls *terrain vague* again, in which there exists intensely 'the space of the possible' (1995: 119).

If we take, for a moment, the definitions of space and place given by Michel de Certeau, an unusual relationship between them begins to open up here. In de Certeau's largely urban conception, 'space' is what we create within the 'place' of a city by moving across it (Buchanan 2000: 102). Space is the performative

assertion of our freedom within and against the restriction of such freedom by the architecture and legal discourse of streets, alleys, towers, stairways and subways that make up the *place* of a city. De Certeau's understanding of place is one at odds with the understanding of place that this book is arguing for, but it might be instructive to consider the relationship to space that he puts it in for a moment. In the edgelands it is precisely this static conception of place that de Certeau gives that has come undone as the built environment lapses into *terrain vague*, making the freedom of the individual's creation of space all the more free and possible. For de Certeau, the walk is a creative act and is described, in terms akin to language itself, as an 'enunciative focalisation' (1984: 116). This casting of lived space as an assertive, signifying act is particularly marked at moments in the book when surprising things occur in the edgelands, when they become miniature theatres for strange human behaviour. In the following from the chapter on woodlands, after reading about a rise in people hunting deer in edgelands in Scotland they imagine the following:

A hunt in the postmodern forest might begin with the weapons being inspected and made ready, the dogs quietened in their car cages. Next, a few lines of grey cocaine are chopped out with a supermarket loyalty card on the back of a CD case, and, suitably emboldened and excited, the caravan of 4 × 4s switches to full beam and enters the scratchy woodland. Leaving the vehicles at the car park, the party then moves ahead on foot, quietly through a dark scented with honeysuckle, wild rose and nightshade, over stiles and along footpaths, deeper into the woods, until the shout goes out and the dogs are let loose. The whole thing is recorded on cameraphones. (2011: 169)

An oddly anonymous nocturnal group is involved in activities for which we do not seem to have a frame of reference. Conventionally, hunting is undertaken in parkland or the Highlands by landed gentry, the wealthy, even the aristocracy. We do not readily associate hunting with this environment, or with drugs, loyalty cards and cameraphones, but the neglect to which edgelands have been left has opened up the potential for a certain transgressive freedom. And this comes across through the movement from reportage into fictionalized narrative as well. It is a textual liberty that emulates the taking of a certain spatial liberty. Everything about the passage transgresses. Even the 'honeysuckle, wild rose and nightshade' hint at a postmodern subversion of sylvan pastoral.

In a later passage, the pastoral and postmodern collide again in the oddly transgressive behaviour of another anonymous group of people. Again the border between non-fiction and fiction melts away. It is one of the shortest entries in the book from the chapter on 'Weather', reproduced here in full:

The spring of 2010, and the first signs that iPhone birdsong apps are being abused, as people begin to play the pre-recorded warblings and alarm bells of various confused species back into the trees and bushes. We see the first occurrences of a new kind of edgelands flash mob: at first light, hundreds gather in the silent places outside of towns and cities, lit by the firefly glow of their phone screens, and at the preordained exact moment play the songs of their chosen birds, a digital dawn chorus made possible by lightweight flash-memory technology. (259–60)

There is a morally ambiguous curiosity that we feel at this, part imagined, part based on news reports. Fiction seems to take over from reportage, picking up and dramatizing the scene about halfway through again. It is exciting, bizarre and concerning all at the same time. This nocturnal troupe, enabled by new technology, challenges a passive, romantic absorption of the dawn chorus by interacting with it, by participating in it. The lines between nature and technology, human and animal, fiction and reality, all become blurred. The flash-mob performance creates a momentary space of enchantment and bacchic frenzy that appears suddenly and recedes just as quickly. In this and the hunt scene above there are playful, barbed and provoking images of anonymous human behaviour at the wild edges and they are offered up without comment before a change of subject. There are no judgements in the edgelands, they seem to be saying. This is Rubio's 'space of the possible' pushed to a space of carnivalesque lawlessness and anarchy, a behavioural as well as a spatial hiatus from the ordinary running of society. These passages present an interesting comparison to Mabey's visions of wildlife tangled up with land developments: visions of feral modernity that complement his own visions of modern nature.

However, the admiration that Farley and Roberts hold for edgelands as *spaces* (in de Certeau's definition) is, in the end, as difficult as their adoption of the picturesque and pastoral modes. It is subversive and imaginative, but it is also oddly detached. The nostalgia arising out of their childhood experiences in edgelands emphasizes the spatial possibilities and freedoms,

but in doing so they somehow fail to connect with the contemporary status of edgelands as *places*. ‘The edgelands now need something beyond a merely subjective celebration of their identity,’ wrote Shoard in her review of their book. ‘Far more than our towns and countryside, they are being subjected to ceaseless change. Wild space is being prettified at the expense of its character and creatures. Industrial ruins are being cleared away’ (2011: n.p.). The detachment with which Farley and Roberts admire the edgelands sits somewhere between the modernist detachment of the *flanêur* and the visual detachment of the landscape tourist. The book will no doubt be a powerful tool in making arguments for the conservation of edgelands, but how that conservation might take place – how the ambiguity and vagueness of them as places might be protected without being made into something less ambiguous and less vague – is a difficult discussion that they avoid. For example, they are quick to sniff out the hypocrisy of a community woodland group who damage the edgelands ecosystem where they plant their trees. Nonetheless, they seem to welcome the retail village or the industrial estate, even in one case provocatively proposing a ‘Premier Inn on top of Ben Nevis and a Little Chef on Scafell Pike’ (2011: 166).

With the latter of these, they are provoking a reaction from those who mountaineer out of a desire for solitude, but there is a certain anonymous and homogenized design that comes with these forms of development, and an unfortunate and wilful disregard for history. What industrial ruins, picturesque pools and edgelands wildlife were bulldozed to make room for the Trafford Centre outside Manchester, or Birmingham’s Fort Shopping Park, places that they find ‘beguiling in their honesty?’ (217). The imposing architecture of retail parks, shopping centres and container ports is an example of the spatial deterritorialization and feral modernity that they admire too. Shoard herself questions where the workers in such superstores or offices can go in their lunch hour, suggesting that ‘the absence of any community space deprives people of their right to live fully’ (2011: 132); and she takes issue with the fact that ‘councils neglect to provide the most basic public facilities they would automatically provide in a town’ (131). These are important issues for the future of edgelands too. In their race to appreciate these places, Farley and Roberts at times seem to ignore or excuse bad design, and the question is begged as to whether celebrating edgelands as an unadulterated expression

of our historical moment needs to mean celebrating even footloose and profiteering short-termism. The community woodland they criticize is led by local people invested in the place. Its failures might more kindly be viewed as part of a learning curve, while no such curve will exist on sites owned by global corporate interests unless people demand it. *Edgelands* offers a subversive aesthetic that will no doubt generate interest in these exciting spaces, and it does so in a curiously playful relationship with the conventions of landscape aesthetics, but the book, at times, quite knowingly lapses into a mode that is a symptom of modernity rather than a thoughtful interaction with it.

An edgelands heritage

Ken Worpole and Jason Orton's *The New English Landscape* offers a very different approach to edgelands as it explores a more localized view in the area of the Thames estuary. For Worpole and Orton, influenced by the principles of the European Landscape Convention (which the British have been quite late to sign), our understanding of landscape and place goes to the heart of 'politics, public aesthetics and cultural identity' (2013: 11). They too confront and challenge the tradition of the picturesque from within its own terms – they offer Worpole's critical essays accompanied by Orton's carefully composed photographs – but the critique they articulate is one guided by local histories, among them histories of the communities of artists, intellectuals, socialists, anarchists and Tolstoyans who moved to Essex land colonies associated with the 'back to the land' movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This is a view of the edgelands not merely as free, creative space to visit and think in, space to explore on foot and admire, but as sites where lives were made and utopian experiments lived out. Together they explore the remaining traces in the landscape and document the coming change as large-scale developments move in. Marion Shoard has suggested that at some point people will have to carefully consider the kind of 'relationship' they want to see in the long term 'between our activity in the edgelands, their epic infrastructure, their unique wildlife and industrial archaeology, and their peculiar place in our imagination' (2011: n.p.). If Mabey pioneered new ways of exploring modern nature in these places, and if Farley and Roberts have

begun to make arguments for appreciating their feral modernity as well, then Worpole and Orton explore both their third, historical dimension, but also the way these three aspects might be related to one another culturally. They have responded to Shoard's suggestion here by beginning to articulate a distinctive form of heritage for these unusual landscapes, where heritage has recently come to be described (by Rodney Harrison) as 'a form of social and cultural action ... as a form of 'work' which helps to produce a culture' (2010: 36). It is not an easy issue to articulate in relation to edgelands. Putting a fence around such places and signposting them is not the solution; but doing nothing and leaving them to fall prey to future development as the empty wastelands they are often assumed to be is equally unsatisfactory.

In 2014, Worpole and Orton's project website showed a photograph of a small shed nestled among buddleia bushes, accompanied by text describing it as the site of the former Joseph Wells Fireworks Factory near Dartford, Kent. It is one of a number of corrugated iron sheds, 'which for obvious reasons were spaced apart from one another.' They ask, 'How do structures like these feature in debates about what should be preserved in landscapes which are earmarked for regeneration?' The answer, of course, is that presently they do not. 'Unfortunately, planners and developers frequently see landscapes like these as blank canvases that can be cleared or levelled flat. The specifics of place are something they would prefer not to have to address when making their decisions on the future of such ambiguous places' (Worpole and Orton 2014: n.p.). Like Mabey's work, and to an extent Farley and Roberts's, their combination of fieldwork, research, writing and photography helps to unearth a new way of thinking about this area near Dartford, but one that is based on a more careful investigation of historical depth. The insecurity of the place's identity – far from being liberating, as it seems to be for Farley and Roberts – in fact invites a closer scrutiny, one that coaxes more meaning out of the place. Such scrutiny of the insecure heritage of the area has been sustained over several years and continues to grow in their ongoing work. This work can be understood as heritage work insofar as it 'helps to produce a culture', as Harrison suggests; not in the outmoded sense of what was critiqued as 'museumification' in the late 1980s, where the abiding image was of the past under a 'bell jar ... into which no ideas can enter, and, just as crucially, from which none can escape'. This is heritage work insofar as it presents a way of

thinking critically about the past as a way of understanding its meanings in the present and for the future (Hewison 1987: 144).

They also admire the work of architect Peter Beard, and in particular his vision for the wildlife sanctuary around Rainham Marshes. They read this designed landscape as, to borrow Jonathan Bate's description of Central Park in New York, 'a representation which we may experience' (2000, 64).

The complex network of boardwalks, bridges, bird hides and viewing platforms ... has a strong philosophical basis in the art of pathfinding and memory of place, weaving in references to prehistoric brushwood riverside tracks (the exquisite carved wooden *Dagenham Idol* from 2400 BC was found here), the medieval field system and the rusting ruins of military infrastructure – all combined together in a subtle open air theatre of memory. (2013: 77)

The key here is the way Beard draws attention to the plural nature of the landscape for them, the capacity with which he attempts to hold together wildlife and prehistory with medieval and modern military traces. This phrase – 'a subtle open air theatre of memory' – seems to resolve some of the difficulty of the edgelands without closing it down. It suggests a connection to the past but only in the sense that it is being performed in the present. There is a slant reference here to Raphael Samuel's *Theatres of Memory* (1994), a book instrumental in the heritage debates of the 1980s and 1990s again, and a book that also challenged the abstract separation of the past from the present, the representation of memory as 'merely a passive receptacle or storage system, an image bank of the past', and argued for a recognition of memory as rather 'an active, shaping force ... a way of constructing knowledge' (x). This relationship to the past challenges the perception of edgelands as empty. It endeavours to draw out the many different layers of history vying for place in the present and, in doing so, it can invigorate the sense of promise that they offer.

With its emphasis on traces, ruins and history, *The New English Landscape* begins to articulate an important question: what might a heritage of the edgelands look like? The answer is important for two reasons: first, it offers a frame of reference for an increasing number of people who care about such places; but second, the singularly provisional, ambiguous and contested nature of edgelands suggests that a form of heritage that emerges from them might be of interest to the study of heritage itself more widely. Anxieties have been

voiced among heritage researchers about the different forms of ‘authorised heritage discourse’ and their top-down administration by national or international bodies (Smith 2006). Increasingly, attention in critical heritage studies has been turning to alternative forms of heritage practice. Nuanced themes such as intangible cultural heritage, contested heritage and heritage and climate change have been foregrounded for the challenges they pose to heritage workers. There are very distinctive questions that arise in the work of the authors this chapter has discussed about the way constellations of meaning reveal themselves and about how we can interact with them.

The final chapter of *The New English Landscape* is ‘Modern Nature,’ a term that stems from a conversation between the artist and film-maker Derek Jarman and Maggi Hambling about Jarman’s garden near the power station in Dungeness.

She said: ‘Oh, you’ve finally discovered nature, Derek’

‘I don’t think it’s really quite like that,’ I said, thinking of Constable and Samuel Palmer’s Kent.

‘Ah, I understand completely. You’ve discovered modern nature.’ (Qtd. in Worpole and Orton 2013: 76)

The fact that Jarman and Hambling are discussing gardening is important here, in that gardening suggests an involvement with the landscape, a relationship of co-creator, invested in the place beyond its consumption as spectacle. But the type of landscape is important here too. The fact that Jarman’s garden is in the shadow of a nuclear power station on one of the most bleak and alien stretches of shingle beach in Europe might perhaps make it doubly an edgeland. Like Mabey’s startling visions of resilient wildlife, this too is a version of a precarious, living world involved in complex relations with humans and modernity. It is a place that in its vulnerability chimes poignantly with Rubio’s description of *terrain vague* as ‘both a physical expression of our fear and insecurity and our expectation of the other, the alternative, the utopian, the future’ (1995: 121). Such a singular form of gardening, in this simultaneously recuperative and prospective sense, becomes a metaphor for a wider argument about landscape heritage, landscape aesthetics and the interactions they might have with the practices of planning and design. In a sense, Jarman’s garden can be read as a metaphor for the work of all of the edgelands authors, artists and film-makers that this chapter has discussed, nurturing difficult but meaningful forms out of

the most unlikely of places, and working at that ambiguous interface between the revealing of meaning and the making of meaning. New senses of place, each in some way slightly recuperative, emerge from new ways of looking and writing here that are struggling out of old conventions. Through the work of these writers, artists and film-makers, edgelands have become sites in which a certain self-reflexive attitude to place has emerged in Britain today; and they have become places to which we might turn to explore a similarly self-reflexive approach to landscape heritage itself more widely.