

Introduction

14 July 1789 goes down in history as the day of the storming of the Bastille, the dramatic fall of which would mark the beginning of the French Revolution and the end of the *ancien régime*. Meanwhile, on the other side of the Channel in rural Hampshire, the genial parson-naturalist Gilbert White was busy tending to his orchards. ‘Benham skims the horse-fields’, he cheerily notes in his journal for 14 July. ‘Rasps come in: not well flavoured. On this day a woman brought me two eggs of a fern-owl or eve-jarr, which she found on the verge of the hanger to the left of the hermitage, under a beechen shrubb.’¹ Robert McCrum observes that there could hardly be a greater contrast between what he questionably calls ‘the resilient stability of English country life’, as immortalised in White’s classic study *The Natural History of Selborne* (first published in that revolutionary year), and ‘the bloody metropolitan dramas of France’.² And yet White was also a revolutionary in his own way, a ‘pioneer ecologist’ whose work would lay lasting foundations for the empirical study of the natural world.³ (A few decades later, McCrum notes, Charles Darwin would grow up with White’s *Antiquities of Selborne* by his side.)

How White and the *Natural History* are seen has come in turn to shape perceptions of British nature writing. Was White an unassuming chronicler of English country ways, or was he, as his biographer Richard Mabey describes him, a complex modern figure, struggling to ‘reconcile [his] love of nature with an enjoyment of the stimulation of urban life’?⁴ To what extent was his sense of the stability of the natural world contradicted by his

¹ Gilbert White, ‘July 14th, 1789’, *The Natural History of Selborne: Journals of Gilbert White*, nathistoryofselborne.com/1789/07/14 (accessed 10 October 2020).

² Robert McCrum, ‘100 Best Nonfiction Books: No 80 – *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne* by Gilbert White’, *Guardian*, 14 August 2017, www.theguardian.com/books/2017/aug/14/100-greatest-non-fiction-books-all-time-natural-history-and-antiquities-of-selborne-gilbert-white (accessed 12 December 2020).

³ *Ibid.* ⁴ Richard Mabey, *Gilbert White* (London: Ebury Press, 1986), p. 3.

awareness of its capacity for change, both through human intervention and planetary forces, such as the Laki volcanic eruption of 1783? How did his nature writings reflect, whether consciously or not, the politics of landownership and usage in late eighteenth-century Britain? Is the *Natural History* no more than a well-written example of an occasional literary form – the English country diary – or is it an undisputed classic of English literature? And why does it continue to be valued, long after the countryside of which its author writes has irrevocably altered? Is reading White and similar texts from the perspective of modernity in ‘one of the most nature depleted countries in the world’ merely an exercise in escapism?⁵

This last question is a particularly important one for this study. Despite the remarkable efforts of many organisations and individuals, British nature is in a parlous state.⁶ And yet nature writing flourishes as never before; it seems to speak to something important within the national psyche. Richard Mabey describes *The Natural History of Selborne* as ‘part of that curious concoction of ideas and artefacts which are seen as somehow defining “the English way of life”’.⁷ Another semi-mythical English figure, Sir David Attenborough, writes that ‘the British are famous – perhaps even notorious – for their devotion to wildlife’.⁸ He continues as follows:

[T]he passion for the natural world, which can so easily become an obsession, is still widespread through British society. It leads the richest and the poorest, the humblest and the noblest, to stand for hours up to their waists in chilling salt marshes watching wildfowl, to tramp for miles across bleak moorlands just to glimpse a rare flower in bloom, to spend night after night counting birds as they fly across the face of the moon.⁹

Notwithstanding Attenborough’s conflation of Englishness and Britishness – some distinctions between which are discussed later in this book – the connection is clear to a proudly amateur natural-historical tradition that has come over time to be associated, not just with the national sensibility, but with a combination of the enthusiasm and stoicism that are themselves considered features of English country life. There is a contradiction here. Indeed, the British ‘devotion to wildlife’ may be

⁵ www.wwf.org.uk/future-of-UK-nature (accessed 23 October 2020).

⁶ nbn.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/State-of-Nature-2019-UK-full-report.pdf (accessed 23 October 2020).

⁷ Mabey, *Gilbert White*, p. 6.

⁸ David Attenborough, quoted in Christopher Parsons, *True to Nature* (Sparkford: Patrick Stephens Ltd, 1982), p. 7.

⁹ *Ibid.*

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a relatively recent invention, for it exists alongside a dark history of massive and deliberate wildlife extermination.¹⁰ Times have changed, but valuable ecosystems are still often seen as acceptable collateral damage in the pursuit of modernisation: consider, for example, the recent destruction of ancient woodlands for the development of the HS2 railway.¹¹

Nature writers and ecocritics tend to see this apparent indifference or even hostility to nature as a kind of false consciousness that might be cured through reading: a view perhaps best represented in the influential work of Jonathan Bate.¹² Here, British nature writing acts to reconnect the reader to an increasingly disenchanting world, subject both to the ravages of industrialised society and to the alienating features of modern life. Writing of this kind takes its readers on a journey of discovery, one in which their sensory perceptions of and reactions to their immediate natural surroundings are enhanced. Writing of this kind is, as Bate might put it, *poetical* rather than *political* insofar as it expresses and itself encourages a lyrical apprehension of mostly familiar natural phenomena which produces both pleasure and wonder: pleasure and wonder that are merely increased with greater scientific understanding, turning nature writing into a cross between an aesthetic primer, a biological study and a moral/spiritual guide.

This book offers a different view, based in large part on its five authors' differentiated perceptions of what marks nature writing, and British nature writing more specifically, as a *modern* form. To call British nature writing modern isn't the same thing of course as to claim that it is *modernist*. British nature writers are rarely stylistic innovators and still more rarely political firebrands, which is by no means the same thing as saying that such writing is stylistically uninteresting or apolitical. Rather, British nature writing is modern insofar as it grapples, self-consciously at times, with the contradictions embedded within the modern condition; far from being either egocentric or ecocentric – a false division at best¹³ – it struggles, against a busy backdrop of social and environmental change, to confront

¹⁰ Roger Lovegrove, *Silent Fields: The Long Decline of a Nation's Wildlife* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹¹ Julian Hoffman, *Irreplaceable: The Fight to Save Our Wild Places* (London: Penguin, 2019).

¹² See, for example, Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1991); also Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

¹³ The distinction is still routinely made: see, for example, Axel Goodbody, 'From Egocentrism to Ecocentrism: Nature and Morality in German Writing in the 1980s', in Catrin Gersdorf and Sylvia Mayer (eds.), *Nature in Literary and Cultural Studies: Transatlantic Conversations on Ecocriticism* (Amsterdam: Brill/Rodopi, 2006), pp. 393–415.

successive historical manifestations of the modern dissociated self. These struggles are both *ontological* – attempts to understand the nature of the self's relationship to the world – and *epistemological* – attempts to discover first principles that might then guide our knowledge of that relationship. And, tangled up with modernity as they are, they are also inevitably *representational*: they are attempts to find authentic, if not necessarily accurate, ways of representing this relationship, which is nothing if not conflicted, and all the more conflicted for being both intellectually committed and emotionally bound.

One of the premises of this book is that conflict lies at the heart of modern British nature writing, and that the anxieties it articulates are part and parcel of the modern condition itself. This conflict takes several different forms – between experience and representation, between alternative kinds of knowledge, between 'lay' and 'expert' understandings, between those who own land and those who do not – and, unsurprisingly, these forms take on specific local and historical inflections as well as feeding into general philosophical debates. It should probably go without saying that most of the key terms that underlie these debates – 'nature', 'natural world' and, for that matter, 'nature writing' – are themselves contested. 'Nature' has always been a troublesome term, meaning very different things to different people, while 'nature writers' are often suspicious of the category or reject it outright.¹⁴ For the purposes of this book, 'nature writing' is taken as those miscellaneous forms of writing, by no means consistent over the centuries, which have consciously sought some kind of cognitive and emotional engagement with the natural world. Our focus is on non-fictional prose, sometimes seen as the defining mode of nature writing, though some attention is given to other genres and modes as well. The reason for concentrating on prose is rather different from the one provided by recent ecocritics, notably Lawrence Buell, who emphasises what he calls nature writing's 'dual accountability' – that is, to the creative imagination as well as to the various 'real-world' objects it represents.¹⁵ This suggests a moral responsibility on the part of nature writers to say what they see and to say so as honestly as possible, but numerous filters get in the way of this, as well as the age-old problem that language effectively produces the objects it claims to represent.

¹⁴ For a good introduction to the definitional minefield, see Kate Soper, *What Is Nature? Culture, Politics and the Non-human* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 1995).

¹⁵ Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination, Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1995), p. 91.

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Similarly, Jos Smith's more recent suggestion that nature writing is a refined form of 'lyrical realism' begs several questions: not least about an apparent demand for the kind of 'fine writing' that might add stylistic lustre to standard loco-descriptive accounts.¹⁶ As seen throughout this book, much of what potentially counts as 'nature writing' directly challenges the Romantic protocols with which it is often popularly associated, though a more accurate assertion might be that these protocols effectively challenge themselves. Much in the same way, nature writing has historically tended to engage with realist modes only to contest some of the philosophical assumptions that underlie them: it is as much an interrogation as a performance of mimesis, and as much a living testament to the non-transparency of verbal language as anything else.

Such issues are firmly embedded within non-fictional prose, especially though not exclusively the essay, the explanatory function of which is always limited by the constitutive unreliability of the language it employs. Nature writing exploits this unreliability to its own advantage: for example, by offering alternative readings of or perspectives on the same natural phenomenon or socioecological event. Nor is nature writing purely descriptive, whatever that might mean; rather it offers a nested set of *narrative* framings of natural phenomena in which the (usually) retrospective account of an eyewitness – the narrator – is folded into other possible stories and other possible readings of these stories, not least those surrounding the experiential status and interpretative credentials of the narrator himself/herself. In this last sense, nature writing probably owes more to travel writing than it lets on, though the truth value of the latter is more obviously compromised. Like travel writing, it is as much about the imagining of *journeys*, both mental and physical, as about the imagining of *place*.¹⁷

To what extent these part-real, part-imagined journeys offer a commentary on the *nation* remains an open question. On one hand it seems reductive to assimilate nature writing to state-of-the-nation debates or to scan it for circumstantial evidence of national allegiance; on the other it would be wrong to dissociate it entirely from what Smith calls 'preservationist nationalism' or hook it up to an evolutionary historical narrative that makes more recent nature writing seem more progressive than it is.¹⁸

¹⁶ Jos Smith, *The New Nature Writing: Rethinking the Literature of Place* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

¹⁷ For a more detailed discussion of this, see Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan, *Tourists with Typewriters: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998).

¹⁸ Smith, *The New Nature Writing*, p. 38.

That ‘nature’ operates as an indexical sign for a certain, mostly conservative idea of *Englishness*, wrapped up in comforting myths of the countryside, seems a given, but whether this sign points more broadly to *Britain* is something else. Similarly, it would be unwise to assume that nature writing simply props up these myths, which are in any case often more regionally than nationally oriented, or to speculate on how nature writing might fit or not into a national narrative that has changed, and the countryside with it, significantly over time. Perhaps because British nature writing’s association with the less attractive forms of nationalism is potentially embarrassing, the topic has tended to be neglected by critics. For example, Smith’s valuable study is structured around the new nature writing’s complex relationships to different types of place such as the local, the wild and the archipelago, but the national is curiously absent as a category. A key problem with this absence is that it leads to a neglect of fundamentally political issues such as huge inequalities in access to nature among the British populace and the relative lack of diversity in British nature writing.¹⁹ Questions of race, class and gender are addressed throughout this book; we focus particularly on the pervasive whiteness of British nature writing in the Afterword.

One of this book’s primary tasks, therefore, is to consider what is distinctive about British nature writing and what this might say about the changing state of Britain and British cultural heritage. That nature writing is a *cultural* form seems too obvious to discuss, while it is now generally agreed that ‘nature’ is a *human* category – and one increasingly recognised as exhaustible in terms of the finite resources it represents. Current debates around the Anthropocene (the so-called Human Age) have raised the stakes on the protection of the natural world while also challenging what the ‘natural world’ might be in the first place; at their most radical, these debates have also challenged what it means to be human in what is increasingly considered a ‘post-natural’ world. Hence the ambivalent function of contemporary British nature writing as a multifaceted *heritage* form, shoring up traditional views of (say) the English countryside while recognising that these traditions, which are both symbolic and material in their implications, are reinvented over time. To suggest that British nature writing is a heritage form is not to

¹⁹ For the construction of Englishness/Britishness over time, see Robert Colls, *Identity of England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Krishan Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); David Matless, *Landscape and Englishness* (London: Reaktion, 1998); Mike Storry and Peter Childs (eds.), *British Cultural Identities*, 4th edition (London: Routledge, 2013); Sivamohan Valluvan, *The Clamour of Nationalism: Race and Nation in Twenty-First-Century Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019).

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consign it to some dim-lit nostalgic realm in which ‘nature’, however defined, has a primarily restorative or consolatory function; rather, it is to confront the social and historical changes that are part of the fabric of heritage and the various cultural industries it supports.²⁰

The charge that nature writing is inherently ‘bourgeois’ in sensibility and form is thus a perilous one to make (and a ridiculous one if it is applied across the board to *all* nature writing); likewise, nature writing’s academic wing, ecocriticism, is well placed to fend off routine accusations that, like the cultural representations it dissects, it is either politically conservative or temperamentally inclined to pseudo-scientific pronouncements about the environment already disproved elsewhere.²¹ Nature writers and/or ecocritics – so this particular argument runs – are the literary world’s *faux naïfs*, suspicious of the very biological and ecological terms they draw upon, and often given to adopt an unduly reverential attitude towards what they see, with similarly misplaced faith in the referential power of language, as the ‘natural world’.

It should already be clear that this book pushes against negative claims like these without necessarily seeking to recuperate nature writing as a utopian discourse, and without necessarily wanting to revive the nation-based ideologies, sometimes couched in terms of the fundamental differences between ‘American’ and ‘British’ traditions, around which it often revolves. This book seeks instead a grounded appreciation of the *imaginative* work done by nature writing in describing a realm of experience that can neither be fully captured in poetic language nor fully explained by ecological accounts of the tangled relationships between different material bodies, entities, worlds.²² What is needed is neither an artistically enchanted nor a scientifically disenchanting but an appropriately *historicised* understanding of how nature writing operates and of how these diverse operations change over time. More specifically, this book aims at nothing less than a transformative re-examination of the history of modern British nature writing. This is not with a view to identifying, or still less reifying,

²⁰ See, for example, Rodney Harrison, *Heritage: Critical Approaches* (London: Routledge, 2012).

²¹ A prominent example of this line of attack is Dana Phillips, *The Truth of Ecology: Nature, Culture, and Literature in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

²² More is said in this book about the implications for nature writing of so-called new materialist approaches in which nature and culture are recognised as co-constitutively intertwined. ‘Entanglement’ and ‘embodiment’ are key terms in such approaches, which may share a common vocabulary but are otherwise more differentiated than is frequently supposed. A good early example, as important for its feminist approach as for its rethinking of environmental terms, is Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

a ‘British tradition’, but rather in order to interrogate some of the critical assumptions on which British nature writing, nature in Britain and Britain itself as a national ‘imagined community’ might be said to rest.²³

Historicising Nature Writing

‘Nature writing’ is a problematic term for a study that covers more than two centuries, signifying at once a canon that authors have defined themselves in relation to (or in distinction from) and an artificial category imposed retrospectively by critics on a diverse range of texts which traverse various periods and genres. The term emerged in critical discourse at the end of the nineteenth century on both sides of the Atlantic.²⁴ While, for North American critics, ‘nature writing’ referred to the likes of Henry David Thoreau and John Burroughs, British critics applied the term first to authors such as Richard Jefferies and William Henry Hudson. In both contexts, White was invoked as a foundational influence. However, among the many things that had changed since White’s time was a new conception of literature and science as opposites of each other. This conception can be gauged from Hudson’s introductory remarks in *Nature in Downland* (1900), which dissociated the work from books of ‘purely scientific description’. Of rural Sussex, Hudson wrote, he was concerned ‘only with its smooth surface from the aesthetic point of view, and with the living garment of the downs, its animal and vegetable forms, from the point of view of the lover of nature, and, in a moderate degree, of the field naturalist’. His province, he continued, was ‘impressions of the downs – of their appearance and the feelings they evoke in us’.²⁵

The separation of science and the arts into discrete fields of knowledge, which Hudson felt compelled to acknowledge, had been long in the

²³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 2016).

²⁴ The earliest usage of the term ‘nature writing’ we have found in a British publication is in an 1894 article on Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book* (1894). See ‘*The Jungle Book*’, *Natural Science: A Monthly Review of Scientific Progress*, 5 (1894), 8–9. An 1897 letter to *The Standard* newspaper describes Jefferies as working in a tradition of ‘Nature writers’ descending from White: H. S. H. Waylen, ‘The Work of Richard Jefferies’, *The Standard* (5 February 1897), p. 4. The term seems to have taken root slightly earlier in the American context: see, for instance, ‘Literature: Three Outdoor Books’, *The Critic*, 24 (12 May 1894), 319–20, which dubs Henry David Thoreau, John Burroughs and others ‘the “nature” writers, as they are called’ (p. 319). Prior to this, Eric Lupfer notes, the American publisher Houghton, Mifflin and Company curated series of ‘Out-Door Books’ from the 1880s onwards: ‘Before Nature Writing: Houghton, Mifflin and Company and the Invention of the Outdoor Book, 1800–1900’, *Book History*, 4 (2001), 177–204.

²⁵ William Henry Hudson, *Nature in Downland*, 2nd edition (London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1900), pp. 20–1.

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making. Through the nineteenth century, natural history societies, museum curators and, latterly, university departments had catalogued Britain's botany, zoology and geology in exhaustive detail. Travel writing as an aesthetic mode focused on personal impressions came to be opposed to the plain, factual journals of scientific expeditions.²⁶ Stylised, pictorial natural history illustrations gradually gave way to schematic drawings, abstract graphs and rapid photography in specialist scientific publications.²⁷ At the end of this period, epistemic authority over nature's facts was moving increasingly into the hands of specialist technicians working in laboratories and field stations.²⁸ From this perspective, White's digressive records of observations snatched in between his clerical duties looked positively quaint. As the science populariser Grant Allen commented in his introduction to an 1887 edition of *The Natural History of Selborne*, White's book was now chiefly valuable 'as a literary monument' that embalmed 'the daily life of an amateur naturalist in the days when the positions of parson, sportsman, country gentleman, and man of science were not yet incongruous'.²⁹ The emergence of 'nature writing' as a critical category thus coincided with the professionalisation of science and the long-term polarisation of science and literature in the anglophone imagination, which culminated in C. P. Snow's mid-twentieth-century lamentation of 'the two cultures'.³⁰ The label was commensurate with this trend, designating a form of *literature* concerned with subjective aesthetic and emotional experience, in contradistinction to the objective facts and methodical inferences of science.³¹

Retrospectively categorising authors of White's time and even late into the Victorian period as nature writers thus risks anachronism. Such writers worked in contexts in which science and literature intermingled. Indeed, natural history as an activity was frequently imagined as a blend of empirical observation with aesthetic and religious experience. As Lynn Merrill notes, the discourse of natural history constructed nature's objects

²⁶ Nigel Leask, *Curiosity and the Aesthetics of Travel Writing, 1770–1840* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 6.

²⁷ Ann Shelby Blum, *Picturing Nature: American Nineteenth-Century Zoological Illustration* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 318–19.

²⁸ See Robert E. Kohler, *Landscapes and Labs: Exploring the Lab-Field Border in Biology* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Raf de Bont, *Stations in the Field: A History of Place-Based Animal Research, 1870–1930* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

²⁹ Grant Allen, 'Introduction', in Gilbert White, *The Natural History of Selborne* (London: John Lane, 1900), pp. xxvii–xl, xxxiv.

³⁰ C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

³¹ On the polarisation of the arts and the sciences into 'objective' and 'subjective' truth, see Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007).

as ‘curiosities’ to be consumed and savoured much like the objects in a connoisseur’s cabinet.³² Unlike Allen’s methodical ‘man of science’, the ‘naturalist’ was an expansive category that could include almost anyone with a passing interest in the natural world.³³ Models for this identity ranged from Alexander von Humboldt, who related his findings through emotionally charged impressionistic narrations, to Erasmus Darwin (grandfather of Charles), who mixed nature studies with poetic composition. Even Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859) remodelled nature with striking metaphors, imaginative thought experiments and a sweeping narrative of beauty and ‘grandeur’.³⁴ For these reasons, the earlier parts of this study range across a variety of genres. Writers often mixed observations of the natural world with personal memoir and meditations and interventions on diverse topics. Writing about nature frequently served as a vehicle for exploring other issues from art and religion to politics.

That audiences recognised the hybridity of such writing about nature is shown in a reviewer’s comment on Jefferies that the author ‘tells us in a discursive and half-poetical but very attractive way what he has seen. He does a great deal to teach natural history without formality. Those who will study it under him will find it only a pleasure . . . To infect a young person with this sentiment is to educate in the truest sense.’³⁵ The designation of Jefferies’ writing as ‘half-poetical’ reflected his rigorous commitment to facts, recording original data on animals’ habits and living conditions and dispelling popular myths about them. Yet, at the same time, he presented such investigations as motivated by and stimulative of pleasure and the moral-spiritual imagination.

Lawrence Buell groups such cross-genre material in the North American context under the category of ‘literary naturism’, designating ‘an interest in representation of literal nature as a substantial if not exclusive part of one’s literary project’.³⁶ Yet in Britain, prior to the end of the nineteenth century, detailed literary engagements with ‘literal nature’ were rarely so easily distinguished from other forms. While in North America, Henry

³² Lynn L. Merrill, *The Romance of Victorian Natural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. iii–vi.

³³ Ruth Barton, “Men of Science”: Language, Identity and Professionalization in the Mid-Victorian Scientific Community’, *History of Science*, 41 (2003), 73–119 (p. 103).

³⁴ See Gillian Beer, *Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); George Levine, *Darwin the Writer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

³⁵ “Nature near London.” By Richard Jefferies’, *British Quarterly Review*, 78 (July 1883), 212.

³⁶ Buell, *Environmental Imagination*, p. 431.