

Between Country and City

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In their discussion of 'Rewilding Politics and Ethics', Paul Jepson and Cain Blythe identify the importance of *narratives* and *frames* in environmentalist discourse and the politics of rewilding.¹ Partly a result of George Monbiot's framing of farming as ecological vandalism, the Cambrian mountains as 'sheepwrecked' and the herbivores themselves as 'woolly maggots', 'the term rewilding has become toxic in parts of Wales' (104 Jepson), forcing a halt to some rewilding projects. Equally forceful has been the narrative defence of farming, framed in particular as the survival communities of Welsh-speakers. Our group looked at some of the ways rural spaces and inhabitants are 'framed' in a series of articles and extracts, including fiction, essays and newspaper articles.

The environmental impact of overgrazing, along with other intensive agricultural practices and land-use, is not really in dispute: by all measures biodiversity is plummeting in Wales at a terrifying, cataclysmic rate.² There is little diversity of habitat or biomes on the intensively grazed uplands of Wales while high-input practices (use of glyphosate, ploughing and planting of ryegrass monocultures for dairy) and the waste products of intensive farming of cows and poultry (slurry and poultry manure are causing large scale pollution of rivers in Carmarthenshire and the Wye valley)³ are contributing to the creation of a green desert in lower-lying areas. Yet Monbiot's characterisation in his journalism of the uplands as empty spaces have provoked comparisons with the colonial gaze, tabula rasa for the use or management of the coloniser. He writes, anecdotally, that 'those spaces from which much of our wildlife has been disappearing fastest are almost uninhabited. Two friends of mine once walked for six days across the Cambrian Mountains in mid-Wales, and did not see another human being.'⁴ Members of our reading group identified ways in which Monbiot's framing excluded not only Welsh speakers and farmers from a rewilded landscape, but all humans.⁵ A post-human landscape may be appealing to some, but for others it represents a dangerous uncoupling of the connection between humans and nature (a disconnect which has arguably contributed to the current state of climate and biodiversity crisis).⁶

The creation of empty natural spaces can also be interpreted as a 'commodification' of the land which is related to the construction of the countryside as a space of leisure and recreation serving

¹ Paul Jepson and Cain Blythe, *Rewilding: The Radical New Science of Ecological Recovery* (London: Icon Books, 2020).

² The State of Nature 2019 <https://nbn.org.uk/stateofnature2019/> See also the Senedd summary here which notes that 'Changing agricultural management was identified as having the greatest single impact on nature.' <https://research.senedd.wales/research-articles/the-state-of-nature-2019-report-17-of-species-in-wales-are-at-risk-of-extinction/>

³ See Figures 2 and 3, pp. 16-17.

<https://cdn.naturalresources.wales/media/685890/interim-report-from-wlmf-subgroup-on-agricultural-pollution-final.pdf?mode=pad&rnd=13175088315000000>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/georgemonbiot/2013/may/22/britain-uplands-farming-subsidies> Monbiot's longer-form writing, including *Feral* (2013), offers a more nuanced picture.

⁵ In *Feral* which we did not read for this group, but which some members of the group had already read, Monbiot sees rewilding as offering a space for humans to reconnect with the natural world. The implications of reconfiguring agricultural working space as a space for visitors and a tourism-based economy are contentious.

⁶ The disconnect between humans and nature which could result from Vegan Honey or other artificially produced foodstuffs is explored by Jeremy Williams in his Earthbound blog of April 2021: <https://earthbound.report/2021/04/13/vegan-honey-and-our-relationship-with-nature/>

urban centres. Raymond Williams describes this as the conflict between two ideas of the country. On the one hand the 'selective nostalgic' (227) version of country life which understands "the country' as a place of rest, withdrawal, alternative enjoyment and consumption, for those whose first livelihood is elsewhere' (228). On the other, the countryside is a place of work and production and 'producers ... dismiss most objections [to their working practices] as sentimental or at best marginal'. Monbiot's critique of farmers spied from the sea neatly replicates this binary between leisure and productivity. 'From my kayak in Cardigan Bay I have often watched a sight that Neolithic fishermen would have witnessed: towers of smoke rising from the hills as the farmers burn tracts of gorse and trees in order to claim more public money.'⁷

Both Williams and Monbiot identify financial structures as of fundamental importance: while Monbiot caricatures farmers as greedy environmental vandals responding to the prompts of agricultural subsidies, Williams identifies 'agricultural finance' (228) as fuelling 'intensive production' (230): 'The huge involvement of agriculture in high-interest debt and credit is usually a truer cause of the most frantic attempts to increase production at any environmental cost than the causes more often assigned, of merely cruel or greedy exploitation.' (230) For Williams (writing in 1984), the recent entry into the CAP seemed welcome though there are few who would defend its unintended environmental consequences today. What we were interested in exploring in our discussion was not the ins and outs of economics, finance and subsidy, but the way in which the rewilding debate has been framed. In this context, Raymond Williams offers pertinent points about polarisation, nostalgia and the location of people in relation to their 'first livelihoods'. Where does a rural dweller (or visitor) make their primary living? Asking this question allows us to reframe a relationship to the country in revealing economic terms.

George Monbiot's eloquent, ecologically and politically driven polemic has provoked predictable umbrage. A range of commentators have reached for colonial or imperial frames in criticising his approach, and though sympathetic to his environmentalism most of the group identified an arrogance in his miscalculated intervention in a country he for a time called home. Nick Fenwick (Farmers Union of Wales) accused Monbiot of peddling English Romantic myths of a wild Wales, claiming that 'Imposing 'wilding' agenda in the Cambrians is akin to ripping out the living, beating heart of the Welsh language and culture'. This visceral response needs to be understood in the wider context of the cultural politics of Wales over the last century or more.

A protest sign (pictured in December 2020) erected just south of Machynlleth declares 'Na i Ailwyltuo, No to Rewilding' and includes the now iconic slogan 'Cofiwch Dryweryn'. It thus marks the rewilding agenda as a threat to survival. 'Cofiwch Dryweryn' exhorts us to 'Remember Tryweryn', the name of the valley in which the rural Welsh-speaking community of Capel Ceyln was evicted and dispersed to make way for a reservoir to supply the needs of industrial Liverpool. Long a symbol of the political and cultural suppression of Welsh-speaking Wales, 'Cofiwch Dryweryn' became the focus of a new wave of protest and popular action when the iconic graffito in red and white (originally daubed on the remains of cottage south of Aberystwyth by Meic Stephens in the early 1960s) was vandalised in 2019. The response was a spontaneous reproduction of the slogan across Wales,⁸ expanding a longstanding practice of painting nationalist and anti-colonial slogans in rural locations: Nid yw Cymru Ar Werth (Wales is not for sale) and so on. One member of the group responded to the sign as an example of a misguided anti-science 'distraction', akin to the anti-vaxx movement, which denies the urgency of climate and biodiversity crisis. Another saw it as part of a

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/georgemonbiot/2013/may/22/britain-uplands-farming-subsidies>

⁸ Dr David Howell (University of Gloucestershire) created the Mapping Cofiwch Dryweryn project at: https://www.google.co.uk/maps/d/viewer?mid=1huvM2jU-1IEF0u0mGCdrmiA4_scQtUMC&hl=en_GB&usp=sharing

long tradition of popular protest in Wales, from the Rebecca Riots and Chartism to the Welsh-language campaigns of the 1960s.

Both of these responses frame the debate in terms of survival: survival in the context of climate and biodiversity catastrophe on the one hand and cultural and linguistic survival which could be framed in terms of the 'green socialism' advocated by Williams in 1984 or in terms of 'climate justice'. In a discussion of Margaret Atwood's eco-writing within the context of the Anthropocene, Dr Hope Jennings draws attention to the problem of 'discussions about the Anthropocene' in which

there seems to be no questioning of which humans are largely responsible for carbon emissions and which humans are more impacted by the consequences of extreme climate change... There rarely seems to be any attempt to reject imperialist or masculinist views of humans in relationship to their environments, persisting instead with the binary viewpoint that humans are separate from nature of that nature is something to be dominated, controlled and exploited.

She argues that 'anthropocene feminism... works as an intervention, disrupting underlying imperialist, humanist, and racist assumptions about the Anthropocene from perspectives that are focused on the need for environmental, indigenous and social justice.'

Where Welsh-speaking farmers living on marginal ancestral lands (not necessarily the majority of farmers but an important paradigm in the debate) may be positioned in relation to these questions of contribution, impact, precarity and social justice is far from clear. What the interview with Hope Jennings contributes in this context is a reminder of the dangers of uncoupling humans from the natural world in environmentalist or other responses to the Anthropocene (e.g. geoengineering) in a manner which replicates the flawed imperialist-masculinist-extractive ideologies which contributed to the climate and biodiversity in the first place. In addressing indigeneity, gender and imperialism the Hope Jennings interview also makes visible the absence of gender in the other articles studied by the group and perhaps invites us to consider a larger frame in which to approach issues of power and cultural precarity.

The accusations of imperialism or 'eco-colonialism' (emptying the land, dictating its use, constructing the countryside as a place of retreat from industrial ills) levelled at George Monbiot and some rewilding groups are both persuasive and troubling. Persuasive because even a brief analysis of the language, imagery and assumptions reveal a lack of interest and consideration of local communities. Troubling not only because of the urgency and scale of the biodiversity and climate challenge, but also because the rejection of progressive change in Wales has often drawn on the trope of the unwanted outsider to galvanise reactionary resistance.⁹

In a 2013 article for the Guardian, written in response to the first wave of debates provoked by George Monbiot's rewilding activism, Nick Fenwick draws parallels with the wilding agenda and the displacement of indigenous population of Native Americans to create the Yellowstone National Park in 1872. (Raymond Williams identifies a parallel impetus in his angry recollection, in 1975, of a 'a young bureaucrat' recently returned from a trip to America 'describing rural mid-Wales as a

⁹ This is not to imply that all resistance that adopts anti-imperialist frames is reactionary. Resistance to detrimental London-led changes in land use (from Forestry Commission plantations, to reservoirs, to the creation of military ranges, all requiring voluntary or forced dispersal of Welsh-speaking communities) were and are persuasively framed in explicitly anti-colonial terms. See Kirsti Bohata, *Postcolonialism Revisited* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004), Andrew Webb, 'Socio-ecological Regime Change: Anglophone Welsh Literary Responses to Reservoir Construction', *International Journal of Welsh Writing in English* vol. 1 (2013), pp 19-44.

‘wilderness area’, for the outdoor relief of English cities.’¹⁰). Fenwick explicitly frames the rewilding movement in Wales as having ‘the distinct aura of plain old fashioned English colonialism – only with the quinine replaced by camomile tea’. The rejection of social and political movements, from female suffrage to gay rights, has been couched in the language of nationalism in Wales and elsewhere. The argument goes that these are unwelcome and culturally antithetical, ‘un-Welsh’ causes imported over the border (despite abundant evidence of home-grown supporters who are equally capable of using nationalist frames in support of feminist and LGBTQ causes). In invoking the tropes of immigration, however, Fenwick’s characterisation of the green movement as the province of ‘rat-race refugees’ and ‘environmental fundamentalists’ has echoes of xenophobic and Islamophobic discourse and can be seen as a calculated attempt to dismiss green activism in Wales as an undesirable import by mobilising racist stereotypes.

One frame that Fenwick does offer, however, which might provide a way to re-engage with a debate about diversification of land use and a transition to environmentally sustainable agriculture (and thus cultural and linguistic survival in the longer term, for the latter will not be possible without the former) is the characterisation of rural Wales as ‘occupied by a people whose connection with the land is deep rooted, dates back thousands of years, and is embedded in their language and culture.’

The framing of Welsh farmers as stewards of the land and the language may be an oversimplification which is used by NFU and others to resist ecological and environmentally-driven change, but it might also be a way to explore how these roles might evolve in the context of rewilding and with reference to land-practices and cultural connections rooted in both past practice (e.g. mixed farming or agroforestry) as well as looking at models of rewilding which aim to generate novel and self-perpetuating habitats in which large herbivores (or other megafauna) have a role.

Of course, the country is not only defined by agriculture – in economic, social or cultural terms – a view Williams calls a ‘misleading simple identification’. In part the dominance of agriculture in the rural economy and cultural imagination has comparatively recent historical roots; it is the result of the industrial revolution and depopulation of the countryside leaving it over-reliant and specialised in food production. By the time Williams was writing from his old home in the Black Mountains in the 1980s – and surely even more so now – there was evidence of a more diverse population ‘returning’ to rural communities and giving rise to the possibility of local autonomy. This diversification of rural economies and a concomitant focus on the local goes hand in hand with Williams’s argument that the politically dominant concept of efficiency (as a narrow measure of extractive profit) must be transformed. He proposes a new measure of ‘efficiency [as] the production of a stable economy, an equitable society and a fertile world’.¹¹

The tension between insider and outsider views of the rural (and their ability to be mobilised by progressive and reactionary forces alike) which are implicitly or explicitly addressed across the texts and images we read is given its most nuanced treatment in Raymond Williams’s novel *Border Country* (1960). In the two paragraphs we looked at together, Williams presents two ways of seeing the valley in which Matthew Price, the quasi-autobiographical protagonist, has grown up. One is static, the other involves movement and change. The former, is the view of the ‘visitor’ and ‘the guide book’, it

¹⁰ Raymond Williams, ‘Welsh Culture’, in *Who Speaks for Wales* ed. Daniel G. Williams. (University of Wales Press, 2003), p. 6.

¹¹ Williams introduces the term livelihood (which has elements of the modern term wellbeing): ‘It is important to avoid a crude contrast between ‘nature’ and ‘production’, and to see the practical terms of the idea which should supersede both: the idea of ‘livelihood’ within, a better understood physical world and all truly necessary physical processes.’ (Williams, ‘Between Country and City’, p. 237.)

is a 'landscape or a view'¹² and it is empty of people. The second perspective, which Matthew can see when he returns home, foregrounds work, community and change (over seasons, years, centuries, millennia). Significantly, *work* is the basis of the interactions between people and between people and land. In its listing of farm names, mostly Welsh some English, and their connection with family names, Williams recognises the emotional and linguistic ties of community (while also registering the decline of Welsh in this border territory). Matthew realises the static, nostalgic, images he had retained in his memory when away had robbed the valley of the human impact of work and idea of work as a process which has effected change on the landscape over thousands of years.

Allowing some of that work to be undone is sure to feel painful to those who have laboured on it. Stepping back and allowing non-human systems to work independently or alongside lesser human interventions will require a radical reframing of some elements of farming, but perhaps not so much from the idea of the farmer as steward or custodian with a long family history of connection to the land. We may need to step back and to allow some parts of our country to be free of human work, or perhaps the practice of a different kind of work – the work of providing the conditions for new self-supporting ecologies.

In *Rewilding* the authors acknowledge the sometimes irreconcilable vested interests which clash in the process of creating new 'wilded' habitats. They advocate strongly for pragmatism in the design of rewilding, arguing that 'any form of progressive change requires adjustments in attitudes, cultural frames and institutional practices' with success based on 'paying attention to ecological and cultural history and local political and economic realities and *seeking coalitions to shape rewilding futures*'.¹³ It is not clear that we can simply or easily reconcile the different perspectives briefly explored above: Jepson and Blythe say that 'it goes without saying that the practice of protecting and restoring nature involves trade-offs, winners and losers' (103). Yet the urgency of the climate crisis and the loss of biodiversity, the need to support and renew Cymraeg, and the need for social justice in any climate and biodiversity plan, requires us to work towards change.

¹² Raymond Williams *Border Country*, Library of Wales edition (Cardigan: Parthian, 2005), p. 89.

¹³ Jepson and Blythe, *Rewilding*, pp. 122-23.