

The Language of Landscape

Robert Macfarlane, *Landmarks*. London: Hamish Hamilton. 2015. Pp. x + 387. ISBN: 978-0-241-14653-8.

Reviewed by Katie Wales, University of Nottingham

Landmarks is a book difficult to classify, yet it is of great interest to students of the English language. It is also a book that on publication in early 2015 struck such a chord with the general readership that it spent several months in booksellers' 'top ten' lists.

One reviewer ended up in 'Pseuds Corner' of the satirical magazine *Private Eye* (2015) for writing that 'each stratum of a lexico-politico-meteorological-aesthetico "Berlitz" abuts a seam of ecologico-topographic-critico-politico "belles letters"' (29.05.15). This is actually quite a pithy summary. For Macfarlane combines a sensitive strain of writing about landscape based on his personal peregrinations through different kinds of terrain across Britain with a fierce eco-criticism; and also combines word-collecting with ethno-linguistics. The work is explicitly informed in each chapter by key works, poetic, fictional and particularly non-fictional, on nature and topography that have resonated with him; and by a wide range of his own glossaries of regional dialect words. There are nine glossaries appended to each chapter, evocatively labelled 'Flatlands', 'Uplands', 'Waterlands', 'Coastlands', 'Underlands', 'Northlands', 'Edgelands', 'Earthlands', 'Woodlands'; a tenth is left blank for the reader's own terms, and for any future words.

The book-jacket describes the work as a 'celebration of language and landscape'. Macfarlane repeatedly stresses the 'magic' of words, and their ability to 'enchant'; and his aim to release their 'poetry' back into imaginative circulation (p. 6). 'Language is fundamental to the possibility of re-wonderment' (p. 25). *Topogram* is his word for the 'tiny poems that conjure scenes' (p. 6): e.g. *blinter*, a northern Scots word for the 'cold dazzle' of ice-splinters catching the low light. But this 'celebration' is double-edged: on the one hand he argues for this magic or power of vernacular language to 'shape' our sense of place; on the other, that these same regional landscape words are in danger of

disappearing, for a variety of reasons: linguistic determinism meets the ecology of language. It is continually stressed that what we cannot name we cannot properly see: unnamed, unseen. He gives the example of the Sussex dialect word *smeuse* for the gap in the base of a hedge which an animal makes (beautifully illustrated in the blue and white illustration on the book's covers): 'now I know the word *smeuse*, I will notice these signs of creaturely comfort more often' (p. 5). More starkly he states 'language deficit leads to attention deficit' (p. 24). But does linguistic expression only mean individual lexical items? The artist and art critic John Ruskin, for example, reputedly urged the novice landscape painter to note in particular that part of a riverbank which encroached on the water. Even without a word for this liminal place he could describe it. Other languages, indeed, may have such a word, since degrees of lexicalisation differ cross-linguistically. Italian certainly has a word (*lippo*) for the liminal phenomenon of the 'greeny down that grows on the lower half of the rocks, the part in contact with the sea' (Camilleri, 2005: 285). The English paraphrase of the translator is unwieldy, but still explicit. Macfarlane may be right, however, in that language awareness generally may lead to a heightened perception of the phenomenon itself in the future (a 're-wonderment').

Inevitably, the book is also an elegy, for words and also things (activities and natural features) lost. If we no longer have specialised words for certain occupations dependent on the land and water, whether farming, hunting, fishing or smithying, etc. then there is the danger of losing knowledge and losing touch in general with nature (p. 75). But the problem is not only linguistic. The blunt fact is that many of such occupations have disappeared, just as the landscape itself has changed rapidly in the second half of the twentieth century, and industry and urban sprawl taken over, to the detriment of wild life also. As Macfarlane himself acknowledges, we live in a post-pastoral 'blandscape' (p. 23); and also, increasingly, a virtual 'techno-scape' (p. 4), indoor rather than

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outdoor. The elegiac strain is endemic to the very structure of the book, since the reference works on which he draws heavily for his glossaries are mostly 19th-century collections, themselves put together by the members of the English Dialect Society, likewise concerned over 150 years ago with the loss of vernacular vocabularies. It is highly likely then that Macfarlane's own glossaries from 1826 onwards contain actual obsolete words: possibly even *smeuse*. For this word does not appear in the mid-twentieth century *Survey of English Dialects (SED)*, instigated at the University of Leeds (1950–61), which collected from informants in the rural areas of England and Wales precisely words to do with such animal holes: hence *creep* (Norfolk), *smoot-hole* (Northumberland), *cripple-gap* (Yorkshire), *shard* (Somerset) and many others. Macfarlane's apparent lack of use of the *SED* is very surprising. Not only is it a vast resource of words drawn from over 1000 questions to do with rural occupations dependent on the land and natural and weather phenomena, but it would also have brought his glossaries closer to the present-day, and to living memory. There is overlap in a rich seam of expressive words to do with scarecrows, icicles, calls to animals, bogs, dung and lanes. Of course, to a large extent it was also an achievement elegiac in its undertone, for the team of dialectologists led by Harold Orton were also aware that they were searching for the 'traditional types of vernacular English' that were 'best preserved' amongst the rural populations, and already in danger of being lost (Introduction, 1962: 14). In an important sense Macfarlane, like Orton, probably sees his work as fulfilling an 'archival function'

(p. 243), in common with so many of the nature-writers he cites; but in the 21st century the task appears more urgent.

What attracted much attention in the British press at the time of the book's publication was the revelation (p. 3–4) that the *Oxford Junior Dictionary* no longer had many entries to do with nature: so words like *acorn*, *bluebell*, *buttercup*, *dandelion*, *ivy* and *heather* had disappeared. If nine out of 10 children can identify a Dalek, only three out of 10 can identify a magpie (p. 323). This environmental 'illiteracy', as he calls it, has not however gone unnoticed by organisations such as the National Trust, who are encouraging children to look for, and label, natural phenomena, in the 'edgelands' of more familiar urban parks and gardens, as well as the more open terrains of moorland and beach. In a stimulating final chapter ('Childish') Macfarlane would encourage children to go further, and to invent their own words for what they encounter in places 'they are also in, never on' (p. 315). In the end, the book returns to being a celebration, rather than a museum: as he states himself at the outset, 'We have forgotten 10,000 words for our landscapes, but we will make 10,000 more, given time' (p. 14).

References

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- Orton, H. 1962. *Survey of English Dialects (A) Introduction*. Leeds: E.J. Arnold & Sons.
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