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Walking in Circles: Making Stories out of Landscapes

Chodząc w kółko.
Krajobrazowe opowieści

Abstract: Using the example of her novel, *Call of The Undertow*, published in 2013, Linda Cracknell writes about how repeated walks in a new place rich with possibility resulted in a fictional narrative out of observation and sensation. She also draws on her non-fiction book, *Doubling Back: Ten Paths Trodden in Memory*, a book described as a combination of memoir, travelogue and literary meditation, inspired by re-treading former journeys on foot taken by herself or by others. Both books have involved a 'multiple gaze' across nature, social history, communities and inner lives, and share some creative methods. In both she's attracted to liminal worlds, exploration and often to women who challenge boundaries. Motion is necessary to this writer's imaginative writing, but in *Doubling Back*, the motion has itself become the subject. For the writer, the craft is similar but fiction feels a greater transformation of the material. For the reader, which kind of text provides a more visceral experience of having travelled herself, and is it necessary for the reader to be a walker in order to fully engage with accounts of journeys on foot?

Keywords: walking, nature writing, women walkers

Abstrakt: W swoim artykule autorka opisuje, w jaki sposób piesze wędrówki przyczyniły się do powstania jej powieści *Call of the Undertow* wydanej w 2013. Nawiązując również do swojej wcześniejszej książki – *Doubling Back: Ten Paths Trodden in Memory*, pokazuje, że powrót na znane już szlaki może stać się inspiracją do powstania dzieła z pogranicza „wspomnień, trawelogu i literackiej medytacji”.

W obu książkach Cracknell w złożony sposób przygląda się przyrodzie, historii społecznej, lokalnym społecznościom i ich wewnętrznym układom, przyjmując w swoich książkach metody badawcze, które wyjaśnia w niniejszym artykule. Fascynują ją światy graniczne i odkrywanie jednostkowych historii kobiet, które mają odwagę podważać zasadność granic i podziałów. Dla Cracknell, ruch jest niezbędnym elementem w procesie twórczym, a w *Doubling Back* staje się on wręcz głównym tematem jej rozważań. W „Chodząc w kółko: Krajobrazowe opowieści”, autorka zadaje pytanie o rodzaj tekstu, który pozwala na bardziej cielesne doświadczenie podróżnicze, zastanawiając się również, czy czytelnik sam powinien być wędrowcem, aby lepiej i pełniej zrozumieć relacje z odbywanych przez innych podróżników pieszych wypraw.

Słowa kluczowe: wędrówka, przyrodopisarstwo, podróżniczeki

To be honest, I am more likely to be found with a rucksack on my back than with a suitcase in hand. As a writer of fiction and creative non-fiction, there is an inextricable relationship for me between writing and walking. Since childhood I have had a need to be outdoors, to explore wherever I am and to be self-propelled. This tendency has walked me into the life of a writer and made the two inseparable.

My themes for this article will be threefold:

1. My relationship with travel on foot and the act of writing fiction and non-fiction as a way of mining stories about specific landscapes
2. Solitary women in remote places—are they in danger or ‘dangerous’?
3. The lone beleaguered woman-writer versus the ‘Lone Enraptured Male’

So what is it about walking? For a start, it seems to bring many of us much more than physical exercise, presenting us often with a release from anxiety, and loosening our minds so that we solve problems, as best expressed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau: “I can only meditate when I am walking. When I stop, I cease to think; my mind works only with my legs.”

However, for writers and artists, walking may go further than thinking and becomes a deliberate tool. It’s almost as if by avoiding the writing desk, doing something rhythmic and bodily, the mind relaxes creatively, as expressed here by Kamila Shamsie: “While I walk I think about the novel. Sentences and scenes write themselves so much more easily when you aren’t actually writing them” (2017).

Because what I write nearly always has a very close relationship to place and localised sensations and stories, I also need to walk in order to collect observations and to allow in ideas relating to specific features of the landscape. I often walk with a notebook in my hand. In the case of fiction, I might actually enter the mindset of my character as I go in order to appreciate what she would observe in her particular state of mind. This is an essential difference between the fiction and non-fiction process. Rather like a Method Actor, I become a ‘Method Writer’, aiming to experience with or *as* my character.

I will concentrate now on the writing process for my 2013 novel *Call of the Undertow* (Cracknell 2013) ('undertow' is a dangerous current under the surface of the sea that can drag a swimmer down and away from the shore). My main character, Maggie, lives in Oxford and as the novel starts has just become freelance as a cartographer, her first job to compile an atlas for Nigerian schools.

A short geography lesson: Oxford is a city west of London in the south of England, with a dense population: 3,537 people per sq. km. For initially undisclosed reasons, Maggie uproots herself to the far north east of Scotland, to a village called Quarrytown (that she has never visited) on a remote and rugged nose of land sticking into the North Sea. This is a sparsely populated place; there are 14.4 people per sq. km in the county of Caithness. Attracted by the white places on the road atlas suggesting this sparsity, she drives 1000 km to a rented cottage, and then abandons her car on the driveway. It is clear she intends to exile herself:

'You're mad,' her sister Carol said when Maggie showed her the final page of the road atlas, the expanses of blank white paper, the few wiry roads and the tiny shaded areas indicating settlements. 'Even I can read a map enough to see there's nothing there. It's not like you to be so remote.'

Instead of answering she randomly re-opened the atlas near the front; the South. Reading, Newbury, Basingstoke, Didcot, Southampton. The pages were a crazed circuit board of crossing wires – green or red for A roads, blue for motorways. Large shaded areas spoke of dense populations. Carol frowned at the atlas and Maggie closed it with a small thump; a strained line of understanding between them as usual. Carol, older by only two years at 42, even physically contradicted her sister: fair and curvy to Maggie's darkness, height, crane-like angularity.

Maggie's friend Helen was more polite:

'I've never heard of it. Apart from that place of course.' She poked a finger at John O'Groats, known as the most northerly point, even though the map clearly gave this role to Dunnet Head further to the west. She bought a car, a second hand Volvo.

‘You’re going to drive again?’ Carol’s tone now sweetened, sniffing her own agenda for Maggie of ‘getting back’ to something.

‘Easiest way to get there with my things,’ Maggie had said.

No-one tried to stop her, but she sensed the whispered conversations, the concern. Helen offered her help with packing up. Friends handed her pieces of paper with scribbled addresses and phone numbers. But their friends were usually in Inverness, a hundred miles away, or even Perth, two hundred. They were hardly going to be neighbours.

‘Does Frank know?’ Carol asked.

‘We’re not married any more.’

‘I know,’ Carol said. ‘But.’

‘He knows.’

She packed essentials into the car and pointed it towards that far corner of the country, teeth gritted, radio up loud, crunching indigestion tablets; the first time she’d driven in two and a half years. Pulled north and north, with her left hand snapping at her heels but eventually dropping back and back, out-paced and shrinking as she passed Glasgow, the junctions thinning out, the land between settlements spreading. She stopped for a break in Pitlochry in the darkening afternoon, saw a hairdresser lolling and idle in her window, went in and had her dark hair cut short there and then. She barely looked at its effect on her face in the mirror, thought of it as a point of no return. Then beyond Inverness fewer and fewer villages with chains of orange street lights glowing out of the black and her breathing steadying. A road that rolled; a dark chasm now falling away to her right and one or two solitary ships’ lights out there in parallel journeys to her own.

And finally the car had brought her to rest in these flat, open lands of the peninsula where there was nothing to hide behind. You could see so far; see your enemies coming. It was a relief to be so certain of her safety. That was, until the snowman had arrived in her garden (Cracknell 2013, 8–10).

I made long visits to Caithness from 2008, initially with no intention to write about these lonely lowlands, north of the famous Scottish High-

lands. The place initially struck me as bleak, hostile, treeless, flat and it was cold even in August. However, its riches were gradually shown to me including archaeological remains from the distant past and more recent history. I loved walking the mile-long beach at Dunnet Bay. The sky is massive and ever-changing, the cliffs and sea a reminder of elemental powers. It gradually worked its magic on me: the drama, the wildlife, the sense of abandonment. I had to do little more than ask ‘what if?’ and to walk in circles before a story started to present itself.

In 2015 I wrote a piece for *The Bottle Imp* about the necessity of walking to my inspiration for this novel in which I summarised my method:

I wrote my novel, *Call of the Undertow*, by repeatedly walking the beach and dunes at Dunnet Bay and cycling the lanes that radiate from it. In this way my characters got themselves entangled with local stories, geographical features, storms and sunsets. I didn’t actually write it in motion but the ideas came with the visceral sensations of being in that place, got scribbled down on the move, and later materialised into scenes (Cracknell 2015).

On my walks I came across dead seals, Viking remains, the hidden bunkers and sunk Spitfires of World War II, a church believed buried under sand dunes. At Dunnet church I discovered a bell donated by the Oswalds, slaveowners on plantations in 18th-century Jamaica, and where in the late 16th-century Timothy Pont, Scotland’s earliest known mapmaker had been the minister. Another church, named after St Trothan, in the midst of a rare copse of trees was ruined and in the graveyard there was a strange stone with no words but a hollow rumoured always to remain damp. It was connected to a story of a baby found on the beach wrapped in a sealskin. How could I ignore all this?

Map-making was clearly going to be central to this novel, and then a friend’s six-year-old son produced an elaborate and almost supernaturally accurate map of the town where I live in central Scotland and I realised that a child would also be at the centre of my story. He would be

of the place but a roamer and to some extent an outcast, as suggested by the story of the child found in the sealskin.

My character Maggie, and her young cartographic protégé blur boundaries and make people locally uncomfortable. As Cheryl Mares noted in her paper “Linda Cracknell’s *Call of the Undertow* and the Cartographic Imagination”, “both of the main characters are marginalized or ‘liminal’ people in the community, Trothan because he is eccentric, gender fluid, and precocious; Maggie because she is a stranger, an outsider, and a woman alone” (Mares 2016).

Maggie is regarded with suspicion for the above reasons, and because she keeps exploring relentlessly. She is even attacked on the beach by arctic terns. What is she doing here? Why does she wander and encourage the strange child, Trothan, to do the same? And why does he go to her house each day after school? In fact she is helping him with his own detailed map of the area. He draws it on successive layers of film as cartographers used to do, starting with the lines of coast and watercourse, and building up into roads and place-names.

The novel also blurs boundaries between realism and enchantment because local legends and strange transformations seem to be taken seriously by at least some of the characters and begin to appear on the boy’s map. It becomes more complex and revealing of the community than Maggie expected, going beyond the geographical and material. The following extract finds Trothan at Maggie’s cottage when she returns during a visit by her sister, Carol:

When they got back to the cottage, Trothan was sitting at the table hunched over his map with a pen.

He looked up when the door opened and Maggie smiled when she saw the full brown eye peeking up through the fringe. Trothan knew she’d stopped locking the cottage door, but he’d never just come in like that before.

Carol jolted visibly when she saw him. Maggie went over, unable to resist looking at his latest creation.

‘Carol, this is Trothan, my mapmaking colleague.’

Carol nodded slightly.

‘Come and see,’ she said, but Carol ignored her, carried on taking off her coat. Maggie noticed that Trothan was working on the seventh sheet of film again; the layer that seemed to be for his stories.

He was drawing features onto the big scoop of the Bay, into the large area that was, as far as she was concerned, empty; the water itself. She decided not to go into why this wasn’t a great idea, why the text usually tops everything; to leave it until Carol wasn’t there.

She caught sight of something drawn into the Bay at the north-west, beyond Dwarwick Head. She laughed. ‘What’s the story here?’ She didn’t want to break Trothan’s concentration, but she did want to know why, near a drawing of a mermaid, a cave had been suggested in the Cliff and within it a pile of coins and a man with a chain around his ankle.

Trothan raised the pen and put the cap on it. ‘This man,’ he pointed at the shackled figure. ‘He said he loved the mermaid. But really he just wanted her treasure. So she took him down to her cave and kept him prisoner.’

Maggie looked up smiling at Carol, but she was stone-faced, averting her eyes.

‘And is he still there?’ Maggie asked, smiling.

Trothan nodded and stood up. Just before he began rolling his layers of film up, she caught sight of two drawings on Orlig Hill. A bagpiper was being led into a door in the hillside by a woman. She knew that one. But a small stone hut was also marked on the north side of the hill.

‘What’s that?’ she pointed at the hut.

‘That’s where they did the weaving,’ he said.

‘Who?’

‘The women. Twelve women.’

‘Right. So it was a woollen mill. Did they make blankets?’

Trothan shrieked with laughter. ‘Tweed then?’ There was relish in his voice when he said, ‘They wove with men’s intestines.’

She saw then that there was also a strange structure hung with human skulls. A flock of large black birds were scattering from it. ‘That’s nice.’

‘And the loom was weighted down with human heads,’ he said. ‘And the thing that went across ...?’

‘The shuttle?’ she suggested.

‘The shuttle was an arrow. Or maybe a sword,’ he said.

‘Who were these women?’ ‘They told who would die in battle. It’s like a prediction. And when they’d finished they attached their horses to the cloth and galloped away. Six went north and six went south.’ He linked his fingers together then tore them apart, making a sucking sound for the tearing of the intestines. Then he looked up at her from the corner of his eye to gauge her reaction.

‘That’s a gory story,’ she said, flickering a glance to Carol, who was looking away.

‘It’s not a story’ (Cracknell 2013, 83–85).

It is perhaps not surprising that Trothan’s map will eventually get them both into trouble. In particular what he puts on the unorthodox eighth layer of the map will implicate and outrage many local people. Maggie is regarded with suspicion almost because of her physical movement in the local geography, and because she is a woman alone. However, by the end, she has forged for herself a detailed sense of place out of the ‘white places on the map’ by walking and by acknowledging its nuances. By doing so, she has hopefully made peace with something. You will have to read it to learn Trothan’s fate!

I have noticed that critiques of this novel often refer to the primal role of place. Here is Cheryl Mares again:

Spatial references play a critical role in helping to constitute narrative domains, including that of Linda Cracknell’s novel *Call of the Undertow*, which thematizes cartography itself (...). Cracknell’s powerful evocation of place is the most distinctive and memorable aspect of this novel.

Cracknell’s ability to convey ‘visceral sensations of being in [this particular] place’ creates a sense of immediacy and engages the reader in imagining the spatial layout of this particular narrative (...). The novel seems to call out to readers to go and explore the place for themselves and to register the gap between their internalized versions of the literary map Cracknell provides and their perceptions, experience, and analysis of the actual place. This powerful desire the novel creates to engage with the place itself may be in part what is meant by the book’s title (Mares 2016).

Writer Kirsty Gunn in a quote for the cover wrote:

Linda Cracknell's Caithness rises up off the page and takes form around us... Its light and skies, rocky shores and wheeling, screaming gulls, huddled villages and craggy beaches, its grave, austere beauty... Reading this book is like being there (2013, cover).

I renamed the actual village because of this blurring of boundaries between fiction and non-fiction but the geography of the place and my own visceral experiences of it were absolutely essential to what I wanted to convey and to what I made up. Even during final revisions to the novel, my explorations of specific sites in the area gave me tiny details or a shudder of recognition which still worked their way into the nuance of character and plot.

I turned to writing non-fiction when I realised that my adventures on foot, and fascination with former ways, could be the *subject* as well as the method of my writing. When I am in a new place I explore as Maggie did. In *Doubling Back: Ten Paths Trodden in Memory* (Cracknell 2014), the second of my books referenced here, I describe this habit. It seems to have begun while I was on a lone visit to Boscastle in Cornwall as a 16-year-old, with a growing knowledge of Thomas Hardy's own walks on these clifftops and through the deeply-clefted valleys where he fell in love with his first wife:

I walked in increasing circles and offshoots from my centre – circles which moved me towards orientation, recognition, familiarity and finally a sense of 'owning' the place, or perhaps it owning me. This walking ritual, a sort of 'beating of the bounds', that I learnt here is now instinctive when I visit new places, a link perhaps to Hardy who walked his way to a native knowledge of London in the five years that he lived there (Cracknell 2014, 31).

Even at that age I had few qualms about exploring alone, and it's to this issue of women alone, particularly in remote places, that I now turn, both in life and in literature.

In 2015 I came across an article in a North American adventure journal by a woman raising the ‘problem’ of how lone women who walk ‘back country’ routes are perceived. In her own experience she had been approached by men whilst on treks asking whether she was okay, or if she needed help, or if she would like a candy bar. She heard the subtext. It was almost as though she were a child. And she found this attitude in women as well as in men:

When I’d embarked on this journey 14 miles earlier, the woman who issued my permit looked at me like I was crazy. It’s a look women who venture into the wilderness alone often get. We get it from our parents, from society, from the well-meaning people who issue backcountry permits. They say it without saying it: It’s not safe out there. Not for you (Langlois 2017).

This online article was as interesting for the length and fury of the comments trail as for itself. Women spoke of their fear of encountering dangerous men when considering such adventures, or, as the writer, of being diminished by them. According to some women, the prevalent attitude means that in contrast to little boys, little girls are not encouraged to take risks. One man noted, though, that women tended to be much better prepared for such trips but many men expressed anger and confusion along the lines of, ‘If I say nothing, am I creepy? If I just say hi, am I creepy? If I talk too much, am I creepy?’ (Langlois 2017). What were they supposed to do? There were suggestions that women should carry, almost compulsorily, a satellite phone, or even a firearm. It almost seemed that by appearing in places beyond their expected domain, women were unsettling others and somehow, themselves, ‘dangerous’.

Langlois concluded her article by saying: “Don’t try to stop us doing something that empowers us. Help us create a world that gives more women the confidence to be alone” (2017). This rang true to me. I am never so happy as when I strike out alone with a rucksack and tent on my back. I love the sense of independence, freedom and strength. In

the wake of reading the above article, I celebrated the spring equinox by climbing a local mountain of 2500 feet and camping there to see the sunrise on the first longer day. The weather was clear, the mountain snow-covered, the night frosty and beautiful. It was exhilarating.

Afterwards I wrote an article for *WalkHighlands*, an outdoors website dedicated to trails and routes across Scotland, in which I provided encouragement, and tips, for those—particularly women—who had always wanted to do an overnight camping trip alone in a remote or mountainous place, but hadn't quite managed to get out there.

I wrote:

Going off alone like this is one of the most empowering things I do; it makes me feel self-reliant to face whatever the elements and the land present. I'm not antisocial; I also love company. But perhaps I'm one of those people who feel most themselves when solitary as Cheryl Strayed observes of herself in her book, *Wild*, about her transformational solo hike along the Pacific Crest Trail. Being alone heightens my senses so that I keenly observe the weather, the scents, the hardness of the ground under my back. I am not generally afraid, even when others worry over me. And I've learned to cope with adversity, in fact probably deal with it better when on my own because I know I have to. What it comes down to is the feeling of being viscerally alive (Cracknell 2016).

I canvassed opinion from other women ahead of writing this article. What was interesting in the British context, was that few of them spoke of fear of people (read: men) as a factor in their reluctance. Most of the comments related to doubts about themselves and their skills, and a general lack of confidence. Or of being lonely, or being perceived as a 'loser' because they had to take this adventure alone.

The walks collected in *Doubling Back* each physically retraced a memory or biography or old way and were geographically spread—in the UK, Spain, Switzerland, Kenya. For some of the walks I had company, and for several I was alone; some were pretty adventurous, some short rambles. For one I walked a 300 km trail over 14 days from my own front

door to the Isle of Skye, following the route taken in the opposite direction by drovers once bringing cattle to the markets of Central Scotland from the Highlands. I carried a tent, and camped, facing some pretty awful weather along the way. By the end I was struggling, but it remains memorable and a highlight in my own personal story.

On that particular journey I was walking in remote and mountainous terrain as I was, also, on a seven-day walk in the south-east of Spain, following ‘Mozarabic’ trails, created at a time when Spain was still at least partly Muslim. The tent was my place of safety each night, or at least felt it as long as I was sufficiently far away from human activity. But people locally seemed worried for me and when I pushed them to express exactly what the dangers were, they referred to wild boar, men shooting wildlife on Saturdays, and Romanian Mafia in the area. I didn’t meet the latter, avoided the Saturday shooters, and the wild boar I met turned tail and ran from me.

I also reflected on this reaction of alarm from other people to such journeys in my piece for *WalkHighlands*:

When setting out on the walks collected in *Doubling Back*, many of which I did alone, I was often told that I was ‘very brave’, or asked whether I was sure I was doing the right thing. Interestingly the journey with the most objective danger, a climb of the 4,274 m peak of Finsteraarhorn in Switzerland, attracted less comment. I can only conclude that it was because I was climbing with two men. Occasionally I’ve felt that concerns expressed for my safety have veered into disapproval or a suggestion I was behaving irresponsibly. I think a certain amount of doggedness in managing the reactions of those around is essential to not being cowed out of important experiences (Cracknell 2016).

In considering the power of solo walking experiences, I would emphasise again the effect on one’s own creativity as thoughts attach to the landscape whilst we are in motion. For example, this is how my mind worked on my journey to Skye, as I climbed over a pass out of my home patch into a liminal zone of bog:

The slight rise of Glen Meran took me northwards, hair dampening as I climbed into mist, feet following where the deer had trodden paths. The weight of my rucksack gnawed an ache deep into my hip joints. In the late afternoon, Glen Meran spilt me onto Rannoch Moor. My eyes sought features on the blank bog: pylons stalking along the Fort William railway line; an occasional Scots Pine isolating itself as a dark silhouette, flattened by dull light. I followed a quad bike trail to find the ‘creep’, a low gap under the embanked railway. My feet were pulled at by gloopy peat bog. In crazed fluorescence, green and red mosses caught at my eye as if displaced from a world of coral reefs. I abandoned the preserve of dry boots and socks. For the first time on the walk I was out of my comfort zone, wet and peat-splattered, travelling very slowly in an unknown land.

Alone, the meshing of rhythm, thought and observation had me inventing songs and rhymes. Lyrics were delivered in my head to the tune of “Walking on the Moon” by The Police.

‘I hope your legs don’t break
Walking Rannoch Moor.
A boat’s what you should take
Walking Rannoch Moor.’

And so on. Another long-distance solo walker I’ve come across imagined he was a bearer of news between families of cows separated by distance. When they rushed over to the fence to meet him it was as if he was a mail-ship arriving. He passed on news of Sister Agnes’s sore nipples and so on. The mind plays games when left to talk to itself, and for my part I enjoy this slightly off-beat creativity (Cracknell 2014, 187–188).

If attitudes to women’s entitlement or comfort in such places are so prevalent, how do they affect the reception of *writing* from women about this apparently male preserve? Although I started to write *Doubling Back* in 2007, there was a long transformation of the material before publication in 2014, when it was also a BBC Radio Four *Book of The Week*. It was well received, and inevitably attracted comparison with the work of another writer, Robert Macfarlane, and in particular with his best-selling books *The Wild Places* and *The Old Ways*, which had been

published in 2007 and 2012. He is often referred to as leading the way in the ‘new nature writing’ or perhaps thoughtful and erudite adventure-writing, and provides a kind of benchmark for others. In one review in *The Scotsman*, Roger Cox made an explicit comparison between *Doubling Back* and the writing of Macfarlane, and fortunately deduced that my book “comfortably holds its own against *The Old Ways* and is also different enough from it to merit a place of its own in the new nature writing canon” (Cox 2014).

In a piece in *The London Review of Books* in 2008, poet and essayist on nature and landscape Kathleen Jamie, who is also, like me, wary of the restricting connotations of a term like ‘nature writing’, reacted furiously to the narrative stance taken in *The Wild Places*:

What’s that coming over the hill? A white, middle-class Englishman! A Lone Enraptured Male! From Cambridge! Here to boldly go, ‘discovering’, then quelling our harsh and lovely and sometimes difficult land with his civilised lyrical words. When he compounds this by declaring that ‘to reach a wild place was, for me, to step outside human history,’ I’m not just groaning but banging my head on the table (Jamie 2008).

The male narrators she criticises are always alone, marvellously leisured, with no need to stay close to home or attend to child-rearing or domestic tasks. Typically they sleep teetering on mountain ledges, waking at first light to plunge into icy pools before breakfasting on lichen. “The Lone Enraptured Male” syndrome is often quoted, particularly perhaps in relation to the sometimes evident blind spot in the literary world for women writers of nature or adventurous travel in remote places.

I first became aware of this blindspot when, as a newcomer to this thing called ‘nature writing’, I was excited to see a new journal launched in 2007, called *Archipelago*. Its stated concerns appeared to powerfully reflect my own writing themes:

A literary magazine in the ordinary sense, in that it contains writings in non-fictional prose, and verse. It also places great emphasis on monochrome

illustration. Extraordinary are its preoccupations with landscape, with documentary and remembrance, with wilderness and wet, with natural and cultural histories, with language and languages, with the littoral and vestigial, the geological, and topographical, with climates, in terms of both meteorology, ecology and environment (“Archipelago Magazine” mission statement).

I purchased a copy of the first edition and was surprised to find that of the 19 contributors, only two were women. I wrote to the editor about this issue but did not receive a reply and subsequently learned that the pieces had been by invitation, so it was a deliberate selection. As preparation for this conference, I checked *Archipelago’s* most recent edition of winter 2016. However, the balance of contributors had not improved. That edition included work by 14 men and one woman. If these are still commissioned pieces, to my mind this amounts to much more than a blind spot; more like a ‘boys’ club’.

I am also aware of this imbalance being represented in other fields, such as book prize lists, ‘best books’ lists and so on. Here are some recent examples:

- TGO Book Awards shortlist 2017: 10 men, 3 women
- Boardman Tasker Award for mountain literature Shortlist 2017: 5 men, 1 woman
- “12 Glorious Landscape Books” Scottish Book Trust: 9 men, 3 women
- Wainwright Nature and Travel writing prize shortlist 2017: 9 men, 3 women

One has to ask whether this really reflects the gender balance of writers in these fields.

Perhaps more female editors would help adjust the balance. In 2008 I was asked to edit an anthology of new literary non-fiction that focused on the relationship between people and the wild places of the British Isles, *A Wilder Vein* (Cracknell, ed., 2009). Submissions were invited publicly and we had a tremendous response. Although generally, figures suggest that women are less likely to submit their writing than men, this particular publication attracted more women. The final selection

for the book, based on high quality but also chosen to reflect a range of geographies and subject matter, was 11 women, including the work of some well-known writers such as Sara Maitland, and seven men. This showed how healthy women's writing in this field is, making it hard to understand the position of publications such as *Archipelago*.

In the UK there has been a growing profile for women's writing on land and nature, partly in response to the rediscovery of the writings of Nan Shepherd as championed by Macfarlane himself. Her walking and her writing could be seen perhaps as characteristically female in that it reflected a lifelong exploration of the Cairngorm Mountains without fixation on conquering summits, or walking exhausting distances, but rather going *into* the mountain, and immersing herself in it sensuously and learning it intimately.

On the back of this a new project has recently been launched in Scotland called "Into the Mountain"¹ which aims to cultivate women's experience of mountain environments and creative responses to it. *Way-making: An Anthology of Women's Adventure Writing, Poetry and Art* (Mort at al., eds., 2018) has recently been published, as well as a number of books by female writers who explore aspects of nature or travel in the 'wild' such as Melissa Harrison, Olivia Laing, Amy Liptrot, Sara Maitland, Anna Pavord, Esther Woolfson, Helen Macdonald and Helen Mort. This led David Robinson to remark that "the new, emotionally open—and largely female—school of nature writing is spreading fast. Al-most, I'm tempted to say, like a ring of bright water" (2017).

However, his applause for emotional revelation integrated with nature writing is not welcomed by all. Books by women which are part memoir or personal journey but which relate in some way to nature or a journey in the wild have sometimes been diminished or criticised for not doing nature writing 'properly'. Two particular examples of such critiques come to mind: of Cheryl Strayed's *Wild* (2012) and Helen Macdonald's *H Is for Hawk* (2014):

¹ For more information, see: <http://www.ssw.org.uk/into-the-mountain-workshops-and-events/>.

Far from reviving nature writing, *Wild's* runaway success marks a further step toward extinction for the genre. Present-day readers, Strayed seems intuitively to understand, will read about the outdoors only when what they're actually reading about is a plucky young woman triumphing over grief and bad boyfriends on an audacious long-distance hike (Hinch 2013).

A legitimate question to pose about *H Is for Hawk* is its status as a nature book. The motif of a raptor as a symbol of grief and of the author's struggle with depression is indisputably powerful. Macdonald's evocation of her bird's savage habits also provides the book's aura of raw otherness but it is ultimately not a wild bird. Yet there are wild goshawks in Britain and these barely appear in the text (Cocker 2015).

There is of course a serious point here about a need for writing which might help us confront the approaching disaster of the Anthropocene. But perhaps a preoccupation with the term 'nature writing' is unhelpful for women and particularly those who cross boundaries and embrace domestic or emotional worlds in their journeys. And don't women writers have the right to choose the nature and subject of the stories they wish to tell? Or does such a critique, and publishing imbalances referred to above reflect an assumption that explorations of our wilder places can only properly 'belong' to rugged and adventurous men? Perhaps women are 'dangerous' in print as well as out in the hills, and we should embrace this role.

I will conclude with a short extract from the close of *Doubling Back* where I reflect on my regular circular walk from home and its role in both memory and story-making:

Crossing the road, a squealing gate leads to a plateau of grass and reeds and a path drops westwards. With the opening of the views to the surrounding hills, I sense my 'memory-markers' scattering the valley sides, linked by a web of paths. A picnic spot; a confession made over there; an illicit kiss here. High on the hillside opposite, a small white farmhouse perches on a green strip between dark forestry where David Robertson, a cheery sheep-farmer lived before leukaemia took him. At the bottom of the slope below me is the cottage I rented for

two years with grotesquely patterned carpets, and piles of mice droppings. But my neighbours there have been a kind of yardstick to my years in this valley: the six-year-old now away in a hydro-electric engineering job, the white collie who arrived as an irrepressible puppy now taking every chance to lie down.

The writing of any story is mostly re-writing. My first draft will have a rough sense of direction and content, a provisional resolution, but then I'll revisit it again and again, re-seeing the material to tighten it, or even to allow it, if it insists, to follow a new route. I think of it as a repeated walk; a loop with varieties or diversions.

Revisiting our own memories is like this too. We subtly reconstruct them as we go, so that our life stories are less like photographic, objective reality and more like an act of imagination, re-invented over and over. As Grace Paley says, 'When a story is told for the second time, it's fiction, no matter what'. Perhaps that's what makes remembering so pleasurable; it feels like a made-up story, complete with sensory detail and implied meaning.

On a walk like this made over many years, and on many occasions, I've cached so many memories amongst the rocks and trees and hills, that re-turning the walk also gives me a way of retracing my own story (Cracknell 2014, 245–246).

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