

Across Britain, nature is in vogue, the countryside is the new chic. The vintage pastoral patterns of Cath Kidston, the bright floral designs and gentrified tweed of Joules, and the Hunter-welly clad urbanites clambering down from their Range Rovers boldly proclaim the rural as a middle-class fashion statement. A perceived ‘nature deficit’ has fuelled a new interest in all things rural, rustic and wholesome, as seen in the expansion of charitable organisations like the National Trust and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB). Membership of such associations are at an all-time high – in 2010, the number of RSPB members stood at more than double that of the three major political parties.¹ Both now place new emphasis on family adventures in the outdoors; the new ‘natural playgrounds’ of the National Trust parallel the growing Forest School movement.

In bookshops, ‘new nature writing’ dominates the shelves whilst window displays are full of bucolic book covers, nature lino prints, and matching floral tea towels. Essayists, anecdotal writers, prose-poets, and natural historians like Robert Macfarlane, Kathleen Jamie, Roger Deakin, and Helen MacDonald (to name but a few) call us back to the wild, opening our eyes to their landscapes (and ours) with beautiful and nostalgic evocations of what we are missing in the twenty-first century. Often, this nostalgia drives the authors backwards, to a lost landscape that is at once more remote and free of human interference (except that of the lonely poet). Sometimes it is conflicted: Jamie has criticised the romanticized stance of the ‘lone, enraptured male’ nature writer, with time and funds to conquer far-off Celtic fringes.² Others argue that when the rural is eulogised, the urban becomes lamented. In dialogue with this stance, authors like Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts call for us to look at the urban wilderness – the edgelands reclaimed by nature; wastelands and railway verges that speak of a renewed ecosystem.

At the same time, works of an earlier generation of nature writers are finding a new audience. Sold alongside the new nature writing, these early and mid-twentieth-century writers recall a simpler, and more pure pastoral time. With wistful covers that reinforce the associations between the rural and the nostalgic, they are often to be found near the British Library Crime Classics – reprinted novels from the 1930s and 40s. The content and form, taken together, demonstrate a much broader trend for mid-century design and country life, exhibiting a sentimentality towards an imagined pre-urban idyll. Contemporary publishing and marketing also finds and fosters purposeful links between old and new nature nostalgia. When buying a book by Robert Macfarlane online, costumers are ‘recommended’ H. E. Bates, W. G. Sebald, W. H. Hudson, or Edward Thomas. Many of the new nature writers – consciously and unconsciously – reinforce this literary lineage by referring to the influence of these same writers. So too, do the prizes awarded to exceptional works of nature writing: the ‘Wainwright’ prize is a good example. Simultaneously referencing the Lakeland guidebook writer and the Wainwright brewery (the revival of real ale itself is another reflection of the popular, historical rural), the prize is also sponsored by the National Trust.

In addition to literary eulogies, the old and organic are also increasingly commodified into attractive accessories and sold as ‘vintage’: the detached and dehistoricized artefacts of the rural, quaint, and ‘authentic’. Vintage, like nostalgia, speaks of a past that floats freely across the twentieth century. See, for instance, the homespun arts, crafts, and upcycling of

programmes like Kirstie Allsop's *Handmade Britain* (Channel 4, 2012), in which Kirstie (cousin of Cath Kidston) needlefelts a delicate robin, bakes scones, and arranges flowers for country shows around the UK. Rural 'styles' – the delicate buds of a mid-50s flower print, heathery tones in a mock tweed, Farrow and Ball shading of an indomitable Aga – co-opt a series of generalisations about the past that are not fixed. Interwar railway posters celebrating the Lake District and the Norfolk Broads, with their bright geometric designs, co-exist alongside shaker kitchens and mid-century mock Scandinavian florals. Not confined to interior design, the trend has spread to the festival movement, as any episode of *George Clarke's Amazing Spaces* (Channel 4, 2012-) attests: 'vintage' vehicles turned into festival pop ups are the new way to sell anything from coffee to cheese, hair-dressing to cinema-going.

Turn on the television in the evening and see a proliferation of what Felix Thompson called the 'geography genre':³ the televisual equivalent of nature writing, programmes like *Countryfile* (BBC, 1988-), *Scotland's Wild Heart* (BBC, 2016), and *Great Canal Journeys* (Channel 4, 2014-), that offer high definition panoramic visions of the countryside around us. The BBC's flagship rural affairs programme has long been criticised as an urban fantasy rather than a rural affairs programme, just as John Betjeman said, long ago, that the term 'countryside' itself is simply a "delightful suburbanism".⁴ George Monbiot argues that *Countryfile*, "portrays the countryside not as it is, but as we would like it to be. Timeless, unsullied, innocent, removed from the corruption and complexities of urban life."⁵ In the same way, there is an undisguised (in fact purposeful) sentimentality about much of this geographical programming. *Great Canal Journeys*, presented by Timothy West and his wife Prunella Scales, is unusually self-aware in this respect, charting, as it does, the historical development of Britain's canals, alongside reminiscence of the presenters' idyllic family holidays and Prunella's waning memory (she has dementia).

Similarly, at the time of writing, *Penelope Keith's Hidden Villages* (2014-) is advertising its third series. This type of programme might be called 'docu-lite' – popular magazine programming that offers a series of info-nuggets about landscape, history, geography, literature, tradition, and local anecdote. A subgenre that could be dissected along the lines of the 'dumbing down' of television (we do not, it suggests, have the attention span for 'proper' documentary anymore), it is also usually countryside focused. Indeed, the format is unusually uniform regardless of the broadcaster: a famous figure, often of a certain age (say, Griff Rhys Jones, Richard Wilson, Clare Balding or Michael Portillo), makes a journey (following a nineteenth century railway guide, or a 1950s Shell motoring guide, a cycling guide, or on foot), and offers an exploration of local areas of cultural or historical importance along the way. The premise is usually retrospective and focused on the intangible and the nostalgic – as Robbie Coltrane so neatly puts it in the opening to *B-Road Britain* (ITV, 2007): 'I will be travelling [...] the way that we would have done fifty years ago. And I'll be trying to find the real heart and soul along the way'.

While, as Helen Wheatley points out, these nature programmes dominate television schedules, elsewhere the landscape – as icon, image and idea – also shapes many other productions.⁶ The BBC's recent remake of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (2016) featured loving and lingering shots of the Russian landscape of a sort unfamiliar to earlier adaptations (although

even the final episode was beaten in the ratings by a weekly episode of *Countryfile*). Likewise, the BBC's new flagship, *Poldark* (2015-), has devoted much time to visualising the pastoral and picturesque (as well as celebrating the rugged masculinity of the lead character). In addition to popular productions which construct the landscape as televisual vista, audiences are also fed nostalgic representations of the rural. Consider the quintessentialism of *Midsomer Murders* (ITV, 1997-) – the quaint and idyllic villages and farmlands from which the cry of the fox gives warning to a brutal and initially unfathomable murder. *Midsomer* is a near relation to *Penelope Keith's Hidden Villages*; take out its terrifying social friction writ violent, and you are left with a lyrical portrayal of village choirs, arts festivals, and close-knit communities protecting their semi-rural lifestyles. It coincides with a wider appreciation of the country fair, the vintage showcase (usually combined with a countryside location), and the *River Cottage* organic idyll.

Imported from Scandinavia, slow television takes these trends even further. Built upon the 'slow' movement – which takes an anti-urban, anti-frenetic stance on all aspects of life, slow television in Britain has developed into a paean for the rural. *All Aboard: the Country Bus* (2016) (following two previous BBC4 slow television experiments – *Dawn Chorus* (2015) and *All Aboard: the Canal Boat* (2015)) covers the entirety of the Northern Dalesman bus route, setting off from Richmond in Yorkshire and taking the audience on a “lush and varied route, along a river valley thronged by blossoming hawthorn trees, through ancient mining villages and wild flower-filled meadows”.⁷ The All Aboard series takes rural lifestyle programming and the philosophy of the slow movement and combines them into a product that enhances both. Author of *In Praise of Slow* (2004), Carl Honoré, talks about the BBC's slow programming as a timely reaction to the ongoing cycle of diminishing attention spans (either real or assumed) and the quickening tempo of television.⁸ Landscape television, then, offers respite from the speed of contemporary drama, as well as relief from what Simon Heritage called the “slate-grey urban misery”.⁹ The presenters of *Autumnwatch* (BBC, 2006-) have even cautioned viewers about addiction to a vision of rurality that replicates the “fix” that comes from visiting a nature reserve, while ignoring the “sterile, too intensely farmed” landscape en route.¹⁰

In Channel Four's social experiment/reality television show, *Eden* (2016), it was not only the beauty of the Scottish wilderness that aimed to draw the viewer in, but the supposed wildness of that wilderness. Predictably, the series actually provides a heart-warming cycle of challenge and communal unity, rather than an apocalyptic eruption of social discord or natural disaster. Like Macfarlane's *The Wild Places* (2015) and George Monbiot's *Feral* (2013), it signposts the televisual trend not only towards nature and the countryside but also 'rewilding' – the notion that we are lost to an urban lifestyle, and disconnected from our ancestors and native land. Macfarlane points to the moment that BlackBerry (the mobile phone) entered the *Junior Oxford Dictionary*, and blackberry (the hedgerow fruit) was left out, as symbolic of a new age in which technology usurped nature.¹¹ Another example is the popularity of digital game, Pokémon Go – in which digital symbols are mapped onto real-world locations, with game players mediating the landscape through their phones as they collect their Pokémon. After its launch, the press was full of examples of careless phone-gazers endangering their lives

by entering hazardous environments without due attention. Stuck on sand-banks with the tides racing in, or dressed in shorts and a t-shirt on a mountain precipice, these incidents demonstrated the disconnect between the young (in particular) and their landscape.

Perhaps the most notable feature of this new nature-fashion is the growing disconnect between what we enjoy about the countryside, how we feel about 'nature', and what we truly understand about the 'wild'. While reading *The Wild Places*, watching *Countryfile*, and weekend outings to bird reserves and National Trust parklands ease our supposed nature deficit and give us that 'natural high', the aesthetic and nostalgic aspects of our new fad risk overshadowing the conservation, preservation and ecological issues that are ultimately at stake.

¹ 'More people than ever saving nature' (11 May 2010), <http://www.rspb.org.uk/news/details.aspx?id=tcm:9-251587>

² Kathleen Jamie, 'A Lone Enraptured Male', *London Review of Books*, 30:5 (6 March 2008).

³ Felix Thompson, 'Is There a Geography Genre on British Television?: Explorations of the Hinterland from *Coast to Countryfile*', *Critical Studies in Television*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2010, pp. 57-68.

⁴ Sam Creighton, television reporter for the *Daily Mail* talks about how *Countryfile* is often renamed 'Towniefile' or 'Countryfool' because of its focus on the 'fluffier side of the rural community': #towniefile also trends during the show's broadcast on Sunday evenings. Sam Creighton, 'It's Towniefile! Disgruntled farmers say BBC rural affairs show is too 'London-centric' and doesn't engage with issues facing them' (5 June 2015), *Daily Mail*, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3111612/It-s-Towniefile-Disgruntled-farmers-say-BBC-rural-affairs-London-centric-doesn-t-engage-issues-facing-them.html#ixzz4MDMEe5ci>; Philip Lowe, 'The Rural Idyll Defended: from preservation to conservation', in G. Mingay (ed.) *The Rural Idyll*, London, pp. 113-131.

⁵ George Monbiot, 'Rural Idiocy' (10 September 2015), <http://www.monbiot.com/2015/09/10/rural-idiocy/>

⁶ Helen Wheatley, 'Beautiful Images in Spectacular Clarity: Spectacular Television, Landscape Programming and the Question of (tele)visual Pleasure', *Screen*, Vol. 52 No. 2, 2011, pp. 233-248.

⁷ 'All Aboard: the Country Bus', <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07r2s1r>

⁸ John Plunkett, 'Gently Does it: from Canal Trips to Birdsong', *Guardian* (1 May 2015), <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/may/01/gently-does-it-from-canal-trips-to-birdsong-bbc4-to-introduce-slow-tv>

⁹ Stuart Heritage, '*Countryfile* v *War and Peace*: how a farming magazine beat Tolstoy on TV', *Guardian* (13 February 2016), <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2016/feb/13/countryfile-v-war-and-peace-how-agricultural-magazine-beat-tv-biggest-drama>

¹⁰ John Plunkett, 'Wildlife shows not reflecting reality of natural world – Springwatch presenters', 24 May 2016, *Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2016/may/24/wildlife-shows-not-reflecting-reality-of-natural-world-springwatch-presenters>

¹¹ Robert Macfarlane, *Landmarks*, London, p. 3.