

## The New Nature Writing

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The rise of ‘The New Nature Writing’ as a cultural phenomenon in the UK has been one of the country’s most notable literary movements this century. There have been new prizes (The Wainwright Prize, The Nan Shepherd Prize), new journals and magazines (*Archipelago*, *Earthlines*), new websites (*Caught by the River*, *The Clearing*), new publishers like Little Toller, and there have even been new conservation organisations that owe a debt to the literature (Rewilding Britain, Action for Conservation). This has all contributed to an exciting and lively time for what Robert Macfarlane has called the “cultures of nature”. But it has not been without its uncertainties and controversies and at times it has felt like the New Nature Writing has raised more questions than it has answered.

For example, nature writers in the UK seem uncomfortable with the term ‘nature writing’ itself (let alone the ‘New Nature Writing’). Why? Some of the leading lights have expressed frustration at the suggestion that writing about nature might somehow need to be siloed off from other forms of writing, or that it might be distinct from writing about *culture* (Richard Mabey 1984; Robert Macfarlane 2003; Kathleen Jamie 2013). Critics both popular and academic often even seem divided about its status as a genre. Lawrence Buell, for example, prefers the term “environmental non-fiction” for such a “multigeneric field” (397); I’ve argued for the term ‘place writing’, emphasising the inseparability of natures and cultures today (Smith 2017). But these also seem to miss the genre’s preoccupation with other species.

Other critics seem divided about the very tenability of nature writing at all now, especially in light of the critical disruptions in thought about the very meaning of ‘nature’ that have emerged in light of the Anthropocene (see Morton 2007). To the question ‘Is American Nature Writing Dead?’, Daniel Philippon has argued that, though the term itself might be “more trouble than it’s worth”, the “expansive sensibility expressed [...] remains a useful tool with which to address the various humanistic challenges associated with sustainability” (2014). However, the US has not seen the same discontinuity that has taken place in the UK, warranting this emphasis on a ‘new’ nature writing.

There are, of course, an abundance of subgenres and modes that constitute the nature writing essay, some of which have been gathered into ‘taxonomies’ of the long tradition, from the ascetic wilderness pilgrimage to the homely country diary to the obsessive pursuit of a single species (Lyon 1989 and Barnhill 2010). Part of the renewal that the *New Nature Writing* represents operates at a level of self-reflexivity within these subgenres and modes. Robert Macfarlane’s *The Wild Places* (2007) offered a fresh take on

the classic wilderness pilgrimage, discovering the wild not on remote hilltops so much as in a flower pushing up through a crack in the pavement. Mark Cocker's *Claxton* offered a book-length collection of the most startling 'country diary' columns from around Norfolk but they are anything but homely. And Miriam Darlington's *Otter Country* and *Owl Sense* pursue their animals across Europe only to confront the very fragile hold they have on a shrinking habitat.

New modes have emerged in recent years, most prominently perhaps, the story of mental or physical recovery intertwined with a narrative about place or animals. Richard Mabey on depression in *Nature Cure* (2005), Amy Liptrot on addiction in *The Outrun* (2015), and Helen Macdonald on grief in *H is for Hawk* (2014), each offer moving insights about our vulnerability and the health that can be found in our relationship with what Ted Hughes once called "the medical earth" (Hughes, 112). These works have helped to bring the question of identity more fully and more carefully into view, reminding us that different social and cultural orientations produce diverse forms of nature writing with very different stories to tell and this seems to be the way in which the New Nature Writing is expanding at the moment. 'Expanding' is the word too. This is not about a change of direction for a tightly defined genre but an attempt to open up, to broaden the church of, what has been a rather narrow field.

Nature writing has always tended towards the personal from Gilbert White's *Natural History of Selborne* (1789) on, but in its concern for the more-than-human it has also shown an anxiety about self-indulgence. At the heart of the genre, most critics celebrate the distinctive entanglement of the scientific and the personal voice; a foundation of authoritative knowledge and then something more speculative and poetic, stretching and complicating the scientific in inviting ways (Finch and Elder 1990; Lyon 1989). You might say that the art of the genre arises out of this tension. And yet, personal as it might have been, publishers' lists and anthologies have often narrowly represented the nature writer as affluent, white, male and able-bodied (as a recent—now postponed—conference at Newcastle University pointed out, *The Lost Voices*).

An uncomfortable discord has emerged here between the genre's ethical and ecological resistance to anthropocentrism—its attempts at self-denial, curbing the authorial ego—and the dominance of the white, male voice. Think, for example, of Emerson's claim that: "Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite spaces—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all" (8). Today, the ecological ethics of such a disidentification feels like a refusal to acknowledge privilege, or even to deny different, more complicated experiences by claiming such and experience to be universal.

One reason for this lack of diversity (aside from the more obvious historical reasons) might be the way nature writing's tension between the personal and the scientific has divided critics in quite polarising ways. Some have argued that the genre should be *more scientific* while others have argued that it should be *more personal*, more speculative, playful and poetic. Jim Perrin (2010) and Richard Smyth (2015) have argued for more facts, less poetry (the former associated with hard-won fieldwork and scientific bookishness; the latter with a metropolitan publishing phenomenon and a lyrical search

for the *mot juste*). Mark Cocker (2015) has warned of the dangers of ‘nature writing’ (with its connotations of scientific scrutiny) being replaced by ‘landscape literature’ (with its connotations of Romantic scenery and lyricism).

This has made for lively debate. But it has also contributed to an uncertain, background anxiety about any personal or literary leanings whatsoever, an anxiety in which to be personal is to be indulgent and in which the ‘literary’ is reduced to celebratory and beautifying repertoires.

Anxiety about the literary has also characterised academic criticism of nature writing that comes at it from entirely the opposite direction (and though this criticism has been largely of US nature writing, it is worth bearing it in mind here too). Timothy Morton (2007) and Dana Phillips (2003) have challenged ecocritics for reading nature writing as an attempt to write a “(non)aesthetic form” that seeks to “escape the pull of literary” (Morton 31); a form that produces a naïve realism that is “monocultural and monotone” (Phillips 19). For both critics, failure to explore the more speculative narrative conventions in which nature writing operates (its more personal and literary tendencies) has stifled the criticism and limited the repertoire of innovation among nature writers themselves.

So which is it to be? The literary and personal or the knowledgeable and scientific? It is, of course, a false opposition, but it is remarkable how polarised the popular criticism and the academic criticism have become. The anti-literary culture of authorial anxiety created by the popular criticism does perhaps explain some of the stylistic monotony identified by the academic criticism though.

The way such debates have circulated this century may in part explain the popularity of embracing the term ‘New Nature Writing’ more recently, drawing a line under matters and starting again, writing now for the more self-aware and self-reflexive Anthropocene. And as much as people will argue otherwise, and as much as ‘traditional’ nature writing continues to thrive, there is certainly something new in the air. But for how long have people been saying this, and where did the ‘new’ come from?

Granta published their special edition, popularising the name, in 2008 on the back of Robert Macfarlane’s *The Wild Places* (2007) and Kathleen Jamie’s *Findings* (2005), two very different books that helped to lay the foundations for what would come. But these books were themselves already standing on the shoulders of important precursors of a slightly older generation—Roger Deakin, Richard Mabey, and going back a little further Nan Shepherd and J.A. Baker.

The early edition of Granta that helped to popularise the form set the ‘new’ apart from the ‘old’ by separating recent ‘heterodox’ and ‘experimental’ writing from “the lyrical pastoral tradition of the romantic wanderer” (Cowley 10). The work published in this edition was an impressively unconventional mix set to challenge any stable idea of ‘nature’ along a variety of axes. There was an essay by Edward Platt on bird conservation in the militarised and contested borderlands between Palestine and Israel, for example. And an essay by Kathleen Jamie exploring cancerous breasts and fetuses preserved in jars in Playfair Hall at the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh. Both forced

confrontations with difficult questions about what constitutes the ‘natural’, and hence what might be the subject of the ‘New Nature Writing’.

However, it is more than a resistance of the ‘lyrical’ and ‘romantic’ that has set this revived interest apart from the longer tradition of nature writing in the UK. There has also been an attempt to decouple nature writing from a long tradition of nationalist politics associated with an intensely *English* countryside literature. Jed Esty (2004) and Patrick Wright (1985) have laid bare the ways in which the longer tradition of nature writing has spoken to, respectively, an insularity in the face of the dwindling powers of empire since the 1930s and an insecure, nationalistic nostalgia during the Thatcher years. More recently, in the context of Brexit Britain, Richard Smyth (2019) has warned of the risk of the new nature writing appealing to the far right today if we let it slip back towards a nationalistic landscape aesthetic, a longing for what Raymond Williams once called an “unlocalised, ‘Old England’” (20).

In fact, the first use of the term ‘new nature writing’ I have found predates Cowley’s edition of *Granta* by nearly a decade. In an essay about Hardy, contending with several authors in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century “who brought nature writing into disrepute” (H.V. Morton, H.J. Massingham and Henry Williamson), Richard Kerridge argued that “environmentalism calls for a new nature writing, clearly differentiated from the conservative tradition and aware of its appeal and dangers” (138).

If there are to be distinctive co-ordinates for the *New Nature Writing* in the UK, then, perhaps they are here in a stance that resists the conservative tradition of a nationalistic landscape aesthetic by reaching out towards the more progressive global concerns of environmentalism. And it is in the process of managing these two things at once that place comes so vibrantly alive in the *New Nature Writing* today. Look at the increasingly international reach of works by Jamie and Macfarlane whose most recent books explore landscapes in Alaska, Finland, Greenland, Italy and elsewhere; who “think globally, [and] act locally” as the old environmental slogan goes. For all their connections and significance, places, in the *New Nature Writing*, have become bigger than the countries that contain them.

This search within place for a bigger and more intricate world brings us back to the question of identity and the broadening out of the genre. Today the *New Nature Writing* is on the brink of another important renewal. Last year saw a new prize for underrepresented voices in nature writing—the Nan Shepherd Prize—and a new online journal for nature writing by authors of colour—*The Willowherb Review*. The prize helps to support unpublished authors to find recognition for their work in a genre still dominated by affluent, white, able-bodied men. Jessica J. Lee established *The Willowherb Review* to create a space for authors whose work often gets overlooked by conventional narrow definitions of nature writing.

Last year saw Luke Turner’s *Out of the Woods* (2019) nominated for the Wainwright Prize—a book that explores sexuality, abuse, and shame in writing about Epping Forest; and it saw Caribbean British author Zakiya Mckenzie take up one of the Forestry Commission’s new Writer-in-Residence posts where she has been reflecting on place, memory and transnational identity. This year will see award-winning journalist

Anita Sethi publish her debut book of nature writing, *I Belong Here* (2020), which recounts a long-distance hike in the rural landscape in response to an incident of racial abuse.

One of the most striking books of last year, though, was Jessica J. Lee's *Two Trees Make a Forest* (2019). Living in Berlin but born in Canada to British and Chinese parents, Lee's book traces family history along international lines of migration. Her grandparents had fled China after the civil war in 1949 to live in Taiwan for several decades before moving to Canada. After her grandfather, who is suffering from Alzheimer's, forgets who she is when she's eighteen she realises how precarious memory and identity are and the book takes us back to the forests and mountains of Taiwan as she attempts to connect with a place that is part of her history but that she has never quite known.

She reflects on the right word for the longing she feels toward the place, working across the languages that are a part of her past and present, but none are quite right—'nostalgia' (English), 'sehnsucht' (German), 'hiraeth' (Welsh), and 'xiangqing' (Chinese). It is a book of fault lines, geological, historical, linguistic and familial but through its probing of the spaces *between* cultures a relationship to place and nature emerges that is truly both expansive *and* intricate.

If nature writing is broadening its church at the moment, it is a very welcome move that will no doubt enrich the genre and enrich the cultures of nature more generally, but it will also be a test for the genre and a test for the 'cultures of nature' generally. In an article for *The New Yorker* a few years ago, Jamaica Kincaid recounted an experience she had at a conference in South Carolina about the cultural history of gardening. When she spoke, she reflected on the way slavery haunts many of the most beautiful gardens in the US in completely unacknowledged ways. For raising this, she was told by one of the wealthy organisers that he was sorry she had been invited to the conference and that he was 'utterly offended' by what she had said, for "I had done something unforgivable—I had introduced race and politics into the garden" (Kincaid 41).

As much as we need to broaden the church of nature writing then, we do also need to reflect on what might have kept race and politics out of the garden for so long. And to think about the narrow definitions of nature, knowledge and authority that have wielded a conservative pressure on the form. In a world of increasingly fortified nationalisms and a global environmentalism waking up to the social and political inequalities at the heart of the crisis, a nature writing that can be both expansive and intricate feels more important than ever.

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