

Early in Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*, published 40 years ago, the bulky Sergeant Pluck with the red moustache and tufted brows asks the narrator: "Is it about a bicycle?" Indeed it is, for a bicycle is at the core of the good policeman's theory about shaping and self-shaping, about how what we do affects us and the land, and how the land affects us in return. He explains that Michael Gilheny is nearly 60 years old and has spent no less than 35 years riding his bicycle over "rocky roadsteads and up and down the hills and into deep ditches". He goes on to observe that "if it wasn't that his bicycle was stolen every Monday, he would be sure to be more than half way now". "Halfway to what?" asks the narrator. "Halfway to being a bicycle himself", said the Sergeant. People who ride too much end with their personalities mixed up with those of their bikes. The same goes for the wild.

### **The Wild Places**

By Robert Macfarlane

Granta Books  
340pp, £18.99  
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### **Wild: An Elemental Journey**

By Jay Griffiths

Hamish Hamilton  
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species are extinguished before rattling bulldozers.

At the same time as we permit these disconnections we still seem to enjoy nature. Hundreds of millions of day visits are made each year to the countryside and to urban parks in Britain. On a typical summer's evening in London's Hyde Park, 100,000 people can be found drifting through the trees and meadows. Eco-tourism is increasingly popular worldwide, as are visits to zoos. And yet physical activity levels decline, junk foods are the easy option and settlements are designed without regard for the importance of green places to our health.

But in these two books about wildness and wild places we have remarkable contributions that give good reason for reconnection. Both Robert Macfarlane and Jay Griffiths are leading lights in what appears to be a renaissance in British nature and place-

The wild shapes us, and we influence it in return. In recent years, though, it has been in full retreat in the face of rampant modern economies. Some of us have now forgotten what it is to be in wild places or to be in the presence of wild and unknowable animals. We walk less and drive more. Today's children spend half as much time outdoors as did the children of 20 years ago. Food seems to come from supermarkets rather than fields. And

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# Poignant echoes of the near and the far

writing, along with such fellow acute observers as Roger Deakin (sadly deceased), Richard Mabey, Marina Warner and Ken Worpole. These writers indicate that when we take ourselves to places we also carry personal memories, hopes and worries. Places are partly unique because of locally distinct ecologies and cultures, grown up over days and years and generations. But they are also made special by our experiences of them and our filters through which the place appears. A place of great renown can be destroyed by an argument or an intrusive phone call reminding of some distant worry. A less iconic place can become fixed for ever by the sight of a falcon falling on a wood pigeon or by swirling clouds of bats at dusk.

Jay Griffiths's elemental journal involves travel to the dense and cloying forests of the Amazon, the soundscapes of the Arctic's Ellesmere Island, the stilted communities of

the Bayo sea gypsies of Sulawesi, the fired lands of the Aboriginal communities in central Australia, and to the airless mountains of the Himalayas.

It is a disobedient book, to coin a phrase of Deakin's, full of revelation and anger about the people of these places who have lost out to the modernist machine. What is wrong with the way they live; why should they be like us? Why, too, should a largely discredited colonial project still be prosecuted in so many places? Griffiths is also breathtakingly honest about moments of connection and also of desolation. This writing invites observation of the writer in wild places made poorer by the actions of the powerful, where she herself is often alone and endangered and yet resolute.

By contrast, Macfarlane travels across the British Isles and Ireland, from Orford Ness and the Dengie Hundred in the east to Sandwood Bay and Rannoch Moor in the

far north and the Burren in western Ireland. This is a book with a particular heft, distinctly illustrated with monochrome photographs of particular stones, of sand ripples and luminous clouds and a silhouetted gull by a cliff. I fell for the trick of the map on the inside cover, thinking at first it was mythical, like those mediaeval maps surrounded by griffons and wildmen that inhabited lands beyond the known world. Here, though, our islands are twisted on their side, and beautifully illustrated by things from specific places — alder seeds, a feather, a stone, a piece of bleached driftwood.

This is a simply exquisite piece of writing, wistful, rhythmic and sublime, at times dissecting the land to leave the bare bones of geology, at others synthetic and building a picture of ecology and people that is quite wild. It is a new kind of fractal writing, every scale seeming to contain all the components of every other level. From the smallest individual stone or ripple to the whole of a landscape, Macfarlane invites participation, drawing in the reader to observe the texture of a salt marsh, or the wind of a mountain top, or the enveloping cool waters of a freshwater swim.

In the 1950s, Guy Debord invented what he and other situationists called the discipline of psychogeography. Their approach was to drift through urban landscapes to discover the labyrinths and riddles of the somewhat unknowable city. Walking in cities that were increasingly hostile to pedestrians was seen as an act of subversion as well as of inquiry. Try walking in North American cities such as Los Angeles today, dominated by freeways and surface streets devoid of sidewalks, and you know what they meant. The method of urban wandering was called *dérive*.

What also links Griffiths and Macfarlane is their method, and this too is centred on walking to create new and unexpected meanings. But aimless drifting does not, to me, describe properly what they do. They move through landscapes with purpose and poise, exploring our relations to nature and how the wild affects us, and we it. They are perhaps better described as *chalutiers*, trawling for memories, observations, reflections and refractions. Each catch is rich and textured, challenging and poetic.

If you only had a day to read one of these books, what should you do? To paraphrase naturalist Carl Sharsmith when asked the same about visiting Yosemite National Park, I'd sit down and cry. Read both, and rediscover the wild of the near and the far. Celebrate, too, the skills of a new generation of expert storytellers.

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