

## In search of the wild

**In this series on Essex nature writing I have surveyed works mostly from the latter half of the last century. For the final piece, we come up to date by looking at perhaps the most gifted of contemporary nature writers, Robert Macfarlane.**

Macfarlane's reputation rests principally on three works, *Mountains of the Mind* (2003), *The Wild Places* (2007) and *The Old Ways* (2012). But it was through none of these that I first discovered him. That pleasure came from a BBC documentary, *The Wild Places of Essex*, first broadcast in 2010: an extraordinary love-letter to the power of wildlife, its ability to hang on and re-colonise the most unlikely of habitats. "Flawless and poetic", the *Observer* said, in one of many appreciative reviews.

Tellingly, he mostly avoided the obvious, chocolate-box strips of tourist Essex, around Finchingfield maybe, or along the Colne valley, or the chalk-valleys around Saffron Walden, instead looking to peregrines at Tilbury, deer rutting in earshot of the M25, and bluebells in Billericay. To us, perhaps, not surprises; but these images of the unexpected did much to open the eyes of the unknowing to what our county possesses.

So I looked to the books. *Mountains of the Mind* is exclusively concerned with the Cairngorm massif of Scotland and is hence just a little out of scope for this article. *The Wild Places* and *The Old Ways*, though wide-ranging – the first covers all of the British Isles, the second takes us as far as Tibet – both examine key aspects of the wildlife and topology of Essex.

Specifically, it is to the sea-margins of Essex that he turns, to the Dengie peninsula, hemmed in by the Crouch and Blackwater estuaries, and to the coast off Foulness Island. Now, there is a school of thought – made evident by the renowned rock-climber turned writer Jim Perrin – that Robert Macfarlane is in some way too soft to be a proper nature writer; Perrin sought escape to the wild from the gritty back streets of 1950s Manchester, Macfarlane's background is altogether more patrician, leading to his current day-job as a Fellow of Emmanuel College Cambridge. Much as I revere Perrin too, it's not an easy argument to sustain, given the privations Macfarlane seeks out, and his trek on the Broomway described in *The Old Ways* is a good exemplar.

The Broomway is the Essex walk that so far I have not been brave enough to do. It ranks, with the crossing of Morecambe Bay, as one of the two most dangerous paths in Britain. People do die here, and yet it runs for barely six miles across sand and silt within sight of Foulness Island, east of Shoeburyness, and the adjacent coast at Great Wakering. There are organised trips with a professional guide; Macfarlane instead befriended a former resident of Foulness, and took his hand-written notes, with their final warning of 'if it's misty, turn around and go home'.

It was misty, yet Macfarlane and his friend David ('probably the only Marxist tax lawyer in London') did not turn round. They set off into what he described as a mirror-land, so disconcerting was the duality of sea and mist in the grey.

"The tide had recently turned, and just offshore the exposed Black Grounds were steaming: a brown mudscape of canyons and buttresses, turgid and gleaming, through which streams riddled ... The surfaces of my body felt porous, absorbent."

Holding their nerve, they reached landfall on the island, and the mandatory return the same way. He starts to hallucinate, fancying that in the white mist he saw Viking longboats, dhows, Istanbul, the Houses of Parliament. Safely returned, however, “[for] days afterwards I felt calm, level, shining, sand flat”. Walking as drug, the Broomway as the LSD of the Thames estuary.

In part this chapter is a memorial to the villagers of Foulness, long-departed now as the island has been turned over to military purposes. The Dengie chapter in *The Wild Places* is in part a memorial too, but to one person, not a multitude. That individual is JA Baker, author of *The Peregrine*, bringing us nicely full circle to the work with which this Wren series started. The land, estuary and coast from Chelmsford, along its river, and out to the saltmarshes beyond the Dengie were the areas in which Baker sought the elusive raptor and its prey. Macfarlane, as so often he does in his writings, recreates those wanderings, the better to get under the skin, into the thoughts, of the earlier writer.

So one autumn, after walking from near Woodham Walter by wood and hedgerow, he made his way to the sea wall on the Bradwell Marshes. Here he bivouacs, just a sleeping bag between him and the night sky, and as dusk falls watches the first of the migration flocks, and then the meteor showers.

“I woke just after dawn. The sun, over the sea, was round and flat as a coin, orange in colour ... The structures of the barns, footless in the mist, seemed even more ark-like. The copses and spinneys stood out like islands.”

This is land that he calls

“... provisional land, borrowed land. Stepping onto it, you are stepping into a ghost of water.”

Indeed even now the Dengie’s boundaries are being refashioned, either by the sea or by human hand in anticipation of the sea; and as if to underline the point, the couple he meets at St Peter’s chapel on the tip of the peninsula are old enough to remember the terrible floods of 1953.

There is no one better than Macfarlane currently writing about that nexus of self and place, the individual in nature re-fashioned by human hand but still intimately, and sometimes terrifyingly, wild. He is a worthy successor to Baker, the writer he has done so much to champion. Read Macfarlane, and see our world anew.

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