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Introduction

One figure, like no other, looms large in setting the ground for the contemporary form that has come to be called the New Nature Writing. Richard Mabey is an author whose work has consistently pioneered new ways of thinking about landscape, nature, place, culture and the range of interconnections that all of these share. Often this has meant reminding us of *old* ways of thinking about these things but he has always had a sharp eye for the new meanings that our modern context provokes. His monumental *Flora Britannica* (1996) is a book that embodies some of the best qualities that have become characteristic of the New Nature Writing as a form, so much so that it has inspired an array of like-minded volumes on different topics.¹ It is knowledgeable, innovative and inclusive; it relates to a long tradition of similar books while at the same time expanding what that tradition might be capable of; it looks at the plants, flowers and trees that are its subject with a sharp eye for local distinctiveness; and it meets the changed and changing conditions of the modern world around it with unflinching resourcefulness. Like many of his other books, it looks at the relationship between humans and wildlife as it has played out in the most diverse and distinctive ways. Some of the plants he writes about – like the lewdly nicknamed cuckoo-pint, or lords-and-ladies (*Arum maculatum*) – have collected over ninety different names over the years, each recording a different way of thinking about and relating to that particular plant (8). What better metaphor for the rich and fluid contours of culture itself, intricately plural even across the one small archipelago of nations that the book examines? It reminds us, as he has himself, that ‘culture isn’t the opposite or contrary of nature. It’s the interface between us and the non-human world, our species’ semi-permeable membrane’ (2006: 23).

¹ Mark Cocker’s *Birds Britannica* (2005) and Peter Marren’s *Bugs Britannica* (2010), both of which he has also contributed to, but also more recently Mark Cocker’s *Birds and People* (2013) and Robert Macfarlane’s *Landmarks* (2015).

One of the things that make *Flora Britannica* so remarkable is the democratic method Mabey adopted in researching and writing it. He began the book with the characteristically forthright and down-to-earth intention of simply 'asking British people whether nature had now dwindled to no more than an object of nostalgia in their lives, or whether it was still entwined in their everyday habits and beliefs' (qtd. in Derwent 1996: 50). The book was an attempt at a 'true social history, an up-to-date ecology of plants and human beings' (50). At the time, he was well positioned with a morning spot on the BBC's *Countryfile* where he was able to appeal to the public for contributions and the appeal was picked up by subsequent features on radio and in various magazines. The project took four years and received many thousands of responses in a variety of forms: 'postcards, tapes of discussions, snapshots and family reminiscences, as well as long and detailed essays on the botanical folklore of individual parishes and individual species' (Mabey 1996: 9–10). Unlike traditional scientific texts on plants and animals that name and describe the species and its likely environment, it collected and published a body of work from the variety of local cultures, ordinary memories and vernacular knowledges that flooded in from the public. The plants became bright focal points around which people felt encouraged to 'articulate their feelings about place and nature in general' (10). The outcome is an historic addition to the canon of British nature writing that, as much as it presents a remarkable image of British flora, also presents a remarkable image of Britain itself, broken down into microcosms of tightly packed cultural history.

Far from showing nature as 'dwindled to no more than an object of nostalgia' as he had feared, people's accounts of plants, flowers and trees seemed interwoven with modernity in the most surprising ways. One community in Sheffield described fighting to save some quite unlikely rows of Mediterranean fig trees growing on the banks of the River Don. As it turned out, at the height of steel production in the 1920s the river water was used as a coolant in the factories and ran at 'a fairly constant 20°C – warm enough for fig seeds washed into the river from sewage outfalls to germinate and thrive'. As such, the local people felt these trees were a part of the 'industrial heritage of the area' and worth fighting for (1996: 66–7). It is a story that shows how trees continue to embody forms of cultural memory and can express and articulate history in the most surprising ways. The proliferation of bright pink rosebay willowherb

across areas of London that were badly bombed after the Second World War is another poignant example (1973: 35).

The story of Oxford ragwort describes the spread of the species nationally from a single specimen 'reputedly gathered from the volcanic rocks of Mount Etna' (1996: 376). Escaping the University Botanical Garden in Oxford, seeds made their way, no doubt by gusts of wind or carried in folds of clothing, to the local railway station and are thought to have proliferated along the granite-chipped arteries of the Great Western Railway to become the most abundant ragwort in most British cities. It is a story that suggests some of the adaptability and mobility of the modern plant life that we pass every day without a thought. There is the story of a 250-year-old sweet chestnut tree on George Green in Wanstead. This tree became a powerful symbol of the battle to resist the building of the M11 link road in 1993 when conflicts between police and road protestors were at their height. The tree itself was occupied by protestors from June until it was felled in December that same year. Those inhabiting the tree received some four hundred letters of support (9). *Flora Britannica* is a book that has helped to set a bewilderingly original benchmark for British nature writing, keeping it at once firmly rooted in the popular cultures of everyday life *and* reaching for innovative new literary forms, challenging the long tradition to adapt with a keen eye on the challenges of a changing modern world.

In thinking about books like this, and others like *The Unofficial Countryside* (published as early as 1973), it is hard to hear talk of 'the New Nature Writing' in the twenty-first century without wondering if, in fact, much of the best of what is 'New' today might not have already been going on for some time. When Jason Cowley identified and named 'the New Nature Writing' in 2008, it was on the back of a wave of reviews in the national presses of books such as Robert Macfarlane's *The Wild Places* (2007), Kathleen Jamie's *Findings* (2005) and Mark Cocker's *Crow Country* (2007) (as well as Richard Mabey's own *Nature Cure* (2005)). Some reviewers had identified what they were calling a 'resurgent interest' (Moran 2008: n.p.) in a well-established form while some believed they could detect the arrival of a 'new genre of writing' (Bunting 2007: n.p.). A degree of uncertainty, then, hovers over the relationship of the New Nature Writing to the past here and has even led to quite an angry challenge from the mountaineering author Jim Perrin who admonished Cowley, arguing

that there was nothing in this new form to suggest ‘a radical departure from the practice and preoccupations of its antecedents’ (2010: n.p.).

With this uncertainty in mind, throughout *The New Nature Writing: Rethinking the Literature of Place*, I do, surprisingly, adopt Cowley’s uncertain title to describe this contemporary form. However, I do so critically and, perhaps more importantly, I do so with an important qualification that attempts to expand the length of the period that the title describes. In this book I make a case for dating the emergence of the New Nature Writing to the early 1970s when, following the founding of Friends of the Earth UK in 1971, a new popular environmental movement began to spread via a fresh counterculture of activism and campaigning hitherto unheard of among the traditional conservation bodies. More precisely, I date the origins of this form to 1973 when, in the same year, both Raymond Williams’s *The Country and the City* and Richard Mabey’s *The Unofficial Countryside* were published, two books that would fundamentally change the way people thought and wrote about landscape in Britain. Williams drew attention to the political and economic realities embedded within, and structuring, a tradition of countryside writing, challenging a particular form of wealthy, metropolitan nostalgia that idealized rural life in ways that disavowed the reality of struggle for ordinary people. Mabey, in his book of the same year, used the conventions of countryside writing to, themselves, challenge the tidy border between country and city and turned a self-reflexive eye on the ambiguous terrain between the two that has come to be called the ‘edgelands’ since (more on this in Chapter 3). Chapter 1 in particular will show a cultural context that directly connects these developments in the early 1970s to some of the key works that began to be published in the early 2000s. It will do so with reference to an influential arts and environmental charity called Common Ground, with whom Richard Mabey has worked over the years. It will show, for example, how the work of this charity helped to shape the thinking of two key works that would have a powerful influence on the more recent wave of New Nature Writing, Roger Deakin’s *Waterlog* (1999) and Alice Oswald’s *Dart* (2002). Understanding the New Nature Writing within this earlier context helps to ground it in a culture of environmentalism and conservation practice. This is instructive for two reasons. First, doing so encourages us to understand the form in ways that connect the literature to real-world

changes in British cultures of grassroots conservation and heritage as they have developed over the last thirty to forty years. Second, such a holistic view draws attention to the opportunity that the New Nature Writing presents as a form through which to read and reappraise contemporary attitudes to place in Britain and Ireland today.

I do not claim this to be a comprehensive study of the form. The New Nature Writing is too vast and abundant and, perhaps more importantly, still evolving for any such comprehensive study at the present moment and there are aspects that are not fully explored here. What this book offers is something a little more particular and partial in its view of the form, as the subtitle 'Rethinking the Literature of Place' suggests. I aim to explore the New Nature Writing with a particular theme in mind here, of contemporary British and Irish attitudes to place and its meanings in the context of global environmental crisis and cultural and economic globalization. The themes of the New Nature Writing are not limited to place and, inevitably, there will be aspects of the form that fall outside of the discussion here. One such theme is animals, and human/animal relationships, which has been a huge part of the New Nature Writing, especially in the very fine work of Mark Cocker, Helen MacDonald, Patrick Barkham and Miriam Darlington, among many others. But in many ways that theme would have taken a different direction and no doubt formed its own book eventually and I felt it important to keep the discussion as focused as possible on the given theme of place.

The proliferation of curious and inventive literary works such as *The Unofficial Countryside* and *Flora Britannica* has unearthed an intricate labyrinth of horizons to the contemporary place-world, inspiring broad public and academic interest.² As I will go on to show, the creative and self-reflexive attitudes to place that we can see at work in the New Nature Writing are themselves intertwined with a wider creative and self-reflexive attitude to place in real-world contemporary contexts. The chapters that follow will show salient connections to projects of globally inspired eco-localization, among

² For overviews, see: *Green Letters*, Special Issue, 'Twentieth-Century Nature Writing in Britain and Ireland', 17:1 (2013); Daniels and Lorimer (2012): 3–9; Dee (2011): 21–30; Hunt (2008): 70–7; Macfarlane (2007): 13. Matless (2009): 178–88; and Tonkin (2008). Examples of UK academic conferences with direct interest in this subject: 'Affective Landscapes', University of Derby, 2012; 'The New Nature Writing', Bath Spa University, 2012; 'Landscape, Wilderness and the Wild', Newcastle University, 2015.

them: the work of the arts and environmental charity Common Ground or the Transition Towns network; experimental, small-scale conservation initiatives such as the Trees for Life 'rewilding' project in northern Scotland; or battles against large-scale developments such as that fought on the Isle of Harris against Redland Aggregates at the turn of the century. All of these are demonstrating a shift in the contemporary meanings of place and the ways in which people identify with locality (the collaboration between the architecture collective Assemble and the Granby Four Streets Community Land Trust, awarded the Turner Prize for Art in 2015, might be added to this list).

Edward Casey has aptly described place as 'an ongoing cultural process with an experimental edge' (1993: 31). I aim to show that literature plays an important role in projecting and steering that 'experimental edge'. In doing so I follow a method of literary geographical criticism developed by Damian Walford Davies in his *Cartographies of Culture*, a book which explores the relationship between literature and forms of counter-mapping. Urging forward debates about the relationship between literature and maps (as two separate epistemological forms) that have surrounded distant reading projects such as Franco Moretti's, Davies has argued instead that cartography ought better be understood as a modality 'immanent in the literary work itself' (2012: 14): 'Whatever the contours of its own imaginative worlds, the literary text has always functioned as a mapper of alternative space and as a prompt to go beyond mere "formal geometries" to challenge the various "substantive geographies" that condition the limits of our social lives on the ground' (12).

The New Nature Writing, as a form emerging from the early 1970s, has questioned and stretched the genres and traditions of landscape writing and has developed alongside a culture of conservation practice that has done likewise with the ordinary cultures of place. In doing so there has been a sustained interest in the more ambiguous *styles* of place that have inspired the chapter titles of this book. Locality, wildness, edgelands, the periphery, archipelago and geology have all served as subtly ambiguous lenses through which place itself has been rethought. With close attention to such ambiguous styles of place and their representations in literature, this book explores a resourceful and imaginative counter-mapping of the contemporary place-imaginary through a range of different, tightly focused perspectives. Localized as such counter-maps might be, I share the belief articulated by Mabey himself

that ‘microcosmic views’ like this might be ‘not just powerful metaphors, but actually the nano-bricks for rebuilding things’ (Mabey qtd. in Douglas 2005: n.p.). Through six key studies *The New Nature Writing: Rethinking the Literature of Place* presents a clear critical overview ten years after the term ‘the New Nature Writing’ was first coined, relating it to the long traditions of topographical writing, landscape aesthetics, naturalists’ fieldwork and environmental thought and practice. It presents a detailed appraisal of the key works with carefully contextualized close readings that bring together research in literary criticism and cultural geography to their mutual benefit. It leads the reader through the key debates and discussions that have aired throughout the last decade, drawing in wider critical and theoretical material to build an argument about the re-energized cultures of place in the period 1973–present.

Nature writing

Compared to the American tradition, which has gathered its own plentiful body of literary criticism, if we focus strictly upon the form named ‘nature writing’, the British tradition has been much less well mapped and much less consistently reflected upon. There were only two self-titled anthologies of nature writing in Britain in the twentieth century, one edited by Henry Williamson in 1936 and one edited by Richard Mabey in 1997. This may be in part a question of terminology. There have been no end of anthologies of ‘countryside writing’ in Britain but these might suggest something slightly different, and something of which the literary critic has grown wary in the wake of Stella Gibbons’s *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932) and Raymond Williams’s *The Country and the City*. As Jeremy Burchardt has suggested, such writing has, at times, risked alignment with a conservative view focused on the chalk downland of south-east England and ‘progressively eliminated conflict, modernity and tension from the field of vision’ (2002: 75). However, W. J. Keith’s *The Rural Tradition* (1974) maps out a canon of authors that serves as an exception to this, critically appraising what might be closest to a British tradition of nature writing as we understand it today. He reflects on a body of authors, from Gilbert White through Richard Jefferies and Edward Thomas to H. J. Massingham, who published non-fiction prose accounts that struggled to see things differently and that wrestled with

new ways of writing what they saw. However, the authors Keith considers are not concerned with nature alone but with the cultures and traditions of rural life as well, making the description purely as 'nature writing' problematic.

There is an issue here about the *nature* of the title 'nature writing' itself. Are we to understand it as a straightforward and *natural* process merely of transcribing experiences and observations of one's surroundings? Eric Lupfer has dated the use of the term to the end of the nineteenth century in the United States, to the tradition of essays descending from Henry David Thoreau and John Burroughs, and has drawn attention to the debt it owes as a genre to certain 'elite literary institutions whose influence strongly determined its form, its audience, and the cultural capital it represented' (2003: vii). Dana Phillips has also challenged the idea that the nature writing essay is merely a 'natural' account of an excursion and has likewise drawn attention to the conventions emerging from transcendentalism and this same late-nineteenth-century tradition in the work of more recent American authors such as Annie Dillard (Phillips 2003: 186). To an extent, this rings true of the British tradition as well since, in some of the earliest examples of the term's use in Britain, there also appears to be a trace of a tradition defined in opposition to its American counterpart, if not an American influence. Alfred Richard Orage's *Readers and Writers: 1917–1921* (1922) has a very brief chapter titled 'Nature in English Literature' in which he begins to set out a distinctively English tradition of 'Nature-writing' including Richard Jefferies and W. H. Hudson (88–90). But in doing so he adopts the American hyphen to the term ('Nature-writing') that descends from the school of 'Nature-observation' and 'Nature-study' practised by the author and horticulturalist Liberty Hyde Bailey who promoted the study of nature in the tradition of Thoreau and Burroughs with an almost religious zeal (1911: 2–49). At heart, what Orage is doing is making an argument that suggests that English authors have been 'Nature-writers' for some time, though they have called it something else and that, in fact, the form might really be authentically rooted in England.

Similarly, in Henry Williamson's *An Anthology of Modern Nature Writing* (1936), despite the absence of any reference to nationality in the title, there are no American authors included. Williamson begins his introduction suggesting that 'most people leave such books ["nature writing"] alone, and suspect with a tendency to derision, the idea of "nature loving"' which is 'bad, inefficient,

amateurish, imitative, pretentious writing', that is, showy and ostentatious, clinging to literary convention rather than based on experience (ix). Cleansing the work he collects in this anthology of such loose affections, Williamson promises writings that are 'the observations of intelligent human beings; and that none of them arouse feelings of fear, lust, anger, or injustice' (ix). Such feelings, he later confesses, he believes to have been what caused the Great War twenty years past, in which he served on the front line. Williamson does not give very much more away than this and it is not entirely clear who or what his comments are aimed at, though 'Nature-loving' was a phrase itself associated with the American 'Nature-study' movement (see Scott 1900: 115). Perhaps this 'anger, or injustice' might be related to Thoreau's 'civil disobedience', fuelled as it was by the philosophy of German Romanticism, or perhaps it is only a broader and more general sense of Romanticism, in either the American or British tradition of nature, concerned with the powerful feelings that natural scenery might inspire. Either way, Williamson distances his book from the self-conscious and affectionate rhetoric of a different form of 'nature writing' ('imitative, pretentious writing'), just as it emphasizes the authenticity of its own approach ('the observations of intelligent human beings').

When Jason Cowley offered up the title of the 'New Nature Writing' in 2008, he too seemed aware of the dangers of naturalizing the form and, like Williamson, set out some quite bold coordinates. Cowley distanced the contemporary form from what he called the 'old nature writing', by which he meant 'the lyrical pastoral tradition of the romantic wanderer' (2008: 10). However, rather than emphasizing, as Williamson did, 'observation' as the countermeasure to Romanticism (there is an odd confusion of 'Romantic' and 'romantic' in Cowley's phrase), this time he aligned the New Nature Writing with something that would sound more modernist in form, with writers 'who approached their subject in heterodox and experimental ways' (10). Unfortunately, the claim suggests rather erroneously that 'old nature writing' was not heterodox or experimental. Keith's *The Rural Tradition* shows non-fiction prose concerned with nature and rural life to have been just this, in fact, from as early as Gilbert White onwards. For example, he shows George Sturt – who published as George Bourne for fear that he would lose business at his wheelwright's shop if his fellow townsfolk found out he was a writer – agonizing over how to write about rural life. Critical of Hardy's use of fiction,

Sturt wonders: 'Sometimes, even, I think that a new art must be invented, proper to unrecorded and intangible beauties of the commonplace' (qtd. in Keith 1974: 154). What is curious about this tradition is that it is precisely a wariness of literary artifice which turns these writers to experiment with new forms. In Sturt's case this involved publishing transcriptions of conversations with his gardener 'Bettesworth' (Frederick Grover), an idea that immediately throws up curious editorial questions for him as an author.

The way Cowley positions this edition of *Granta* in 2008 might misunderstand the tradition then, but it does express an interesting – and distinctively British – anxiety about the relationship of nature writing to Romantic and modernist traditions. More recently, a wave of publications have begun to flesh out this idea of a modernist tradition associated with landscape and place. Alexandra Harris's *Romantic Moderns* (2010) is a book that works at this same fault line in relation to the aesthetics of a 'modern English renaissance' in the 1930s, challenging our assumptions about the alignment of the modernist tradition with the global city (10). Harris explores an interface between the experimental abstraction of the period and a carefully located landscape tradition in the work of Virginia Woolf, John Piper, John Betjeman, Paul Nash and others. The authors and artists that she examines are unusually interested in a sense of national identity at a time when such attachments were being disavowed by modernists in favour of international and transnational metropolitan forms. 'What can read as a sign of retreat', Harris argues, 'can also, perhaps, be read as an expression of responsibility – towards places, people and histories too valuable and too vulnerable to go missing from art' (14).

Jed Esty has also drawn attention to what he calls 'the anthropological turn' of late modernism in which the interests of key figures such as Virginia Woolf and T. S. Eliot saw a geographical 'contraction' in the 1930s and 1940s (2004: 2). Esty draws attention to the declining British Empire as a context for this contraction but rather than reading it as a terminus for the modernist project shows a complex attempt at 'social and aesthetic renewal' (3). In this view English modernism 'trades lost civilizational reach for restored cultural integrity' in such a way as to carry the modernist tendency to experiment and innovate into a preoccupation with national culture (16). He shows this at work, in its most progressive form, in Eliot's *Four Quartets* (1941–3) and Woolf's *Between the Acts* (1941) but also gestures to instances when such

insularity took on more conservative and reactionary forms of nationalism as well. We might see the New Nature Writing as extending this tradition of 'social and aesthetic renewal' and its associations with a 'Romantic Modern' tradition, especially its revival of place as a subject in its own right. Perhaps the most vocal champion of nature writing today, and one of its most ambitious practitioners, Robert Macfarlane, returns to the late Eliot of the *Four Quartets* at the end of *The Wild Places*, for example, and the late Virginia Woolf haunts Olivia Laing's *To the River* (2011).

However, as Richard Kerridge has pointed out, recent nature writing has also had to contend with certain individuals 'who brought nature writing into disrepute', authors such as H. V. Morton, H. J. Massingham and even Henry Williamson himself, for each of whom, in his own way, 'authentic rural life, free from encroachment, was the antidote to the modernity that had produced the [First World] War' (2001: 138). In fact, it is in this same essay that Kerridge first uses the term 'new nature writing,' several years before Cowley, when he argues that 'environmentalism calls for a new nature writing, clearly differentiated from the conservative tradition and aware of its appeal and dangers' (138). I shall argue here that one of the ways in which it has heeded this warning is by tightening the focus of its geographical scale, wary of what Macfarlane has described with suspicion as 'the sourer and sharper versions of old patriotisms' onto a 'progressive parochialism' (2016: xix). As Chapter 1 will show, the influence of the environmental movement on the tradition of nature writing would decouple its alignment with a conservative and nationalistic landscape aesthetic and ground it in a more tangible localism that was the scale at which environmental concerns were being confronted. Writing and artwork that explores this local register tend to emerge at an argumentative tilt to nationalist conventions, influencing a more intricate and heterogeneous picture of pluriform locality. And it is, in part, for this reason that I date the emergence of this *New Nature Writing* form to the 1970s. I argue that the very shift that Kerridge calls for in 2001 had, in fact, already begun to take place, but that it was after 2000 that it really found its popular audience. Key figures explored here, such as Richard Mabey, Sue Clifford, Angela King and Tim Robinson, all began work in the 1970s on projects that would have – and are still having – a lasting effect on the contemporary form.

It is interesting to note that sixty years after Henry Williamson's anthology, in 1997, we see a very different way of framing 'nature writing' in Richard Mabey's *The Oxford Book of Nature Writing*. Mabey's approach is far more expansive, historically and geographically, slipping the former bounds of the national imagination. It begins with Aesop's fables and Aristotle and includes poets, women, scientists, ecologists, anarchists, travel writers, diarists and all from a variety of different countries. Though the writing is clearly full of that acute and intelligent observation that Williamson describes, Mabey goes a little further in defining what binds his own broader selections showing the effects of the more recently aroused moral questions of ecology and environmentalism: 'What characterises the most convincing nature writing is a willingness to admit both the kindredness and the otherness of the natural world' (1997: vii); and 'the inextricable links between all parts of the natural world mean that its importance is an ethical as well as a scientific matter' (ix). This sense of 'kindredness' and ethical concern for wildlife has been amplified since the popularization of environmental thought by groups like Friends of the Earth from the 1970s onwards and the often local *and* global register of such feelings is one of the driving factors that has made the affiliation between nature and nation, even landscape and nation, highly problematic. However, critical thought from across a range of disciplines has more recently brought about deeper changes that affect the way we understand the 'nature' of nature writing, suggesting ways in which the 'New' of 'New Nature Writing' ought to qualify a new understanding of 'Nature' itself as well as a new form of writing.

After nature

We are told now that we have entered 'the Anthropocene', a new geological epoch characterized by our impacts on the land, the oceans and the atmosphere (see Crutzen and Stoermer 2000 for the earliest mention and Steffen et al. 2015 for the most recent and convincing). It is a recognition that has vast implications and might be compared to other historic reorientations prompted by Copernicus and Darwin. One of the big changes this provokes is the destabilization of a very particular enlightenment sense of 'Nature' as the separate and mechanistic universe in which humans live. The beginning of the

Anthropocene is still being debated but since what is now known as ‘The Great Acceleration’ in human development, beginning around 1945, a measure may be taken in a range of disciplines showing that the planet has begun to operate outside the traceable parameters of the Holocene (the last 11,500 years) as a result of our species’ way of life (though it should be added that the responsibility lies heavily weighted towards the wealthy nations). Between the years 1945 and 2000, figures show that atmospheric concentrations of CO₂, acidification of the oceans, consumption of fertilizers and fuel, usage of water, and human population have all risen, on the planet as a whole, dramatically above Holocene levels. During the same period, figures also show that stratospheric ozone levels, biodiversity, tropical rainforest and woodland, coral reefs and areas of unexploited fisheries have likewise all seen a level of decline outside the parameters of the Holocene (Steffen et al. 2015: 4–7). We have come to recognize that the planet is now in a volatile state of change on a trajectory that will be disastrous for the sustainability of ecosystems and the future of biological life if it continues.

What does this do to our cultural understanding of ‘Nature’? First perhaps, it puts the word in inverted commas or gives it a capital letter: that is to say, it estranges us from what we have, for a long time, taken for granted. Attention has been drawn to the way the naming of ‘Nature’ as an object establishes a distance between us and it, a distance characteristic of, and symptomatic of, the continuous exploitation that has led to such vast anthropogenic disruption. Clearly, to continue to behave now as if ‘Nature’ were as ‘eternal and separate’ as we once believed it to be would be fatal (McKibben 1990: 7). For some, the word itself comes so loaded with just such an implication that they believe the very idea of ‘Nature’ risks preventing a truly ‘ecological thought’ that ought to be instead concerned with exposing and opening up such categories (Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*). Part of the problem is that, for many, the view of ‘Nature’ as out there, as always out there, enchantingly reposed for our pleasure is very appealing. This idea of ‘Nature’ is bound up in complex ways with recreation activities, picturesque aesthetics, national heritage and even forms of conservation and environmentalism. Timothy Morton (2007) has suggested that ‘putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration’ (5). The recognition of

the Anthropocene forces us to look very carefully at our cultures of 'Nature' and ask if they too, however well intentioned, are part of the problem. Is there, enshrined within them, a belief that 'Nature' is 'eternal and separate'?

The challenge of Morton's work is to think beyond this 'Nature' that is admired 'from afar'. In fact, the challenge of Morton's work is to ask whether the very breadth of ideas suggested by 'Nature' (upper case, lower case, in inverted commas or not) are not all underpinned by this sense of 'sadistic admiration', by the very need to delimit and name, to *produce* 'Nature' by fixing it apart from the human. Part of the problem with this argument is that for many people in perfectly ordinary contexts 'nature' does not equate to 'Nature' as an Enlightenment ideal, separate and mechanistic, but refers simply to the stuff of which we, and everything, is made. Just as men and women have continued to successfully struggle for relations beyond the 'sadistic admiration' of the male gaze, so in perfectly ordinary contexts we might imagine that people have found ways to adapt their lives to relate to wildlife in the places they inhabit in equitable and non-violent ways. However, at an institutional level and in the large-scale manner that our day-to-day lives are implicated in systems of what Ulrich Beck has called 'organized irresponsibility', the deconstruction of such a loaded and complex term can lead to a political position worth exploring (1999: 149). Geographers too have, for some time, been suspiciously unpicking the alignment of 'Nature' with 'a transcendent archetype' to reveal what Jamie Lorimer has called 'a power-laden process of purification' (2015: 25).

In fact, this anxiety about the separation of 'Nature' is one that has preoccupied British nature writers themselves. 'I can remember being called a "nature writer" for the first time,' Richard Mabey writes, 'and flinching at the implication that this was different from simply being a writer' (1984: xi). Mabey feels uncomfortable about the way the term seems to suggest a limitation of scope, that being a 'nature writer' might imply a decision to, for example, turn away from the *cultural* life of Britain, something he has repeatedly checked as counter-intuitive. When cordoned off in this way, 'nature' tends to convey an evacuation of politics and ethics. Robert Macfarlane has also argued that 'nature writing is an unsatisfactory term for this diverse, passionate, pluriform, essential, reviving tradition,' though he concedes that, nonetheless, 'it is the best there is, and it serves as a banner to march beneath' (2003: n.p.). Kathleen Jamie too has been troubled by the fact that 'our best "nature writers" are equally

concerned with culture, and the fact that we live immured in both' (2013: n.p.). British nature writing wears its title with some anxiety and discomfort then, aware of the danger of seeming to endorse a separation of the affairs of 'Nature' from the affairs of the country, even the world, at large.

Beyond the aesthetic production of 'Nature' as a particular style of distant and enshrined object then, how might those self-consciously involved with and engaged with the world do things differently? Stephen Daniels and Hayden Lorimer have suggested of the current enthusiasm for landscape writing that some of 'the newest examples ... bear witness to landscapes and environments that exist, *after* nature', often foregrounding those in which historical, industrial, technological and commercial developments are most marked (2012: 4). But recognizing the living process of historical and human development in the landscape also draws attention to the living process of changes in flora, fauna and the elements at large and the way in which these processes evolve and change together. Elizabeth Ellsworth and Jamie Kruse, writing more broadly of the way artists and authors have responded to the challenge of the Anthropocene, have described a 'turn away from static, mechanical models of "nature" to dynamic models that see the world as a field of continuous emergence' (2013: 16). This sense of post-natural volatility and the disorientated concern it provokes connects to the agenda of many of the writers considered in this book as they revisit familiar geographies with an open mind, to bear witness, reconnect, rethink and rewrite. However, the post-natural view of landscape is not reconfigured by mapping a change in 'Nature-as-object' alone. It is not about changing the definition of 'Nature' but rather about changing our understanding of the whole relationship between 'Nature' and the 'Human' that constitutes 'Nature-as-object' in the first place. 'Putting something called Nature on a pedestal' involves occupying a very particular version of what it means to be 'Human' as well. Concomitant to this challenge to the idea of 'Nature' as a stable and separate object is a challenge to the idea of the 'Human' as objective, homogeneous, coherent, authoritative and in control, itself distant from that objectified 'Nature'.

A thoughtful response to this comes from a recent book on the conservation of *Wildlife in the Anthropocene* (2015). Geographer Jamie Lorimer argues that, in this new epoch 'there is no single Nature or mode of Natural knowledge to which environmentalists can make recourse' but that rather 'multiple

natures are possible' (7). For Lorimer, 'the Anthropocene is multinatural' (7). This is part of a wider recognition that human knowledge itself is multiple, heterogeneous, located, contingent and therefore political; that 'there are multiple forms of natural knowledge – not all of which are scientific or even human – informing a myriad of discordant ways of living with the world' (7). 'Nature' gives way to 'multiple natures' for Lorimer, and each of these 'natures' is inflected differently by its distinctive location: *materially* inflected in the day-to-day processes which produce and affect it in different situations; and *epistemologically* inflected in the way that ordinary cultural processes describe and understand it differently in different locations. So at points of lively interconnection 'Nature' and the 'Human' both multiply in locally distinctive ways. We might recall Richard Mabey's claim that 'Culture isn't the opposite or contrary of nature. It's the interface between us and the non-human world, our species' semi-permeable membrane' (2006: 23). In Lorimer's 'multiple forms of natural knowledge – not all of which are scientific or even human' and in Mabey's 'semi-permeable membrane' there is an acknowledgement that agency and even expertise might come from the non-human as much as from the human, and therefore that we are involved in a more collaborative process than we often acknowledge. Ignoring this can lead to attempts to dominate and control in ways that stifle what might be a richer experience. This is something that Chapter 2 explores in greater depth in relation to the wild. For Lorimer, the idea of 'wildlife' comes to explain this vibrant site of interconnection between the human and non-human in which the human relinquishes some of his or her detached superiority: 'We can think of the wild as the commons, the everyday affective site of human-nonhuman entanglement. Politics in the wild involves democratizing science, relinquishing the authority that comes with speaking for a singular Nature' (2015: 11). This democratization of science that Lorimer's work on conservation promotes is the flip side of its proliferation, and localization, of multiple 'natures'. Both of these foreground wildlife and place as always already intertwined in the most ordinary of ways that are too often invisible in the shadow of the isolated spheres of 'Nature' and the 'Human'. This is an idea that will be central to the reading of place throughout this book.

In Lorimer then, there is a curious response to the epistemological challenge of the Anthropocene that shifts down the scale towards the local,

towards more intricate and proliferate forms of space and place. This largely runs counter to other theorizations of the Anthropocene that have shifted up in scale towards the planetary. However, one of the central arguments behind this book's rethinking of place in contemporary literature is that the books it explores reveal ways in which environmental uncertainty has produced a shift in *both* of these directions at once, to the intensely local and to the globally interconnected; and that, crucially, these shifts are part of the same response. In Lorimer's version of wildlife conservation there is a sense of optimism and possibility via its reading of a democratized agency that even extends collaboratively to the non-human. However, in criticism that shifts up in scale towards the global, the question of agency presents a much more challenging problem. Concerned not simply with the recalibration of human/non-human relations '*after nature*', but with what impedes a sustainable future at a planetary scale, criticism concerned with the Anthropocene has asked what the emergence of this challenge does to our sense of history and our sense of agency as historical peoples. For Dipesh Chakrabarty, the Anthropocene has seen a 'collapse in the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and history' (2009: 201) out of which the human emerges as a 'geological agent' with the power to change the planet (206). But as a geological agent, the human does not enjoy the same individual freedoms that it is used to as a 'biological agent'; the human can only be a geological agent 'historically and collectively, that is when we have reached numbers and invented technologies that are on a scale large enough to have an impact on the planet itself' (206–207). It may well be within our power to slow down various anthropogenic disruptions but this will require facing the challenge of acting 'as a species', something which we have not faced previously, and something which also begins to question what, or who, is meant by the 'we' that must engage with this change (219; see also Yusoff 2016).

Timothy Clark has described such a species agency as a 'tragic environmental Leviathan', 'a power that barely recognises itself as such and which is not really capable of voluntary action or planning, as it arises from the often unforeseen consequences of the plans and acts of its constituents' (2015: 14–15). Nonetheless, drawing on work by Ursula Heise, he suggests that the goal of humanities work concerned with the Anthropocene might be to 'aid a sort of species-consciousness' that helps to articulate a shift towards 'a new kind

of eco-cosmopolitanism capable of uniting people across the world without erasing important cultural and political differences' (17). Considered in this way, we can perhaps better understand the localization and democratization of Lorimer's 'multinatural' Anthropocene as enriching precisely those cultural and political differences. Locality and place, for all their fineness of grain, might be productively rethought as a plausible foundation for just such eco-cosmopolitanism. They offer those 'microcosmic views' that Richard Mabey suggests might be 'not just powerful metaphors, but actually the nano-bricks for rebuilding things' (Douglas: n.p.). The networked projects of eco-localization looked at in Chapters 1 and 2, the devolved, archipelagic mobility looked at in Chapters 4 and 5 and the trans-local alliances such as the one explored at the end of the book in Chapter 6 all begin to show how the New Nature Writing offers a window on to the alternative spatial structures that are emerging in contemporary British and Irish cultures of place.

However, both place and the local have come under fire from recent environmental criticism responding to the Anthropocene, suggesting that it might be necessary to rethink their contemporary meanings. The body of New Nature Writing that this book examines affords a very singular opportunity to consider just this. Emerging from the early days of the environmental movement's arrival in the UK in the early 1970s, this unusual literary form revives and reworks its own British and Irish tradition of nature writing to produce a sustained, self-reflexive examination of attitudes to place that confound the usual expectations. Ursula Heise's pioneering work in this area has offered a critical examination of 'place-based rhetoric' among authors and ecocritics of the American tradition and has urged a greater recognition of the 'deterritorialized' and 'cosmopolitan' realities that are explored in work that engages with a wider 'sense of planet' (2008: 51). Although Heise is not, herself, in any strict sense, a constructionist, her concerns about 'place-based rhetoric' stem from the way it has developed in a reactionary bubble isolated from a wider context of critical and theoretical thought that has, over the last twenty years, dismantled many of the key concepts that it holds on to (such as identity, place and of course, more recently, nature) and shown them to be culturally constructed. The American tradition is founded on what she calls, after Zygmunt Bauman, an 'ethic of proximity', one that is inherited from the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naes (for whom 'the nearer has priority over the

more remote – in space, time, culture, species’) (Naes qtd. in Heise 2008: 28). Emerging from this, Heise argues, there is an over-weighted moral emphasis put on place as a means by which to ‘reconnect with the natural world’ (2008: 28). Such reconnection helps us to ‘overcome the alienation ... that modern societies generate’ (29). In this sense place becomes a retreat into nature away from modernity. This leads to an outmoded and worrying essentialization of place that puts too much emphasis both on the bounded definition of place itself as a stable unit of meaning and on the ways in which ‘identity, whether individual or communitarian, is constructed by the local’ (42).

This critique has been further articulated by Morton’s *The Ecological Thought* (2010), in which it is argued that ‘fixation on place impedes a truly ecological view’ (26) by not being progressive, spacious and global: ‘Our slogan should be dislocation, dislocation, dislocation,’ he argues, as it reaches towards an ecology that is more fluid and decentred (28). Less carefully argued than Heise’s work, but equally important for the way it forces an enlargement of thinking in relation to environmental issues, Morton’s own writings against place have been founded on an understanding of what he calls ‘a powerful Western myth’ in ‘the idea of authentic place,’ one that owes much of its strength to the idea of nationalism (55). He destabilizes this myth and argues that ‘the local isn’t familiarity but the uncanny, the strangely familiar and the familiarly strange’ (50). Both Morton and Heise, then, are arguing against a very specific formulation of place and the local that is concerned with essence, authenticity, identity and stability, with boundedness and definition. However, these movements of deterritorialization and destabilization draw attention to the socially constructed nature of place in a way that this book will show has been overtly embraced in the recent British and Irish tradition, not to fix place but to rethink it. One reason for this is that its emergence has been from precisely the traditions of theoretical thought that Heise shows the American tradition to have retreated from.

This book’s argument begins by carefully re-tracing the origins of the New Nature Writing, not in 2008 as Cowley does, but some time earlier in the work of Richard Mabey (as explored further in Chapter 3) and in the work of the arts and environmental charity Common Ground. Chapter 1 explores Common Ground’s influential development of a fresh place-based cultural practice founded on an ethos of ‘local distinctiveness’ which embodies the

environmental slogan 'think globally, act locally'. Timothy Morton begins *The Ecological Thought* with a telling omission of this slogan revealing a certain prejudice that goes some way to explaining his dismissal of the possibility of an ecology that might consider scales of the local and global at once: 'Small is beautiful. Diet for a small planet. The local is better than the global. These are the slogans of the environmental movements since the late 1960s. I'll be proposing the exact opposite of the sentiments they express' (2010: 20). Had he included 'think globally, act locally' (perhaps the most famous of environmental slogans) the opening argument would have been complicated in an important way.

Common Ground's treatment of the local is a very particular one, in fact, already calved away from a stable and bounded version of the nation as a coherent whole and already connected to a global movement of environmental concern. It departs in important ways from the accusations that Heise and Morton have made of the American tradition in respect of its engagement with three key contexts. The first of these is its emergence from an informed global environmental movement. The founders of Common Ground were, for example, all a part of Friends of the Earth during the 1970s. By the time Agenda 21 was proposed at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, arguing as it was for the stimulation of 'environmental citizenship' and 'local democracy' *from the ground up* as a way of making global environmental issues a household reality, Common Ground had already been developing projects across the UK that had done precisely this for nearly a decade. The second key context is the Marxist literary criticism of Raymond Williams and John Barrell concerning the rural landscape and the wider intellectual work on space, heritage and landscape that was emerging from authors whose work challenged the homogenizing powers of nationalism under the Thatcher government such as David Lowenthal, Patrick Wright, Stephen Daniels and Doreen Massey (many of whom worked with Common Ground over the years). The third and final context was the tradition of landscape history that has descended from the work of W. G. Hoskins and that revealed, in what some might mistake for a wild or a natural landscape, a palimpsest of intricate historical narratives in which human life and culture, geology, forests, climate and wildlife were deeply intertwined. These three important contexts meant that the emergent principle of 'local distinctiveness' and

the place cultures that have since been informed and influenced by it were much more nuanced and critically aware than the representations of place that Heise and Morton read in the American tradition. Chapter 1 sets out some of this important context in more detail and provides evidence of the influence of Common Ground on key texts that served as progenitors to the more recent wave of New Nature Writing.

How, then, does the version of place and the local emerge distinctively in this British and Irish tradition? This book explores three important ways of reading place through the New Nature Writing that help to rethink and reappraise its contemporary meanings. First, it reads representations of place in the New Nature Writing for the way that they foreground its dynamic properties, in that the form puts emphasis on place being an open-ended and experimental process, an ongoing performance of social and cultural reality that is in often difficult dialogue with other scales of place such as national administration and global environmental challenges. In particular this is revealed through the emphasis of the artists and authors discussed on recognizing place as, in the words of Doreen Massey, 'the unavoidable challenge of negotiating a here-and-now' (2005: 140). In this sense the literature is read as itself an experiment in place with the potential to feed into the cultural life of that place, especially in light of the fact that so many of the authors are themselves also engaged with activities of grassroots environmentalism or heritage. Second, it reads representations of place in the New Nature Writing as relational, even at times as cosmopolitan, in the sense that they explore networks of subnational and regional spaces within and beyond Britain through the movements, allegiances and relationships *between* the places and the authors discussed. It does this under the influence of recent work in cultural geography, in literary criticism associated with place, and in archipelagic criticism. It explores place in the context of mutable configurations of space across these diverse islands and in light of a devolved geography of what Andrew McNeillie has called this 'unnameable archipelago' (2007a: n.p.). Third, and last, it reads representations of place in the New Nature Writing as self-reflexive in the sense that they are in a dialogue with the long traditions of topographical writing, nature writing and rural writing. This forces an often quite conflicted engagement with such inherited modes as chorography, travelogues, the picturesque, the pastoral and the wilderness excursion narrative. The book aims to show that a new vision

of place is emerging, one struggling to articulate new meanings ‘*after nature*’, revealing how popular attitudes towards geography today have come to be characterized by a tension between anxiety and uncertainty on the one hand and by a new-found sense of possibility and imagination on the other. It is such a tension that makes the New Nature Writing such an important body of work for understanding changing attitudes in Britain today, but it is also what makes it such a difficult and complicated body of work, one that has divided opinion and drawn debate after debate in the public sphere.

Debate

Criticism of the New Nature Writing tends to pull in two clear – and clearly opposite – directions. On the one hand, as we will see below, there are the naturalists who believe that the form should distance itself from aesthetics and stick to the facts, that there is no place for lyricism in a genre that has strayed from its origins in scientific writing. On the other hand there are the environmental critics who also feel that the form should let go of hackneyed rhetorical tropes such as the excursion narrative (and other forms that attempt to be faithful to real-world experience), but these critics argue that it should, instead, embrace more ambitious aesthetic forms. This polarization of opinion provokes some important questions about a dilemma between fidelity and artifice at the heart of the New Nature Writing and it repays some closer inspection.

At the Museum of Modern Art in Machynlleth in October 2010 the mountaineer and author Jim Perrin ended his William Condry Lecture with a volley of criticism launched at the New Nature Writing as it was being promoted and championed by *Granta*. For inspiration he turned to the Etonian naturalist and editor James Fisher who, in the 1940s, wrote the following against nature writers of his time who he felt had an ‘excessive consciousness of the exquisite nature of their prose’. Perrin suggested that it equally well ‘pins most of our so-called “new nature writers” firmly to the specimen-board’ (in an image suggestive of his preferred perspective):

Do these people really believe that the search for truth is less important than the search for poetry or art or aesthetic satisfaction or ‘happiness’?

Do they not understand that the purest source of these imponderables is in the realms of fact, and that the establishment of facts is most simply done by the ancient methods of logical science? Once facts are despised, fancies replace them; and fancies are poisonous companions to the enjoyment and appreciation of nature. (Fisher qtd. in Perrin 2010: n.p.)

It characterizes a familiar conflict that seems to arise from time to time in relation to nature writing, and one we saw an echo of in Henry Williamson's introduction to his 1936 anthology. Aesthetics and facts are opposed to each other, as are poetry and truth, in such a way that is hard to imagine in relation to another literary form such as the novel. A similar argument is made in a recent American collection of essays offering a new approach to the aesthetics of nature after environmentalism which recommends 'disinterestedness' and 'which demands that appreciators purge aesthetic experience of their own particular and personal interests and opinions' (Carlson and Litnott 2008: 12). Elsewhere, one of its editors, Allen Carlson, has suggested that 'concerning the art-based approaches, it is argued that they do not fully realize the serious, appropriate appreciation of nature, but distort the *true* character of natural environments' (2009: 9; emphasis added). Such a representation of 'nature' as an object that we can know the 'true' character of, in both cases here, has come to feel a little antiquated for reasons that this introduction has already made clear but also, oddly, it embodies an animosity towards human feeling and the aesthetics they produce, however modest.

The difficulty haunting this perspective can be traced back to a tension at the level of the 'facts' that Fisher describes. John Searle has distinguished between what he calls 'brute facts' and 'institutional facts' (1995: 2). 'Brute facts' are those that would be facts with or without our witnessing or describing or agreeing with them. 'A flower grows from the soil' is a brute fact for Searle, even before I write it down as such. 'Institutional facts', however, are more contingently based on human agreement. They are facts because we accept them and behave accordingly and because we talk about them as facts. That a certain tall-stemmed, small-headed yellow flower is known as a 'Common Ragwort', for example, is an institutional fact that he describes as 'language dependent' (64). The facts that Perrin and Fisher, Williamson or Carlson, are describing are 'brute' but there are important ways in which brute facts interact with institutional facts and can produce wildly different cultural perspectives.

To extend the given example, Common Ragwort is legislated against in Britain as a threatening weed because it is so poisonous to animals but on the Isle of Man, where it is known as 'Cushag', it is nonetheless admired as a national flower (Mabey 1996: 376). This is because the 'brute' fact of the flower's growth comes into contact with the variety of human responses to it that are based on values that differ according to particular cultural priorities and spark these different institutional facts as a result. I am not about to enter the rocky terrain of suggesting that brute facts are undermined by institutional facts, nor that the nature writer should be unconcerned by brute facts. However, it should be remembered that institutional facts might be understood as a very ordinary, basic and early layer of culture itself and that they, of course, soon give way to aesthetic forms. Aesthetics emerge as a refined and often individualized articulation of these institutional facts and we need to be very careful before dismissing them as 'fancies'. Simon Malpas, for example, describing what Carlson calls a 'distortion' of the natural environment, has argued: 'Art is what touches upon differences between us that form the basis of community, and remind us of the necessity of being in common. In the surprise fragmentation of sense elicited by the work there is the possibility of touching on the sense of plural community' (2003: 93). With this in mind, it is not so easy to oppose facts to aesthetics since aesthetics might be understood as a style of fact in themselves.

A more helpful way of thinking about this tension between fidelity and artifice was suggested by Raymond Williams in *The Country and the City*. Williams describes a form of country writing (and the same could be said of nature writing) running through the twentieth century which moves 'at times grossly, at times imperceptibly, from record to convention and back again, until these seem inextricable' (1973: 261). By 'record' Williams means those works that have tried to capture in all good faith the real lives of those living in rural areas, books such as William Cobbett's *Rural Rides* (1830) or George Bourn's *The Bettsworth Book* (1901). By 'convention' he means those works that 'scribbled over' the real lives of people in the country, possessed by a Georgian vision that used rural England as an image for 'its own internal feelings and ideas' (258). An image of a form pulled in both directions emerges then, wanting to be true to its subject but also wanting to fit with the popular expectations of the tradition. In the awkward debate between fact and aesthetics

that haunts nature writers, we can perhaps see a shadow of this more helpful opposition of ‘record’ to ‘convention’. It is more helpful because ‘convention’ here refers to one particular aspect of aesthetics; that is, its *reproduction* of tradition and its satisfaction of expectations. No doubt we would agree with Perrin if his argument had been with authors who ignore the facts of the world before them in favour of purely literary conventions. However, this cannot be said for the authors that this book explores. The way in which today’s writers are engaged with convention is often quite argumentative, wrestling to resist it in favour of the new realities of a changing world. We might think of the edgelands literature considered in Chapter 3 which explodes an easy opposition of country to city in the rural tradition (think of the revisions suggested by the titles of these books alone: Richard Mabey’s *The Unofficial Countryside*; Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts’s *Edgelands: Journeys into England’s True Wilderness* (2011); Ken Worpole and Jason Orton’s *The New English Landscape* (2013)). Or we might think of Chapter 4’s exploration of Tim Robinson finding his way through a conflict in the mapping practices of the Ordnance Survey and the Irish tradition of *dinnseanchas*. Or Chapter 5’s devolved account of the landscape vision that has emerged from the literary journal *Archipelago*, a vision at a consistently argumentative tilt to conventional orientations of ‘the Isles’.

John Joughin and Simon Malpas tell us that ‘it is impossible now to argue that aesthetics is anything other than thoroughly imbricated with politics and culture’ (2003: 3). This is by no means to suggest that all forms of aesthetics are politically engaged in a self-aware manner. Historical formalism has shown that ‘enmeshed in a web of institutional and cultural as well as social and political histories, literary forms are overdetermined by their historical circumstances and thus multiple and variable in their results, *neither consistently ideological nor inherently demystificatory*’ (Cohen 2007: 3; emphasis added). There is, of course, a case to be made for certain forms prevalent in nature writing, just as could be said of so many forms in other genres, to have been determined by the literary marketplace. Timothy Clark has asked how far the celebration of ‘the poetic as a kind of green psychic therapy’ is bought and read as ‘the wishful illusion of an industrial consumerist society rather than as a site of effective opposition to it’ (2011: 23). Stephen Poole has even suggested rather rashly that the whole nature writing genre might be a ‘solidly bourgeois form of escapism’

(2013: n.p.). There is, then, an uneasy relationship between environmental literature and the culture industry, but in Clark's more measured articulation this is a concern rather than a dismissal and it is a concern that speaks more broadly of the relationship between literature and the culture industry rather than of environmental literature alone. How something is read and absorbed by the public, what one might learn from the 'escapism' of art, what thoughts are incubated and what actions are provoked, are difficult things to measure.

However, as I aim to show in this book, the aesthetics of many of the authors associated with the New Nature Writing have emerged in a form of self-reflexive conflict with convention, struggling to see things differently and write things differently. But they have not done so by turning to brute facts alone. The British and Irish landscape is so overwritten with divergent cultural histories that it is often hard to tell the brute facts from the institutional facts. That much of the Highlands are a treeless wilderness appears to be a brute fact about nature but as Chapter 2 will show, this masks a contentious political reality. It is through fresh and innovative writing that the implications of this are explored, writing that is alert to the subtle, ongoing dialogues between layers of history, and layers of genre that have lodged themselves in our expectations and in our ways of looking. This is not a disavowal of truth in relation to place but a recognition that knowledge, that ways of looking at, and thinking about, and listening to place are political and that this tension between facts and aesthetics that appears to divide opinion over the New Nature Writing might in fact be the very point at which some its most interesting work emerges, books such as Richard Mabey's *Flora Britannica* and Robert Macfarlane's *Landmarks* which break completely new ground. As they trouble the boundary between brute and institutional facts they intervene in their own ways.

Perhaps the New Nature Writing could even afford to be *more* ambitious in its various aesthetics, as criticism from the polar opposite direction attests. Dana Phillips, writing of the contemporary American tradition, has called for artwork and literature that resists the dreary realist tendency of 'monocultural and monotone' 'landscape writing' which he feels reduces the complex to the simple (2003: 19). Timothy Morton has also argued for a much more dramatic break with tradition, caught as he feels American nature writing is in a habit of trying to 'escape the pull of the literary' (2007: 31). Morton challenges nature writers for, in a manner less than self-conscious, attempting to close the gap

between language and the world, but in so doing making use of more and more complex forms of rhetoric that are mired in convention. One trope in particular Morton uses as an example goes something like: 'As I write this, I am sitting on the sea shore. ... No,' he scoffs, 'that was just pure fiction; just a tease. ... As I write this, a western scrub jay is chattering outside my window. ... That was also just a fiction,' he scoffs again. 'What's really happening as I write this is' and so on and so forth (29). In trying to close that gap, to somehow break down all the distancing effects of language and to communicate his or her experience as directly as possible in a '(non)aesthetic form' the nature writer unwittingly creates a complicated rhetorical maze that Morton dismisses as 'kitsch' (30). The way out of this maze for Morton is to stop resisting 'the pull of literary'. Dana Phillips also adds that the form 'has yet to develop tropes enabling it to come to terms with the fractured (and fractal) realities of nature', also spurring authors on to embrace the pull of the literary, to stretch their imaginations and techniques (2003: 20).

In its self-reflexive dialogue with the longer tradition, the better New Nature Writing that has been published in Britain and Ireland does not fall into this trap. It is too anxiously alert to its position in a long intertwining of traditions; and it is often too conscious of the contours of language as a medium as well. In fact, as we will see in Chapter 4, Tim Robinson has even taken precisely the fractal geometry of Benoît Mandelbrot 'as a source of metaphor and imagery' for exploring the multifocal linguistic depths of place (2011: 252). Nonetheless, there is a warning here that authors might take on board about a retreat from language or the literary. For Williams, the pull of a desire for 'convention' and the pull of a desire for an honest 'record' have meant that writing often exists precisely in their 'inextricable' mixture (1973: 261). Fresh aesthetic interventions lie in the careful and thoughtful mediation of the two rather than in the retreat from either one. The place-imaginary that this book looks at through the New Nature Writing is one that goes beyond the attempt to separate record from convention but that rather examines the political expression emerging from the ways in which their relationship is mediated.

A more alarming debate about the New Nature Writing arose recently when Mark Cocker drew attention to the contrast between the popularity of this form and the abject condition of much of the British landscape and its wildlife: 'How can we produce pastoral narratives when the realities underlying them

are so sharply defined and their implications – social, political and cultural – so profound?’ (2015: 45). He gives the example of William Atkins’s *The Moor* (2014) which takes British moorland as its subject matter but that, with its wealth of discussion of the literary connections of English moors, manages to ignore completely the issue of grouse shooting in Scotland. This is despite the fact that, as Cocker points out, ‘Most moorland exists today to deliver a cash crop of grouse to a super-rich elite who think little of paying between £3,000 and £12,000 per person for a day’s shooting,’ and the fact that the taxpayer is subsidizing the conservation practices that maintain such areas as moorland despite the damaging impact that they have had on species other than grouse (such as the almost extinguished hen harrier) (45). Cocker suggested that there has been a concerning shift lately in the preoccupations of the New Nature Writing from ‘nature and culture’ to ‘landscape and literature’ (by which he means the subject of the discussion has shifted from grounded conservation projects to purely literary representations) and that this has seen a disconnect from the uncertain, real-world political realities of our imperilled wildlife (44). He even goes so far as to align the ‘New’ of the New Nature Writing with that of New Labour, ‘a project that has been uprooted from its original generative stock’ (43).

Cocker’s argument should serve as a profound warning and should be related to the wider debates about the politics of the New Nature Writing as it develops, but it should not inspire a nervous flight from aesthetics. On the contrary, what his argument provides is a prompt to consider the historical relationship between the aesthetics of the New Nature Writing and the shifting politics of contemporary Britain. In *The Country and City* Raymond Williams challenged the nostalgic idealization of rural life but the real project of that important book was to historicize the aesthetics of the countryside, to examine it as the expression of wider political and economic realities that existed in the relations between the country and the city. In the same way we ought to be conscious of the way the aesthetics of the New Nature Writing express and engage with the wider political and economic realities of the country at large in relation to its uncertain condition of social and cultural unity and in relation to a wider world navigating its way through environmental crisis. Robert Macfarlane responded to Cocker’s article by considering some of the values being promoted through the aesthetics of what he called the

recent ‘cultures of nature’ that have proliferated in the UK: ‘community over commodity, modesty over mastery, connection over consumption, the deep over the shallow, and a version of what the American environmentalist Aldo Leopold called “the land ethic”’ (2015: n.p.). An important warning about the relationship between literature and activism, from a literary critical point of view, Cocker’s dismissal of so much of this body of work merely as ‘pastoral’ lacks the proper engagement with literary aesthetics.

The chapters that follow go to great lengths to examine works of the New Nature Writing as they have been shaped by, and as they have helped to shape, a wider culture of grassroots conservation, environmentalism, ecology and heritage in Britain and Ireland today. Chapter 1 lays the ground by reappraising the idea of the local in response to the recent dismissals of place (considered above) as reactionary, bounded and insular. This chapter looks back to the early work of Common Ground and their rooting of the big questions of the environmental movement in tangible and local realities. A new and more complex version of the local emerges as a result of this, one that is open, experimental and alert to contemporary conflict and change. I explore this through the charity’s first publication, *Second Nature*, an anthology of specially commissioned nature writing that very carefully disentangles itself from a tradition of nationalist landscape aesthetics typical of the period 1930–60. I go on to trace the direct influence Common Ground had on two key literary works that have themselves exerted a strong influence on the later formation and popularization of the New Nature Writing: Roger Deakin’s *Waterlog* and Alice Oswald’s *Dart*. The chapter closes with a reading of Tim Dee’s simultaneously local and global work *Four Fields* (2013). This reading is informed by Fiona Stafford’s reconsideration of the local as an outward-looking literary phenomenon concerned with a search for what disparate locations and lives might have in common. The local emerges as a vital scale at which public engagement with global issues can find a meaningful purchase. A particular version of place comes to be conceptualized, in similar terms, as an ongoing, outward-looking and imaginative process of creative activity linking deep history with the present and the future.

Chapter 2 turns to a range of books that have recently shown an interest in the wild and its curious relationship to place in such densely populated and historically layered landscapes as Britain and Ireland. Unlike the American

understanding of wilderness as remote and pristine, a modest sense of the wild as closely entangled with human affairs has grown up in a distinctive way on this side of the Atlantic. However, in part because of this close association of the wild with the human and historic landscape, the subject has divided opinion and has become a contentious issue, so the chapter explores three very different views on the wild through three key books: Robert Macfarlane's *The Wild Places*, Kathleen Jamie's *Findings* and George Monbiot's *Feral* (2013). Though in the end these three appear to arrive at a similar understanding of wildness as a lively process of interaction across the connective interface between the human and non-human, they each arrive at it by different means and these means themselves are culturally significant and are carefully explored. It concludes by considering the way projects of rewilding have been connected to diverse, pioneering community land initiatives, building on the previous chapter's re-evaluation of localism. Through other works by these same authors it examines what appears to be an emerging grassroots politics associated with the wild, one that connects in outward-looking ways to other projects across Europe and one that is beginning to make important demands for the reform of national policy on conservation and land ownership.

Chapter 3 looks at a much more ambiguous style of place as it turns to the edgelands. Edgelands, described as the 'interfacial rim' between country and city, have inspired a range of authors and artists recently because they offer an opportunity to trouble and question conventions of landscape aesthetics. This chapter explores three key works that have taken to these ambiguous spaces of 'terrain vague' and asks 'what might the future hold for them?' It begins by looking at perhaps the first work of the New Nature Writing as it is understood here – Richard Mabey's *The Unofficial Countryside*, a groundbreaking work that adapts a method of investigating such landscapes to playfully challenge both rural and urban traditions of writing with a very sharp eye for the resourcefulness of modern wildlife underneath. In so doing it presents a particular version of 'nature' (a term critically examined here) as inextricably entangled with modernity in these spaces and develops the previous chapter's engagement with the wild. Nearly forty years later, Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts returned to similar territory in *Edgelands: Journeys into England's True Wilderness*, endeavouring to draw attention to landscapes overlooked by high, and even much popular, culture.

It examines their fascination with the architecture and ordinary cultures of these unlikely places, unpicking their playful prose forms as they parody and subvert picturesque and the pastoral modes from within. A vision of feral modernity emerges that complements Mabey's vision of modern nature. The chapter concludes, however, with a critique of Farley and Roberts' *Edgelands* for its attitude to history, arguing that a full account of edgelands ought to, at some point, confront the difficult question of an 'edgelands heritage'. In this final part, the chapter explores the complicated possibility of such a heritage through Ken Worpole and Jason Orton's *The New English Landscape*. In the end it argues for all of these authors as, in fact, engaged in a much needed and nuanced form of contemporary heritage work insofar as they are helping both to reveal and make cultural meanings in these underappreciated places.

Chapter 4 takes an in-depth look at the varied practice of Tim Robinson. There has been little academic research published on his work as yet despite an illustrious career, first as an artist of the London avant-garde in the late 1960s, then as a map-maker in the west of Ireland and finally as a now very highly regarded author of place. In part, this dearth is due to the difficulty of approaching these three diverse strands collectively, but in part it is due to his very deliberate move out to the extreme periphery of the British and Irish archipelago in 1972. This move came at a time when a whole generation of artists were beginning to think critically about the modernist alignment of culture with the city in the context of rising concerns about the environment and a contraction of British imperial power. Robinson's move to Aran brought him to consider the possibility of mapping and writing about an intangible heritage that had been misunderstood by nineteenth-century British colonial administration. The process raises the existential question of how the artist – in whatever medium – might do justice to a place that he or she takes as a subject. Aran's peripheral geography and the labyrinthine Connemara shoreline become physical metaphors for the intricate horizon of the contemporary place-imaginary. Writing about place reveals the fractal depth of the shared and interlocking spaces of history and community as they grow and change for Robinson. His work is thought to anticipate the field of 'deep mapping', a part creative, part academic, interdisciplinary form of cultural work interested in the transformative power of bringing to the fore marginalized experiences and forms of intangible heritage. With this in

mind Chapter 4 builds on the previous chapter's argument about innovative and artistic forms of heritage work within the context of deep mapping to explore the rich spatial dynamics of all three aspects of Robinson's work. The significance of his initial dramatic move from centre to periphery is eventually complicated by the more intricate and archipelagic geographies of what he comes to call 'the view from the horizon'.

Chapter 5 echoes this shift in spatial register from 'centre/periphery' relations to the more complex and decentred relations of archipelagic thinking. The literary journal *Archipelago* has served as something of a masthead for a range of authors associated with the New Nature Writing but its vision of Britain is an unconventional one. Inspired by recent work in Four Nations History and archipelagic criticism, what emerges is a politically and culturally devolved view on 'the Isles' that gives preference to the northern and western periphery and the cultural geographies of the coast. This chapter offers an account of the prose (and some poetry) of the journal's editor, Andrew McNeillie, before looking carefully at some of *Archipelago*'s favourite authors and artists and how their work has been presented in the journal as a way of understanding the particular reconfiguration of space that the journal offers. What emerges is, on the surface, a turn to the periphery which, like Robinson's own turn in the last chapter, sees the literatures and cultures of micro-regions speak back to the centre, but the chapter looks more closely at this familiar dynamic to reveal a more complex and decentred archipelagic space underneath this, one with an emphasis on artists working (quite literally at times) in the cosmopolitan spaces '*between* and *among* islands' (Stratford et al. 2011). The chapter concludes with a reading of a collaborative work by Scottish poet Douglas Dunn and English artist Norman Ackroyd that emerges from boat trips taken by the two around the Scottish coast. The littoral vision that *Archipelago* publishes captures uncertainties about the future unity of Britain in the context of Ireland's own experience of independence, but it does so celebrating the dynamic possibilities of mobility and clustered relationships that archipelagic criticism argues has been so crucial yet under-acknowledged to British and Irish literary history. In the end, the editorial vision has come to nurture and stimulate the possibility of a deliberate, forward-looking movement of archipelagic literature to match the historic and cultural geographical work of archipelagic criticism.

The final chapter considers the accumulated new meanings of place as they have been developed throughout the book and asks what bearing they might have on the challenge faced by the Anthropocene. It does this by considering the relationship of place writing to geology. Geology has in fact come to hold a strong and significant fascination for authors concerned with writing about place. The austere presence of materials which have emerged from a scale of time difficult to relate to our own modest and limited scale has offered a humbling corrective to our modern experience. Such encounters have been resistant to a particular intersection of environmental and Romantic traditions of thought that searches for a 'reunion' with nature. In doing so they have spoken to some of the dilemmas emerging from the recognition of the Anthropocene as a geological epoch defined by destructive human development. As such, they present a useful way of concluding the book's rethinking of place in a modern context and suggest a response to the recent dismissal of place by environmental critics. Stone and geology are explored in the work of three authors here – Kenneth White, Tim Robinson and Alastair McIntosh. In texts by each of these we can read a consistent effort to reimagine the cultural geography of place by turning towards a deeper understanding of the stone beneath their feet. Far from regarding stone as a source of stability and reliability, these three find themselves accommodating unstable, vertiginous, precarious and plural truths that are drawn upon as a source for, what White calls, 'cultural renewal'. Realizing the impossibility of conciliation to such a non-human scale of presence also leads to the opening of what Heidegger calls a 'clearing' (*Lichtung*), both in terms of an aesthetic space in the poetics of landscape writing but also in terms of a lived place and the dynamic creativity at the heart of place culture. Heidegger's version of the clearing as an entanglement of earth and world is complicated here by recent developments in, on the one hand, new materialism's recognition of 'a geological affect' (Bennett) and, on the other, by the Anthropocene's recognition of humans as a 'geological agent' (Chakrabarty). However, his notion of the strife (*Streit*) produced by their entanglement only intensifies and its instantiation of an originary truth, that is the truth of the work of art, is read both in place writing and in place culture as a way of rethinking place in response to the challenges of the Anthropocene.

By broadening the focus of the period described by the New Nature Writing, this book shows how examples were set by an earlier generation of authors like

Richard Mabey, Sue Clifford, Angela King, Roger Deakin and Tim Robinson. Reconnecting the New Nature Writing with this earlier cultural context to which it is deeply indebted forces an acknowledgement of a generation whose commitments to real-world change have set a high benchmark. We need this benchmark today. If the New Nature Writing as a form is to grow and develop in a way not determined and dictated by the literary marketplace – and if it is to avoid the risk of becoming, as Clark warns ‘the wishful illusion of an industrial consumerist society’ – it is crucial to remember such a benchmark set by these important earlier authors (2011: 23). Not as something to aspire towards but as something to exceed, as an established foundation to build on in new and ambitious ways. This book endeavours to show that there are much more complex, experimental and self-reflexive processes going on in these works than just the ‘pastoral’ but it does so by connecting them to this tradition of socially engaged environmentalism that runs back to the 1970s. It encourages readers to look carefully and unpack the forms at work in the New Nature Writing since in them, in the questions that they provoke, there is a fresh understanding of the ways in which the cultures of place are changing in Britain and Ireland today.