

The Wild Places

How distressing that the pace of technology now renders a book just 8 years old out of date. Even I, surely one of the last die-hard adherents of the road atlas have yielded to the lure of the sat nav. The author's claim of over a million road atlas sales in the UK per year just cannot be true any more.

I was concerned that I would find hard going a book based almost completely on description. But no. The writing is very engaging, almost psychedelic - very visual. Macfarlane can become transfixed on minutiae. A piece of rope end flotsam on a beach attains a numinous illumination, as if placed there especially for him by a passing deity. Like the tripper, one is mesmerised by the intense is-ness of it all.

I have spent the night on Rannoch Moor in a small tent. I think we found the only two square yards on the moor where pitching a tent was feasible. Emerging from the tent in the morning is one of my all time great outdoor memories. It was magical being alone in the middle of that vastness of bog and seeing the morning mist rise up the distant crags to roll over the moor. I think this beats even the Himalaya, because the Himalaya tourist treks are not wilderness experiences. Rannoch Moor, however, is very much an alien land, hazardous to man. It is justifiably called a wild place.

I had not come across the term "holloway" before. I was interested that Macfarlane is of the view that many of these sunken paths started as Saxon or pre-Saxon field boundaries. I suspected as much as regards some local examples, such as that which ascends Tor Hill as the natural extension of Nind Lane, and at least two of the descents from Lacombe Woods down to Waterly Bottom.

I liked the etymological excursions. The relation between "wood" and "wild" had not struck me before (though "weald" is a give away really) so "wild wood" is a tautology. And it is remarkable (if true) that the same link occurs in the Latin "silva" giving us "savage". I did not know the relation of "peregrine" to "pilgrim" or of the peregrini. Not did I know that Cape Wrath is not angry but merely a corner, though the region seems pretty wrathful to me.

You do get a hotchpotch with Macfarlane, straying frequently far from place and nature. I liked his exposition on retinal rod cells. (Trigger warning - science coming). It is true that these cells respond to a single photon, though the authors he quotes would not claim precedence in this discovery. They know well that it was established far earlier (in fact in 1942). I hope Macfarlane has not fallen for the common fallacy that humans can therefore see a single photon of light. Neural filters only allow a signal to pass to the brain to trigger a conscious response when at least five to nine photons arrive within 100 ms. If we could consciously see single photons we would experience too much visual "noise" in very low light, so this filter is a necessary adaptation, not a weakness.

I have first hand experience, though, of the peculiar sensitivity of the retinal rod cells in very low light levels. I can tell you that if your peripheral retina, which contains only rod cells, becomes detached, it is far more evident at night than in the day. It is most peculiar. You would expect that the missing patch of vision would be more

apparent in contrast to the brightness of day. But no. It is far more apparent at night when the abnormality is more noticeable against the almost darkness elsewhere.

No less than four nuclear power station places for mentioned, though not the power stations themselves in every case: Dungeness, Sizewell and Bradwell, and, of course, Chernobyl. The latter featured in the form of the nearby abandoned township of Pripiat, now a haven of wild life of a rare diversity thanks to the absence of humans.

Damn Macfarlane, he sees my lifetime's inventory of bird life in an afternoon. He writes, "Through the blue skies were arriving fieldfares, mistle thrushes, redwings, starlings, rooks, lapwings, coming in from Siberian river deltas and Finnish forests.....Raptors came too, singly or in pairs, sparrowhawks, peregrines", and once a merlin.

And again he writes, "This wilderness was not about asperity but about luxuriance, vitality, fun. The weed thrusting through a crack in a pavement, the tree root impudently cracking a carapace of tarmac: these were wild signs as much as the storm wave and the snowflake". I agree. The whole planet is alive. Life is endemic. Even in Lake Vostok or near deep sea hydrothermal vents there is life. Arguably it could not be any other way. Gaia is all or nothing. I know full well that my garden and gravel drive would be a sycamore forest within a few years if we didn't weed it constantly. If humans disappeared, Britain would revert to a wild wood with remarkable speed - and a good thing too.