

The Word-Hoard

This is a book about the power of language – strong style, single words – to shape our sense of place. It is a field guide to literature I love, and it is a word-hoard of the astonishing lexis for landscape that exists in the comprision of islands, rivers, strands, fells, lochs, cities, towns, corries, hedgerows, fields and edgelands uneasily known as the British Isles. The ten following chapters explore writing so fierce in its focus that it can change the vision of its readers for good, in both senses. Their nine glossaries gather thousands of words from dozens of languages and dialects for specific aspects of landscape, nature and weather. The writers collected here come from Essex to the Cairngorms, Connemara to Northumbria and Suffolk to Surbiton. The words collected here come from Unst to the Lizard, from Pembrokeshire to Norfolk; from Norn and Old English, Anglo-Romani, Cornish, Welsh, Irish, Gaelic, the Orca-dian, Shetlandic and Doric dialects of Scots, and numerous regional versions of English, through to the last vestiges of living Norman still spoken on the Channel Islands.

Landmarks has been years in the making. For as long as I can remember, I have been drawn to the work of writers who use words exactly and exactingly when describing landscape and natural life. ‘The hardest thing of all to see is what is really there,’ wrote J. A. Baker in *The Peregrine* (1967), a book that brilliantly shows how such

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seeing might occur in language, written as it is in prose that has ‘the quivering intensity of an arrow thudding into a tree’. And for over a decade I have been collecting place-words as I have found them: gleaned singly from conversations, correspondences or books, and jotted down in journals or on slips of paper. Now and then I have hit buried treasure in the form of vernacular dictionaries or extraordinary people – troves that have held gleaming handfuls of coinages. The word-lists of *Landmarks* have their origin in one such trove, turned up on the moors of the Outer Hebridean island of Lewis in 2007. There, as you will read in the next chapter, I was shown a ‘Peat Glossary’: a list of the hundreds of Gaelic terms for the moorland that stretches over much of Lewis’s interior. The glossary had been compiled by Hebridean friends of mine through archival research and oral history. Some of the language it recorded was still spoken – but much had fallen into disuse. The remarkable referential exactitude of that glossary, and the poetry of so many of its terms, set my head a-whirr with words.

Although I knew Gaelic to be richly responsive to the sites in which it was spoken, it was my guess that other tongues in these islands also possessed wealths of words for features of place – words that together constituted a vast vanished, or vanishing, language for landscape. It seemed to me then that although we have our compendia of flora, fauna, birds, reptiles and insects, we lack a *Terra Britannica*, as it were: a gathering of terms for the land and its specificities – terms used by fishermen, farmers, sailors, scientists, crofters, mountaineers, soldiers, shepherds, walkers and unrecorded ordinary others for whom specialized ways of indicating aspects of place have been vital to everyday practice and perception. It seemed, too, that it might be worthwhile assembling some of this fine-grained

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and fabulously diverse vocabulary, and releasing its poetry back into imaginative circulation.

The same year I first saw the Peat Glossary, a new edition of the *Oxford Junior Dictionary* was published. A sharp-eyed reader noticed that there had been a culling of words concerning nature. Under pressure, Oxford University Press revealed a list of the entries it no longer felt to be relevant to a modern-day childhood. The deletions included *acorn, adder, ash, beech, bluebell, buttercup, catkin, conker, cowslip, cygnet, dandelion, fern, hazel, heather, heron, ivy, kingfisher, lark, mistletoe, nectar, newt, otter, pasture* and *willow*. The words introduced to the new edition included *attachment, block-graph, blog, broadband, bullet-point, celebrity, chatroom, committee, cut-and-paste, MP3 player* and *voice-mail*.

When Vineeta Gupta, then head of children's dictionaries at OUP, was asked why the decision had been taken to delete those 'nature words', she explained that the dictionary needed to reflect the consensus experience of modern-day childhood. 'When you look back at older versions of dictionaries, there were lots of examples of flowers for instance,' said Gupta; 'that was because many children lived in semi-rural environments and saw the seasons. Nowadays, the environment has changed.' There is a realism to her response – but also an alarming acceptance of the idea that children might no longer see the seasons, or that the rural environment might be so unproblematically disposable.

The substitutions made in the dictionary – the outdoor and the natural being displaced by the indoor and the virtual – are a small but significant symptom of the simulated life we increasingly live. Children are now (and valuably) adept ecologists of the technoscape, with numerous terms for file types but few for different trees and creatures. For *blackberry*, read *BlackBerry*. A basic literacy

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of landscape is falling away up and down the ages. A common language – a language *of* the commons – is getting rarer. And what is lost along with this literacy is something precious: a kind of word magic, the power that certain terms possess to enchant our relations with nature and place. As the writer Henry Porter observed, the OUP deletions removed the ‘euphonious vocabulary of the natural world – words which do not simply label an object or action but in some mysterious and beautiful way become part of it’.

Landmarks is a celebration and defence of such language. Over the years, and especially over the past two years, thousands of place-terms have reached me. They have come by letter, email and telephone, scribbled on postcards or yellowed pre-war foolscap, transcribed from cassette recordings of Suffolk longshoremen made half a century ago, or taken from hand-drawn maps of hill country and coastline, and delved with delight from lexicons and archives around the country and the Web. I have had such pleasure meeting them, these words: migrant birds, arriving from distant places with story and metaphor caught in their feathers; or strangers coming into the home, stamping the snow from their feet, fresh from the blizzard and a long journey.

Many of these terms have mingled oddness and familiarity in the manner that Freud calls uncanny: peculiar in their particularity, but recognizable in that they name something conceivable, if not instantly locatable. *Ammil* is a Devon term meaning ‘the sparkle of morning sunlight through hoar-frost’, a beautifully exact word for a fugitive phenomenon I have several times seen but never before been able to name. Shetlandic has a word, *af’rug*, for ‘the reflex of a wave after it has struck the shore’; another, *pirr*, meaning ‘a light breath of wind, such as will make a cat’s paw on the water’; and another, *klett*, for ‘a low-lying earth-fast rock on the seashore’. On

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Exmoor, *zwer* is the onomatopoeic term for the sound made by a covey of partridges taking flight. *Smeuse* is a Sussex dialect noun for ‘the gap in the base of a hedge made by the regular passage of a small animal’; now I know the word *smeuse*, I will notice these signs of creaturely movement more often.

Most fascinating to me are those terms for which no counterpart of comparable concision exists in another language. Such scalpel-sharp words are untranslatable without remainder. The need for precise discrimination of this kind has occurred most often where landscape is the venue of work. The Icelandic novelist Jón Kalman Stefánsson writes of fishermen speaking ‘coddish’ far out into the North Atlantic; the miners working the Great Northern Coalfield in England’s north-east developed a dialect known as ‘Pitmatical’ or ‘yakka’, so dense it proved incomprehensible to Victorian parliamentary commissioners seeking to improve conditions in the mines in the 1840s. The name ‘Pitmatical’ was originally chosen to echo ‘mathematical’, and thereby emphasize the craft and skilful precision of the colliers. Such super-specific argots are born of lives lived long – and laboured hard – on land and at sea. The terms they contain allow us glimpses through other eyes, permit brief access to distant habits of perception. The poet Norman MacCaig commended the ‘seagull voice’ of his Aunt Julia, who lived her long life on the Isle of Harris, so embedded in her terrain that she came to think *with* and speak *in* its creatures and climate.

As well as these untranslatable terms, I have gathered synonyms – especially those that bring new energies to familiar phenomena. The variant English terms for ‘icicle’ – *aquabob* (Kent), *clinkerbell* and *daggler* (Wessex), *cancervell* (Exmoor), *ickle* (Yorkshire), *tankle* (Durham), *shuckle* (Cumbria) – form a tinkling poem of their own. In Northamptonshire dialect ‘to thaw’ is *to ungive*. The beauty of this

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variant I find hard to articulate, but it surely has to do with the paradox of thaw figured as restraint or retention, and the wintry notion that cold, frost and snow might themselves be a form of gift – an addition to the landscape that will in time be subtracted by warmth.

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‘Language is fossil poetry,’ wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson in 1844, ‘[a]s the limestone of the continent consists of infinite masses of the shells of animalcules, so language is made up of images, or tropes, which now, in their secondary use, have long ceased to remind us of their poetic origin.’ Emerson, as essayist, sought to reverse this petrification and restore the ‘poetic origin’ of words, thereby revealing the originary role of ‘nature’ in language. Considering the verb *to consider*, he reminds us that it comes from the Latin *con-siderare*, and thus carries a meaning of ‘to study or see with the stars’. Etymology illuminates – a mundane verb is suddenly starlit. Many of the terms in the glossaries that follow seem, at least to me, as yet unpetrified and still vivid with poetry. They function as topograms – tiny poems that conjure scenes. *Blinter* is a northern Scots word meaning ‘a cold dazzle’, connoting especially ‘the radiance of winter stars on a clear night’, or ‘ice-splinters catching low light’. Instantly the word opens prospects: walking sunwards through snow late on a midwinter day, with the wind shifting spindrift into the air such that the ice-dust acts as a prismatic mist, refracting sunshine into its pale and separate colours; or out on a crisp November night in a city garden, with the lit windows of houses and the orange glow of street light around, while the stars *blinter* above in the cold high air.

By no means are all place-words poetic or innocent. Take the familiar word *forest*, which can designate not a wooded region, but

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an area of land set aside for deer-hunting – as those who have walked through the treeless ‘forests’ of Fisherfield, Applecross and Corroun in the Highlands of Scotland will know. *Forest* – like numerous wood-words – is complicatedly tangled up in political histories of access and landownership. Nature is not now, nor has ever been, a pure category. We inhabit a post-pastoral terrain, full of modification and compromise: this is why the glossaries contain plenty of unnatural language, such as terms from coastal sea-defences (*pillbox*, *bulwark*, *rock-armour*) that register threats both from the sea and of the sea, or *soft estate*, the Highways Agency term for those natural habitats that exist along the verges of motorways and trunk roads.

Some of the words collected here are eldritch, acknowledging a sense of our landscapes not as settled but as unsettling – the terror in the terroir, the spectred isle. Some are funny, and some ripely rude. Before beginning this work, I would not have guessed at the existence of quite so many terms for animal dung, from *crottle* (a foresters’ term for hare excrement) to *doofers* (Scots for horse shit) to the expressive *ujller* (Shetlandic for the ‘unctuous filth that runs from a dunghill’) and *turdstool* (West Country for a very substantial cowpat). Nor did I know that a dialect name for the kestrel, alongside such felicities as *windhover* and *bell-hawk*, is *wind-fucker*. Once learnt, never forgotten – it is hard now not to see in the pose of the hovering kestrel a certain lustful quiver. Often I have been reminded of Douglas Adams and John Lloyd’s genius catalogue of nonce words, *The Meaning of Liff* (1983), in which British place-names are used as nouns for the ‘hundreds of common experiences, feelings, situations and even objects which we all know and recognize, but for which no words exist’. Thus ‘*Kimmeridge* (n.): The light breeze which blows through your armpit hair when you are stretched out sunbathing’; or ‘*Glassel* (n.): A seaside pebble which was shiny and

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interesting when wet, and which is now a lump of rock, but which children nevertheless insist on filling their suitcases with after a holiday'. When I mentioned to my then seven-year-old son that there was no word for the shining hump of water that rises above a submerged boulder in a stream, he quickly suggested *currentbum*.

The makers and users of the words in the glossaries range from such canonical writers as Gerard Manley Hopkins and John Clare, through to the anonymous workers, watchers and farmers who have added to the prosperity of place-language in these islands over the millennia. This prosperity is by no means the exclusive product of literacy or high culture. Margaret Gelling, the great scholar of English place-names, notes that 'the Anglo-Saxon peasant farmer' had a vast range of words for 'hill' and 'valley', and that the Anglo-Saxons generally were 'a people in possession of a vast and subtle topographical vocabulary', with little tolerance for synonyms. The huge richness of place-language is also, of course, a function of miscellany. The culture of these islands has been formed by waves of invasion, settlement and immigration, and for this reason the lexicons seek to reflect the diversity of languages of arrival, as well as those of staying put. You will find terms here from Old English and Norn; harder to find and reach have been the place-words used by modern minority communities to describe aspects of, say, the Peak District tors and moors or the estuaries of Essex. 'British Bengalis, Gujaratis and Punjabis often . . . move from one language to another,' the poet Debjani Chatterjee told me, 'and frequently sprinkle in words from one when speaking the other. So we may be speaking in Bengali but referring to certain landscape features in English – and vice versa. But,' she added, 'it is a slow creeping process for such vocabulary to get established.' Because of this slow creep, among other reasons, these glossaries do not (could never)

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aspire to completion. They contain only a fraction of an impossible whole. They are intended not as closed archives but glorious gallimaufries, relishing the awesome range and vigour of place-languages in this archipelago, and the taste of their words on the tongue.

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In *The History of the Countryside* (1986), the great botanist Oliver Rackham describes four ways in which ‘landscape is lost’: through the loss of beauty, the loss of freedom, the loss of wildlife and vegetation, and the loss of meaning. I admire the way that aesthetics, human experience, ecology and semantics are given parity in his list. Of these losses the last is hardest to measure. But it is clear that there is now less need to know in detail the terrains beyond our towns and cities, unless our relationships with them are in some way professionally or recreationally specialized.

It is my hope (but not my presumption) that the words grouped here might in small measure invigorate our contemporary language for landscape. I do not, of course, believe that these words will magically summon us into a pure realm of harmony and communion with nature. Rather that they might offer a vocabulary which is ‘convivial’ as the philosopher Ivan Illich intended the word – meaning enriching of life, stimulating to the imagination and ‘encouraging creative relations between people, and people and nature’. And, perhaps, that the vibrancy of perception evoked in these glossaries may irrigate the dry meta-languages of modern policy-making (the DEFRA glossary, for instance, which offers such tautological aridities as ‘*Land use*: the use to which a piece of land is put’). For there is no single mountain language, but a range of mountain languages; no one coastal language, but a fractal of coastal languages; no lone

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tree language, but a forest of tree languages. To celebrate the lexis of landscape is not nostalgic, but urgent. ‘People *exploit* what they have merely concluded to be of value, but they *defend* what they love,’ writes the American essayist and farmer Wendell Berry, ‘and to defend what we love we need a particularizing language, for we love what we particularly know.’

I am wary of the dangers of fetishizing dialect and archaism – all that *mollocking* and *sukebinding* Stella Gibbons spoofed so brilliantly in *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932). Wary, too, of being seen to advocate a tyranny of the nominal – a taxonomic need to point and name, with the intent of citing and owning – when in fact I perceive no opposition between precision and mystery, or between naming and not-knowing. There are experiences of landscape that will always resist articulation, and of which words offer only a remote echo – or to which silence is by far the best response. Nature does not name itself. Granite does not self-identify as igneous. Light has no grammar. Language is always late for its subject. Sometimes on the top of a mountain I just say, ‘Wow.’

But we are and always have been name-callers, christeners. Words are grained into our landscapes, and landscapes grained into our words. ‘Every language is an old-growth forest of the mind,’ in Wade Davis’s memorable phrase. We see in words: in webs of words, wefts of words, woods of words. The roots of individual words reach out and intermesh, their stems lean and criss-cross, and their outgrowths branch and clasp.

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‘I want my writing to bring people not just to think of “trees” as they mostly do now,’ wrote Roger Deakin in a notebook that was

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discovered after his early death, 'but of each individual tree, and each kind of tree.' John Muir, spending his first summer working as a shepherd among the pines of the Sierra Nevada in California, reflected in his journal that 'Every tree calls for special admiration. I have been making many sketches and regret that I cannot draw every needle.' The chapters of *Landmarks* all concern writers who are particularizers, and who seek in some way to 'draw every needle'. Deakin, Muir, Baker, Nan Shepherd, Jacquetta Hawkes, Richard Skelton, Autumn Richardson, Peter Davidson, Barry Lopez, Richard Jefferies: all have sought, in Emerson's phrase, to 'pierce . . . rotten diction and fasten words again to visible things'. All have written with committing intensity about their chosen territories. And for all of them, to use language well is to use it particularly: precision of utterance as both a form of lyricism and a species of attention.

Before you become a writer you must first become a reader. Every hour spent reading is an hour spent learning to write; this continues to be true throughout a writer's life. *The Living Mountain*, *Waterlog*, *The Peregrine*, *Arctic Dreams*, *My First Summer in the Sierra*: these are among the books that have taught me to write, but also the books that have taught me to see. In that respect, *Landmarks* is a record of my own pupillage, if the word may be allowed to carry its senses both of 'tuition' and (in that ocular flicker) of 'gaining vision'. Thus the book is filled with noticers and noticing. 'The surface of the ground, so dull and forbidding at first sight,' wrote Muir of the Sierra Nevada, in fact 'shines and sparkles with crystals: mica, hornblende, feldspar, quartz, tourmaline . . . the radiance in some places is so great as to be fairly dazzling'. How typical of Muir to see dazzle where most would see dullness! Again and again in the chapters that follow you will encounter similar acts of 'dazzling' perception: Finlay MacLeod and Anne Campbell detailing the intricacies of the

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Lewisian moor; Shepherd finding a micro-forest of lichens and heathers on the Cairngorm plateau; Baker scrying a skyful of birds; and Richard Jefferies pacing out a humble roadside verge in a London suburb, counting off sixty different wild flowers, from agrimony to yellow vetch.

Books, like landscapes, leave their marks in us. Sometimes these traces are so faint as to be imperceptible – tiny shifts in the weather of the spirit that do not register on the usual instruments. Mostly, these marks are temporary: we close a book, and for the next hour or two the world seems oddly brighter at its edges; or we are moved to a kindness or a meanness that would otherwise have gone unexpressed. Certain books, though, like certain landscapes, stay with us even when we have left them, changing not just our weathers but our climates. The word *landmark* is from the Old English *landmearc*, meaning ‘an object in the landscape which, by its conspicuousness, serves as a guide in the direction of one’s course’. John Smith, writing in his 1627 *Sea Grammar*, gives us this definition: ‘A Land-marke is any Mountaine, Rocke, Church, Wind-mill or the like, that the Pilot can now by comparing one by another see how they beare by the compasse.’ Strong books and strong words can be landmarks in Smith’s sense – offering us a means both of establishing our location and of knowing how we ‘beare by the compasse’. Taken in sum, the chapters of *Landmarks* explore how reading can change minds, revise behaviour and shape perception. All of the writers here have altered their readers in some way. Some of these alterations are conspicuous and public: Muir’s essays convinced Theodore Roosevelt of the need to protect Yosemite and its sequoias, and massively to extend the National Park regions of America; Deakin’s *Waterlog* revolutionized open-water swimming in twenty-first-century Britain. Others are private and unmappable, manifesting in ways that are unmistakable

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to experience, but difficult to express – leaving our attention re-focused, our sight freshly scintillated.

Strange events occurred in the course of my travels for *Landmarks* – convergences that pressed at the limits of coincidence and tended to the eerie. You will read about them here: the discovery of the tunnel of swords and axes in Cumbria; the appearance of the Cambridge peregrines (first at sillion, then at sill); the experience of walking *into* the pages of Nan Shepherd's *The Living Mountain* in the Cairngorms; the widening ripples of a forgotten word, found in a folder in Suffolk that had been left behind by a friend who had died; and then the discovery – told in the Postscript – on the day before I finished *Landmarks* that its originating dream had, almost, come true. In all of these incidents, life and language collapsed curiously into one another. I have tried to account for these collapses, but such events – like many of the subjects of this book – are often best represented not by proposition but by pattern, such that unexpected constellations of relation light up. Metamorphosis and shape-shifting, magnification, miniaturization, cabinets of curiosity, crystallization, hollows and dens, archives, wonder, views from above: these are among the images and tropes that recur. The chapters here do not together tell the story of a single journey or quest, but all are fascinated by the same questions concerning the mutual relations of place, language and spirit – how we landmark, and how we are landmarked.

I have come to understand that although place-words are being lost, they are also being created. Nature is dynamic, and so is language. Loanwords from Chinese, Urdu, Korean, Portuguese and Yiddish are right now being used to describe the landscapes of Britain and Ireland; portmanteaus and neologisms are constantly in manufacture. As I travelled I met new words as well as salvaging old

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ones: a painter in the Hebrides who used *landskein* to refer to the braid of blue horizon lines in hill country on a hazy day; a five-year-old girl who concocted *honeyfur* to describe the soft seeds of grasses held in the fingers. When Clare and Hopkins could not find words for natural phenomena, they just made them up: *sutering* for the cranky action of a rising heron (Clare), *wolfsnow* for a dangerous sea-blizzard, and *slogger* for the sucking sound made by waves against a ship's side (both Hopkins). John Constable invented the verb *to sky*, meaning 'to lie on one's back and study the clouds'. We have forgotten 10,000 words for our landscapes, but we will make 10,000 more, given time. This is why *Landmarks* moves over its course from the peat-deep word-hoard of Hebridean Gaelic, through to the fresh-minted terms and stories of young children at play on the outskirts of a Cambridgeshire town. And this is why the final glossary of the book is left blank, for you to fill in – there to hold the place-words that have yet to be coined.