

The Condry Lecture 2011

A naturalist of his own square mile

*Woke up this mornin'
Put on my walkin' shoes
Step out in the country
Walk away these blues
When the leaves are on the trees
An' the birds are in the air
If you know where to look, baby
You will always find me there
'cause I'm a man
A man of his own square mile
I aint goin' nowhere
Gonna get there in a while*

My square miles: From the Gleddins to the Gallows

The Gleddins, a ghost garden.

A dour light leaned through trees and all was mud and mist. A chiffchaff appeared in a crab-apple tree, its olive green and brown plumage the same colour as bark but it bore a light stripe across each eye: the mask of the farseeing. These were the ones who saw beyond our horizons, moving through the world to meet us unexpectedly. The ones who became transparent as the world moved through them, their speech and song reminding us of an intimacy with Nature we had forgotten about. The chiffchaff came bearing the weight of immense journeys. It had seen the acacia scrub and tropical forest of West Africa, the Sahara desert, the Mediterranean Sea and the river valleys with patterned fields and woods of Europe on its way to this tree. And it was from this tree that it made the journey to Africa.

Chiff-chaff, chiff-chaff: a two-beat song, clear and strong as the left-right of nailed boots on stones. Then the bird riffed on his metronome, slipping notes and compacting phrases to make the two-step skip, to break the line. Now it was a dance. Now it was the sound of ghosts in their boots, dancing in the May woods. The lanes were white with a bow-wave of cow-parsley and inside the Gleddins the air was dripping with the sexy musk of mayflower. I walked into the woods along an old path used by quarry workers a hundred years ago.

The chiffchaff had hardly shaken the dust of all those miles from its feathers before he was attacked. But the robin may have had no more of a permanent claim on this wood than the chiffchaff. He had colonised this place and defended what he believed to be his hard-won boundaries. The chiffchaff skipped from danger to a hidden perch where it began to sing his two-beat mantra, seeing far away. Other birds saw other things. A gang of gulls following Wenlock Edge north kept low, out of the wind. A yellowhammer perched on the topmost twig of a hedge, his colours the browns and duns of thorn and hazel and the bright yellow of oilseed rape now flowering in the field he looked across, smelling sweetly of agricultural subsidies.

These birds vanished into mist but their hidden sounds spoke of spring; they were the aural equivalent of violets and primroses. Skylarks - pouring their songs into a murky sky with the inevitability of a stream flowing downhill towards the river - set the wild, unstoppable pitch of the season, keeping blind faith whatever the weather. A raven carried a white egg, or was it an eye?

At the far side of the Gleddins was a stile which overlooked the long wooded scarp of Wenlock Edge and the Severn plain stretching north-westwards to the hills of the Welsh Marches. The suddenness of the view came as a shock: it swooped from The Wrekin in the north, westwards across to the Oswestry Uplands and the high Berwyn mountains around Lake Vyrnwy behind them - a land both local and mythic. In the tidal green of this landscape the songs of birds from Africa and the Mediterranean wove together with those of the stay-at-homes. At dawn it

was a thunderous swarm of song. At dusk it was the sound of falling shards of light. To listen was to join it. Ghosts were dancing in my boots too.

To Gallows Tree Leasowe, by buzzard.

Buzzards fly into a pale blue, trail-sketched and cirrus-scratched sky. They cruise on a breath, a church steeple-high orbit that draws circles looping over back gardens, the priory ruins and surrounding fields. Two buzzards spar as they rise higher and a third joins them. The pale undersides of their wings flash silver in the sun and their calls are like cats whistling in the sky, stringing into a space of warm autumn light. As they ascend the three are joined by a fourth, then the four are joined by a fifth. Five buzzards, weaving a pentagram higher in the sky, become black specs as they drift northwest, out of Wenlock's hollow, over the Edge to the plain and Severn Vale beyond. It's as if the history of this moment is being written by these birds as they soar above other histories which are equally ephemeral.

A hundred feet above Harley Bank, work to stabilise the treacherous rock where the road between Shrewsbury and Bridgnorth cuts up the wooded Edge, has left raw scars, a new path and fence. From the highest point, the view follows the buzzards' pathway through the sky, above the plain to the far hills. The midnight harvests, where combines worked day and night while the weather held, are in and the earth is being turned and seeded again. The last colours bleed from woods and hedges: yellows and ochres in lime and ash and the red splash of field maple. A haze veils the uncertain world beyond. But this is a certain place: a high exposed point which takes in the miles of landscape like a buzzard's eye; a place from which to ambush the thoughts of travellers in the cutting far below. The view from Edge Top, in the corner of a field called Gallows-Tree Leasowe, is the last thing many would see, hanging from a rope – dancing on the tree of misadventure.

Wenlock Edge – a wave of bone.

Wenlock Edge stretches in a twenty mile-long ridge, from the birthplace of the industrial revolution in the Severn Gorge to the gateway to the Welsh Marches

in Craven Arms. It is a very Shropshire phenomenon, an axis linking diverse and distinctive landscapes through this one diverse, distinctive land. With the Wrekin to the north, the Clee Hills to the east, the Stretton Hills to the west and Clun Forest to the south, Wenlock Edge acts as the spinal column through which impulses, from nerves ending in stones, ditches, bogs, trees, fields, hedges and the wild lives of this land, pass. It acts as a synaptic corridor, through which flash the sparks of being which give this land its spirit.

This is a kind of ecological view of what makes the spirit of a place. The received wisdom from ecology is about inter-connectedness, or as the pioneer ecologist John Muir once wrote, "Everything is hitched to everything else." Maybe things could exist on their own in isolation - possibly this tree, that hill, or these streams? In reality however, things don't; their very existence depends on the relationships between them. In common with other landscape features, Wenlock Edge is made of such relationships but there are certain characteristics created by natural processes, human activity and a wild spirit which arcs between them, giving the Edge its edge. This occurs within dimensions of space as well as time, a lot of time. What we think of now as Wenlock Edge was once reef and shallow sea: 425 million years ago it was a living ecosystem inhabited by creatures which built a world for themselves out of lime, absorbing the water's calcium to protect themselves. Their limestone has lasted through all time since. From its origins on a latitude with present-day Australia, through world-shifting processes of plate tectonics, this great slab of stone tipped up here. The Edge is a wave of bone on which the centuries lean. It lives differently now.

Seen from the Wales, it is a dark brow of trees because along the breaking face of the wave are the woods of Wenlock Edge: the longest unbroken length of woodland in England. Under its roots the Edge rises 200-300 feet above the land, northeast to southwest, and behind it the weight of the wave pushes westward, as if it were about to break across the lowlands and smash into the hills of Wales. Poised along its ridge, weathering, glacier-carved, bitten-into by human endeavour yet

persisting, the wave is stilled; it is time that is tidal. Across all those years, the dust, duff and middens pile on top of each other in strata, each layer holding its own stories, ideas and beliefs. Nothing is lost, all is buried in the sediment of soil and civilisation. The weight of history presses down to harden the rind which covers Wenlock Edge. We scabble about on it, finding clues to secrets we don't know what to do with. We dig holes into the past.

The last limestone quarry closed a couple of years ago and over a thousand years of history came to an end. There was nothing to mark its passing. The dust is settling and the wild is taking root in it again. In abandoned quarries, bee orchids and wild thyme flower in the sun, hart's tongue and polypody ferns green the shadows, jackdaws and peregrine falcons nest on high ledges. Cliff faces and scree slopes, pools and flushes, heaps, pits and terraces: all these places are being colonised by a wild life that bleeds onto clean open pages of stone from the margins. The pastures and meadows rich in wildflowers and invertebrates which are special to limestone soils have been decimated by modern agriculture and development. Only scraps and verges remain as refuges for wildlife and they are finding their ways into redundant quarries like exiles returning to a land scarred by the battlefields of a very long war. The products of the quarries - stone walls, mortar, lime-wash, road mettle, and concrete - create places for lichens, spleenworts, Pellitory-of-the-wall and mason bees. Plants and animals have always reclaimed cracks in the landscape; however brutally it was purged or however tidily maintained, Nature is resurgent and opposed to our control, you can feel that in the woods. "A culture is no better than its woods," wrote WH Auden. What do the woods of Wenlock Edge say about our culture?

They say we need a place where Nature can be free of our obsessions of control and exploitation and where we can find freedom within it; a place for wildlife and people together; a place of moods and shadows which changes with the seasons and not with our intentions; a place from which our culture sprang and still holds truths, desires and fears. Perhaps these woods also say our idea of the

sacred has returned there - to the wild, through trees into the earth, the waters, the stone, which inspired it.

The Witch's Common – reclaiming a lost square mile.

It may have been a day like this - grey above and gold below with a fresh breeze stirring leaves and something in the land which should've been left alone. Down in Corve Dale, jays clattered from oak trees fat with acorns as hunters with a pack of hounds splashed through the river Corve hunting mink, as they once hunted otters here. Buzzards idled round the sky and even sparring ravens couldn't dislodge their careful circles. A sparrow hawk found itself in a mob of house martins. This gathering time before the trip south gets the martins agitated and they took against the hawk without touching it. Higher still on edge top, beech trees had turned coppery brown, the young ash were already lime green and a few wild cherries burned scarlet against the greys of rock face and low cloud. From the scraped-flat quarry floor and its derelict iron machines lying like abandoned sarcophagi, a thin pathway snaked across the stone bank, up over the lip of the hole and away. This path, untrodden by human feet, crossed a scrap of land where a few butterflies, dragonflies and knapweed flowers soaked up a rare ray of sunlight. This was all that remained of Westwood Common, a once large stretch of open limestone grassland on the Edge, almost completely obliterated by quarrying since the middle of the last century. It may have been on such a day that Nanny Morgan walked the common for the last time, along a path like this through dyer's greenweed and ladies bedstraw. A great beauty but evil it was said, she lived on the common in a house called Five Chimneys. This was where she sang

to azgals, the lizards and foraged for her simples. Feared by local people but paid for spells and curses by them, Nanny Morgan the witch was murdered here in September 1857 on a day like this - grey above and gold below, with a breeze stirring something best left alone now.

A naturalist in the community of Nature.

There is a sacredness in Nature which transcends faith, belief and ideology as a feeling beyond love and fear, a dream of life's community.

In my own work I explore the idea that Nature has a sacredness which can be expressed in a secular, non-religious literature. Nature experienced through encounter with particular phenomena, such as wildlife, landscapes and weather, has a personal significance for many people which is equivalent to, if not a substitution for, older notions of the sacred.

Sacredness – as that quality inherent in a place or thing dedicated to a god or some religious purpose - has persisted in personal experience of Nature beyond unconditional religious belief. I argue that secular kinds of sacredness which may arise from a love of Nature have to be thought about with kinds of sacredness which come from a fear of Nature - through phenomena such as disease, earthquake, tsunami and now climate change. Ideas of sacredness arise from a numinous experience engendering a fear *for* Nature - which enriches and gives meaning to human existence but is threatened by human interventions – together with a fear *of* Nature which has the power to destroy human existence altogether.

This can be hard to articulate because the intimate language used to talk about Nature is overpowered by religious traditions and conventional discourse dominated by business-speak and political rhetoric. Ecology, for example is a descriptive science but its language is that of economics. Natural history, far from being some anachronistic reserve for fuddy-duddies, is still the descriptive counterpart of natural philosophy, and it's an intellectual and creative response to

the crisis of existence and mass extinctions. Natural history offers an opportunity to speak about nature as an earthly or cosmological force; as space, place or process; quantitatively as biodiversity or qualitatively as wildness; emotional fear, love or inspiration. The experience of Nature has such a spiritual or psychological effect on individuals that it has a profound cultural significance. As a naturalist of a square mile, my aim is to try and express this significance through a way of expression which can be described as nature writing. Here's a recent example:

A taste for the wild.

A purple stain on the lip, a gritty seed between teeth, the little black orbs roll around in the mouth releasing the sunshine and rain of summer. But already mush to touch and as if thawed from frozen, blackberries were losing their taste. Although these September fruits were still sweet and shiny, they just didn't have the intensity of flavour the first blackberries had some weeks ago. Now a patch eight feet tall, the brambles covered an acre of pasture that was grazed until about thirteen years ago. This was the relic of a field from way back, once used for the ponies which hauled limestone from quarry faces and pits to limekilns. The lime was taken away by train, down into the Severn Gorge to Coalbrookdale where it was used to flux iron in a hell of mad furnaces. That world vanished a long time ago. The furnaces became museums; the limestone quarries draped in silence; the derelict limekilns buried in the woods; the ghosts of jinnys, mules, donkeys and cobs clip-clopped into shadows of the Edge. In the years since grazing stopped on the field, the brambles reached out from the encircling hedge - rush, root, rush - their stems touched down and took hold in the grass and their seeds, passing through birds and badgers, pushed the colony into the open. Year on year the patches merged together and grew taller, wider, thicker, denser, like a

fairytale bramble concealing a Sleeping Beauty secret. Perhaps that's true. Perhaps the secret was the history of this place and what's remains of it could be experienced by eating the blackberries. With their roots in the past, their leaves filled with the here and now and their fruits for the future, the brambles shared something with another world. A stain on the lips, seeds in the teeth, a taste of sunlight and rain on the tongues of quarry workers and their ponies. Soon to be lost: a moment of sweetness, free and wild.

'cause I'm a man

*of his own square mile
goin' nowhere*

But I'm gonna get there

Yes, I'm gonna get there

You know I'm gonna get there in a while.

A man

I aint

Paul Evans, Tabernacl/MoMA, Machynlleth, 6th October 2011.