

# Over the wall ...

**Alan Maley**  
goes back to nature.

**T**he three books I discuss here are all about some aspect of the power of landscape to affect the way we are. Most of us live in towns nowadays, far from the natural world, and are assailed by such a barrage of visual and auditory stimuli that we have almost lost the capacity to look at anything really carefully – to notice it and observe it. If nothing else, these books may stir an interest in the world around us, and make us think about our place in it. They may also provide some ideas for incorporating our relationship with nature into our teaching.



## **The Making of the English Landscape**

This book was first published in 1955 and was out of print for a time, so this handsome re-issue as part of a series of nature classics is most welcome. William George Hoskins was the father of modern landscape history. He makes us realise that what we see as we look at a landscape is composed of the many layers

of its past history: *'The cultural humus of 60 generations or more lies upon it. But most of England is 1,000 years old, and in a walk of a few miles one can touch every century in that long stretch of time.'*

These things are there for us to see, if only we can learn to read the signs left by history on the landscape. In fact, the landscapes we see are a compound of geology, topography, soil-types, vegetation and the long history of human intervention. Hoskins takes us through this palimpsest, stripping it back, layer by layer, starting with the most ancient signs of habitation in the Iron Age and Bronze Age, still visible in stone walls, burial mounds, earthen forts, stone megaliths like Stonehenge, and Celtic field patterns. He moves on to the imprint left by the Romans, in the form of their roads, canals and dykes, like the Foss Dyke, and certain field patterns around former Roman villas. The Saxon occupation of Britain (450–1066) sees the development of the large open-field systems with their strip farming – still visible in some areas as patterns of ridge and furrow on the pastures – the settlement of villages following forest clearance and the earliest churches and bridges. The villages of the Scandinavian invasions are easily discernable from Saxon settlements by

place names ending in *-by*, *-wick* and *-thwaite*. Following the Norman Conquest in 1066, the colonisation of the forests continued apace; marshland was reclaimed; watermills appeared on the rivers; new bridges, churches and cathedrals like Durham and Canterbury were built; the great monastic foundations controlled large tracts of the country, leaving their mark in the stone walls that march across the moors of the north of England; and towns like Norwich and Exeter began to thrive. The Black Death, which decimated the population, left in its wake hundreds of deserted villages, still traceable from the patterns they have left on the ground. Yet the 14th and 15th centuries were also a great period of castle building, and many churches and bridges date from this time. During the period from the Tudors to the Georgians, much of the remaining forest cover was cleared and many of the open fields started to be enclosed by the hedges which are now so much a part of the English landscape. Rich landowners began to build magnificent country houses, like Audley End in Essex, and these were often surrounded by parks and specially landscaped gardens. The final great transformation of the landscape was brought about by the



Parliamentary Enclosures of the 19th century, in which virtually all the open fields disappeared, to be replaced by smaller, hedged fields. The Industrial Revolution brought its own radical transformation to the landscape in the form of canals, turnpike roads and, above all, the railways. Millions of tons of earth were shifted to construct the tunnels, cuttings and viaducts, and coal mining, steel smelting, chemicals, pottery and glass disfigured the landscape with tips and the blight of spreading towns and their slums.

So, next time you go to the countryside, in the UK or elsewhere, maybe you will see more than before. And there are some wonderful projects that you can do with students on local landscape history.

### **The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot**

This is the third of Robert Macfarlane's nature books. In it, he celebrates the complex relationship between the landscape and those who walk through it. He speaks of walking as 'a *reconnoitre inwards*' and 'the subtle ways in which we are shaped by the landscapes through which we move'. In other words, we do not walk just to get somewhere, but to facilitate reflection, 'walking as enabling sight and thought ... paths as offering not only means of traversing space but also ways of feeling, being and knowing'. So this is a book both about the landscapes he encounters through his feet and also about a kind of metaphysical walking – an inward journey.

It is divided into four main parts: *Tracking* (England), *Following* (Scotland), *Roaming* (Abroad), *Homing* (England). The foreign walks are highly evocative of place: old pathways through the Left Bank in Palestine, the high forests of the Sierra de Guadarrama in Spain, the sacred mountain Minya Konka in the Himalayas. But the essence of the book is the journeys within Britain, with the detailed descriptions of walks in different kinds of landscape – chalk, granite, limestone, etc – all

described in a lyrical style which brings them alive. For example:

*'In a canopy of long, thin beech wood, rocks yabbered and called, tossed up into the air and then settled back as if the wood itself were boiling.'*

*'Rain-filled hoof marks and footprints flashed gold, coined by the sun.'*

*'... a tractor ploughing a distant field to corduroy.'*

*'... a big field mushroom lying upside down on its cap, its black gills like the charred pages of a book.'*

One of the most hauntingly beautiful descriptions is of the Broomway, which crosses the mudflats at low tide in Essex, where sky and land and mist merge into a single silvery substance. This is writing at its best.

But the chapters also weave a discursive pattern of interaction between Macfarlane, the landscapes he traverses with their plant, animal and bird life brilliantly described, the many strong personalities he encounters on the way, the stories and the history associated with the landscapes, and the literary figures and travel writers who have also passed there. In particular, there is a thread of association with the poet Edward Thomas, who was killed in 1917 at the Battle of Arras and was one of the best English nature poets of the 20th century.

Macfarlane ends by walking alongside prehistoric footprints fossilised on the shoreline at Formby in Lancashire: *'I stop by the last footprint, 5,000 years after setting out, my track ceasing where his does. I look back along the track-line to my south. The light tilts again and suddenly the water-filled footprints are mirrors reflecting the sky, the shuddering clouds and whoever looks into them.'*

### **How to Connect with Nature**

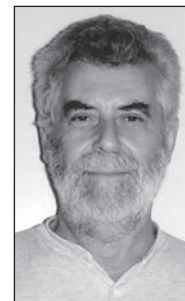
Tristan Gooley's book is a practical guide for the layperson, to help them re-connect with the natural world. It is one of the titles in a new series of small, compact, practical handbooks produced by *The School of Life*. Gooley's aim is to re-awaken awareness of the world around us: the way time is structured, the way we read the sky, the nature of water ... Chapter 2, *The Senses*, has a rich array of exercises for developing sensitivity to what we see, hear, smell, taste and touch. Many of these exercises could usefully be

adapted for language teaching. He also deals with landscape types and their typical vegetation. There is a chapter on *Hidden Calendars* – all the natural signs available for reading the time of year. Again, much of this would also form good language teaching input, suitably adapted. In the penultimate chapter, he details the benefits from greater contact with nature and awareness of it. In particular, he mentions: *'Time spent in nature has been shown to improve self-esteem and conflict-resolution ... one hour spent in nature can improve memory and attention span by 20 percent. Nature can calm us, it can help us focus and for many it works as an anti-depressant.'*

So what are we all waiting for? **ETp**



Gooley, T *How to Connect with Nature* (*The School of Life* series) Macmillan 2014  
 Hoskins, W G *The Making of the English Landscape* Little Toller Books 2013  
 Macfarlane, R *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot* Hamish Hamilton 2012



Alan Maley has worked in the area of ELT for over 40 years in Yugoslavia, Ghana, Italy, France, China, India, the UK, Singapore and Thailand. Since 2003 he has been a freelance writer and consultant. He has published over 30 books and numerous articles, and was, until recently, Series Editor of the *Oxford Resource Books for Teachers*.

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Did it really work in practice?

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