Nature writing's fascist roots

When the Christchurch shooter described himself as an "eco-fascist", he invoked the age-old and complicated relationship between nature writing and the far right.

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Eva Braun (1912 - 1945) exercising in her bathing suit at Konigssee, Berchtesgaden, Germany, 1942. Eva Braun liked to go swimming at the lake, which is only 4 miles from Adolf Hitler's Berghof, where she lived with the Nazi dictator. (Photo by Galerie Bilderwelt/Getty Images)

There is a snake in our Eden. Or rather, our Eden is the snake – subtle, tempting, full of false promises, beckoning us on to ruin. The land in which we live is no longer a green and pleasant one, but as we fumble for a way back into paradise we risk opening a door on to dystopia. The landscape of modern writing on nature is haunted by the ghosts of fascism.

In her hugely influential *H is for Hawk* (2014), Helen Macdonald describes watching a herd of deer on chalk-land near her mother's home. A middle-aged man, passing by, remarks: "Doesn't it give you hope?"

> "Hope?"
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> "Yes," he says. "Isn't it a relief that there're still things like that, a real bit of Old England still left, despite all these immigrants coming in?"

Old England: a green land, but also, of course, a white one.

White nationalists feel their "land" is under threat. Brenton Tarrant, the 28-year-old Australian who killed 50 people in the Christchurch mosque shootings on 15 March, is one of them. In a manifesto of more than 70 pages, he described himself as an "eco-fascist", referencing a movement that marries environmentalism with white supremacy.

Eco-fascism is a modern-day ideology, fuelled by the internet, but its roots are deep – and often forgotten. In 2018, a public poll aimed at identifying "the UK's favourite nature book" gave second place to *Tarka the Otter*, Henry Williamson's 1927 countryside tale. Williamson was a ruralist, a naturalist, naive and solitary, but a Nazi too; a fervent admirer of "the great man across the Rhine" and an adherent of Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists. Early editions of his *The Story of a Norfolk Farm* carry a Mosley epigraph and an author's note in which Williamson alludes regretfully to passages written between 1937 and 1939 that had been deemed "likely to excite a controversial interest" – ie were fascist in character – and excised at his publisher's request.

Williamson was by no means the only fascist active in the English back-to-the-land organicist movement: leading lights included Jorian Jenks ("In every country where the Fascist banner has been carried to triumph the men on the land have regained the rights stolen from them in an era of national degeneration") and Viscount Lymington ("in every great city there is a scum of subhuman population... Many are alien... These immigrants have invaded the slums and the high places as well"). Their far-right politics were codependent with a protective nostalgia for a vanishing – real or imagined – rural England.

The nature writer Melissa Harrison effectively dramatises this tension in her 2018 novel *All Among the Barley*. A recruiter for the Order of English Yeomanry, touring farms in 1930s England, calls on people "who above all understand the irreplaceable value of our rural traditions, and wish to protect the health and purity of our English soil", before taking a poisonous nativist turn and urging "the re-creation of a vigorous indigenous peasantry – one with a true stake in the future of this country". The Order is fictional, but it's closely based on the dozens of such organisations that emerged in Depression-era rural England.

The fascism of Williamson and Jenks echoed the fascist and anti-Semitic "peasant politics" of interwar central and eastern Europe, and took its lead, most particularly, from Nazi Germany. "Nature, with all its violence and beauty, was the primary model for conceiving German history and identity in the Third Reich," the scholars Robert G Lee and Sabine Wilke have argued. The anti-industrial German Romanticism of the 19th century fed a surge of feeling for the notion of German soil and German forest: "There was no escaping the imagery, and there still isn't," Paul Scraton writes in his book *Ghosts on the Shore*. "The German word for beech forest, a very normal descriptive word... now carries the weight of a very different meaning: Buchenwald. The name of the extermination camp at Auschwitz? Birkenau. Birch meadow."

The first Germany-wide environmental protection legislation came into effect under Hitler's government, in 1935. A form of environmentalism was locked into the far-right politics of the period.

None of this is new information: Williamson's post-*Tarka* career was blighted by publishers' pleas to drop "the political stuff" and return to the Devon riverside. What's worth mentioning now is the relative silence regarding his fascism at a time when the intensity of political scrutiny across the arts and entertainment is at a generational high. The works of novelists such as Knut Hamsun, Wyndham Lewis and Pierre Drieu La Rochelle can hardly be unbundled from their fascist leanings; *Tarka*, in the popular mind at least, gets something of a free pass. Perhaps as readers of the rural memoir, of the lyrical nature story, of the tales from the hills, we have a collective blindspot for politics.

It would be nice to be able to write off the Williamson wing of English environmentalism as an aberration – but even if it were, that would be to ignore the persistence of its key tropes.

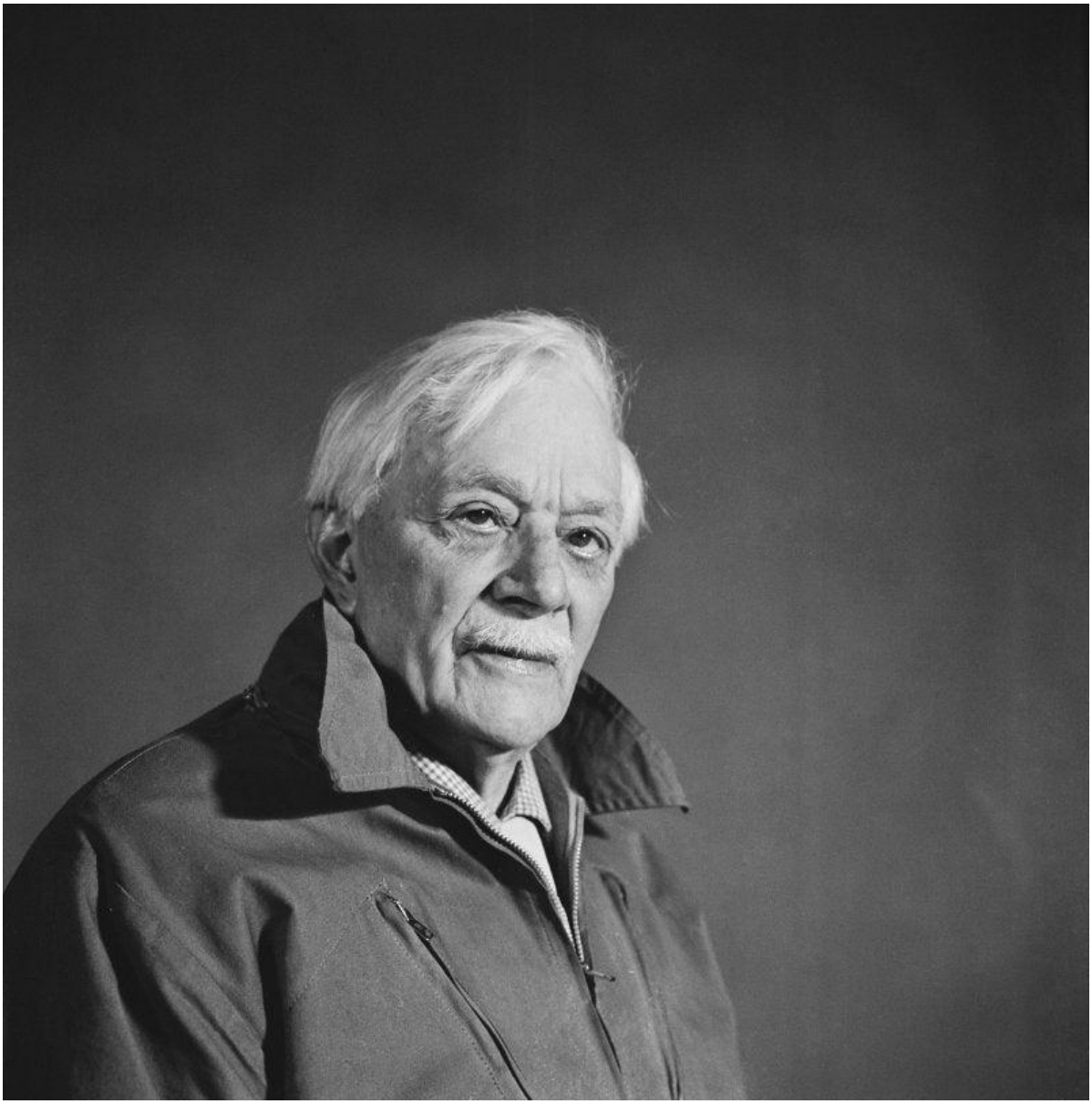
It is in many ways to the credit of the genre that modern nature writers, as a rule, know their nature-writing history and acknowledge their debts, readily writing forewords to new editions of books and promoting reissues. Mark Cocker and Robert Macfarlane led the way in establishing JA Baker and his 1967 work *The Peregrine* in the English wild-writing canon. Helen Macdonald and Conor Mark Jameson both raised the troubled ghost of TH White, in *H is for Hawk* and *Looking for the Goshawk* respectively. John Lister-Kaye and Kate Humble have contributed to editions of Gavin Maxwell's *Ring of Bright Water* (1960).

As a consequence of this kind of critical attention (most of it intelligent and clear-sighted), Baker and White, in particular, are now totemic in the genre. White's personality and politics – his cruelty and misanthropy, his disgust for modernity and civilisation – are well known because of Macdonald. We are perhaps less familiar with the politics of Baker – he was a Conservative voter, we don't know much more than that – but a darker sentiment can be read in the subtext of his best-known work.

"I saw in it the writer's awful desire for death and annihilation," Macdonald writes of *The Peregrine*, "a desire disguised as an elegy for birds... I was frightened of Baker and what he meant... His hawks were made of death." Whatever the literary merits of *The Peregrine*, a strain of abandoned nihilism in nature writing is part of Baker's legacy.

Gavin Maxwell, meanwhile, has in common with TH White a brutal snobbery (as well as a tortured and concealed sexuality). One young man with whom Maxwell had a short relationship spoke of "a mixture of cruelty and sentimentality in him, of repressed violence"; his biographer Douglas Botting describes a leaning towards "aristocratic conservatism and nostalgia".

No one would call any of these writers fascists , but the commonalities are striking and the socio-political alienation pervasive. That Williamson and others are now so central to our nature-writing heritage is problematic.



Henry Williamson, author of Tarka the Otter, in 1971. Photo by D. Morrison/Daily Express/Getty Images

In scrutinising our cultural engagement with nature in the 21st century we can see, without looking especially hard, a frightening resurgence in Nazi-oriented green-ism: "eco-fascism". In 2012, Germany's Heinrich Böll Foundation condemned the country's far-right "green" movements, which have their roots in the nativist rural communities established in the wake of reunification. In promoting organic produce and healthy living, said the co-publisher of the foundation's critique, Gudrun Heinrich, "they're trying to become a very normal part of society – which is dangerous, since they hold very dehumanising beliefs". The historian Nils Franke told the news outlet *DW* that the far right was seeking to use environmentalism as "a Trojan Horse" in a bid to capture a mainstream following.

Eco-fascism of this kind now thrives online. Writing on the *New Statesman* website, Sarah Manavis has delineated the emergence of a fascist philosophy, enabled by online forums such as Reddit, that pulls together anti-Semitism, white supremacy, Norse myth, animal rights and various takes on deep ecology. "Underneath the pictures of idyllic country-scapes and environmentally-friendly rhetoric, eco-fascists are pushing a murderous, racist ideology in the name of protecting the planet," Manavis wrote. After the Christchurch attack, nobody can argue that we shouldn't be taking such movements seriously.

Even this sort of extreme eco-fascism can find points of intersection with the mainstream. Consider, for instance, the now-defunct Twitter account @Sherwode_Forest ("the true spirit of England"), whose 1,000-plus followers were exposed to a venomous stream of neo-Nazism, anti-Semitism and alt-right memes, intercut with tweets about climate change and the loss of hedgerows. That juxtaposition was not incidental: the motive vision here is of a green England concreted over to build homes for immigrants, and of an English "race" under existential threat from non-whites (the person behind Sherwode Forest was extremely exercised by Cheddar Man, the 10,000-year-old Briton with dark skin). While a majority of the account's followers were far-right windbags of one stripe or another, some were respectable green-leaning campaigners or writers. One imagines that this was down to complacency and inattention.

We can trace much of this back to the reactionary ruralism of Williamson and co – but it's in the nature of environmental politics to be messy, and there are other routes we can follow through environmentalist history to arrive in the same dark place.

From the misanthropic fringe of the 1980s Deep Ecology scene, for instance, Edward Abbey wrote of "culturally-morally-genetically impoverished" immigrants hampering his hopes for a "spacious, uncrowded and beautiful – yes, beautiful! – society" in the US. Abbey represented a vein of thinking in which the human species is considered at best to be an inconvenience and at worst a disease; take it far enough and it shades into Unabomber environmentalism. Ted Kaczynski, the American terrorist whose mail-bombing campaign from 1978 to 1995 killed three people and injured many others, talked a lot about nature – as a testing ground and shaping force, as a "counter-ideal to technology". In his justificatory "manifesto", he wrote: "The positive ideal that we propose is nature. That is, WILD nature: those aspects of the functioning of the Earth

and its living things that are independent of human management and free of human interference and control."

William Cronon suggests drily in his 1995 essay "The Trouble With Wilderness" that "the only way to protect sacred wilderness from profane humanity would seem to be suicide". One comes away from a good deal of nature writing with the impression that the author would raise only token objections to the self-immolation of humankind. Other writers fall short of this extreme but make it clear nonetheless that the mass of humanity is a great disappointment to them.

The environmental activist George Monbiot has astutely adopted a quotation from Byron in the process of promoting a "rewilding" agenda in UK environmentalism: "I love not man the less, but nature more." But (as so often) he is rowing somewhat against the current.

The lead character in WR Calvert's 1937 nature novel *Wild Life on Moor and Fell* presents an archetype familiar to readers of modern nature writing: "Peter the Hermit", a "strange and lonely man", retires to a remote cottage, limiting his contact with mankind to a reluctant monthly trip to a barber's shop (where he is "irked" by "desultory and one-sided" chitchat).

We might be reminded of Williamson's disdain for urban life. On visiting London he wrote: "Civilisation is chromium fittings, radio, love with pessary, rubber girdles, perms... Civilisation is white sepulchral bread, gin and homosexual jokes in the Shaftesbury Avenue theatres. Civilisation is world-citizenship and freedom from tradition."

Or we might think of Nan Shepherd's crotchety choosiness about who is and isn't welcome in "her" wild: "To 'make conversation' is ruinous... I have walked myself with brilliant young people whose talk... left me weary and dispirited, because the hill did not speak."

The same spirit persists today. The Scottish nature writer Jim Crumley dislikes tourists, scientists, "experts", farmers and politicians. The ecologist and author Graham White used his introduction to a 2009 collection of John Muir's writings to rail against wind turbines, *Big Brother* and "the endless vacuity of fictional soap operas". Paul Evans sniffs at his fellow train passengers – "zombies" – as they eat sandwiches, discuss football and look at their smartphones (the modern nature writer, as a rule, despises the smartphone: it is never a hub for connectivity and information, only a symbol of our witless degradation).

In his essay "The Limits Of Utopia", the novelist and left-wing activist China Miéville writes:

> Start with heuristics like rural versus urban, nature versus the social, and in the face of oppressive power you easily become complicit, or worse, in environmental injustice, in racism. Such simplistic urbophobic utopianism can unite the most nostalgic conservative seeking solace in a national park with the most extropian post-hippy touting an eco start-up.

It might sometimes seem that nature writing as a genre has overcome the nostalgic fear of the urban with which it has long been associated. The new nature writers stalk the "edgelands" between city and country, and record the harsh beauty of power station hulks and dead foxes on railway sidings. But the urban is cherished where it is seen to comply with the sublime aesthetic; where it doesn't, where it produces smartphones or airports, televisions or tourists, it is more often than not considered surplus to requirements.

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In his 2018 book *Authentocrats*, Joe Kennedy writes scathingly of popular nature writers who, in "taking a stance against a putatively plastic, soulless present", publish writing that "is itself mass-produced, a cookie-cutter poetics of belonging and self-care... that hides its formulas behind a suitably meditative tone. It both commodifies an idea of wildness and quietly campaigns for a patriotic traditionalism." Kennedy adds (sadly without naming names), that this "often-bad writing leverages itself as an alternative to the paranoid patriotism offered by Ukip and the rest of the right. Its good-taste conservationist conservatism looks worthy in comparison to the 'non-utopian' fascism of an English Defence League march."

Paul Kingsnorth is a novelist and co-founder of the Dark Mountain Project – a network promoting new forms of "uncivilised writing" in response to our age of ecological disaster – as well as an occasional contributor to this magazine. In a 2018 essay, commissioned in response to the documentary film *Arcadia*, Kingsnorth sought to reimagine "aboriginal Britain". "You thought it was gone beneath a deluge of motorways and malls and screens and engines and scurrying human feet," he wrote. "Much of it is."

> Britain no longer has a culture. Instead, it has a civilisation, and magic is anathema to civilisation. Civilisations suppress magic, and mystery, and beauty, and wonder. They overlay these rough superstitions with a patina of money and reason and progress, ringed around with border guards of scorn and dismissal. Civilisations are the enemies of real places.

"Real places": the place just over the hill, along the lane, beyond the forest edge – certainly not here, certainly not now, certainly not anywhere with all these ghastly people in it. The online backlash against Kingsnorth's piece recalled an obscure row from 2009 over a song called "Roots" by the retro-folk band Show Of Hands (against the band's wishes, the song had been co-opted by the BNP). The song's lyrics lamented the supposed loss of "English" culture – folk music particularly – and its displacement by "overpaid soccer stars, prancing teens/Australian soap, American rap/Estuary English, baseball caps", and so on.

The late sceptical blogger Nigel Longhurst, taking the song to pieces, recalled a live performance where a field full of folk fans had sung along with gusto to the song's chorus. "Of course all those typically mild-mannered, woolly-bearded folkies aren't

fascists," he noted. We can say the same about all the nature writers and nature enthusiasts, woolly-bearded or not, who disdain modern life as unnatural and the modern world as a non-place. Of course they aren't fascists. But when fascism comes along they may not be best-placed to see it for what it is, or to resist the pull of its song.

They are also often susceptible to the unthinking prejudice that comes with privilege. Discussing the influence of the late Roger Deakin, godfather of the "new nature writing", Gary Budden has noted that Deakin "never once considers [that] perhaps people don't choose to live in polluted urban environments and be disengaged with nature... It's not too far from there to thinking ill of working-class or immigrant communities for not understanding or appreciating the natural world 'properly'."

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Fascism is a resourceful parasite. There are few fields of modern life into which it can't find a way. It might not be that nature writing, or ardent environmentalism more broadly, is in itself uniquely or even unusually vulnerable (though that's not to say that the question wouldn't repay further study). What worries me is that, where nature is concerned, where we write and talk and think about our relationships with wild things and wild landscapes, our guard tends to come down. We can forget to be vigilant.

More than this, we overlook the strong gendering of the genre (no less significant now that the celebrated "lone enraptured male" is less likely to be a sensitive Cambridge academic than a macho loner marching moodily through the suburban periphery) and the paucity of working-class or ethnic minority voices within it. We talk longingly about "our" land as a vanished Arcadia, we make loose play with ideas such as "aboriginal" and "indigenous", and if we're not careful (and very often we're not careful at all), we swallow the nativist myth whole.

"In the current political climate," Gary Budden says, "stuff that can seem harmless and a bit woolly can end up lending itself to some very dangerous narratives about belonging and national identity, all-too relevant in the Brexit era with the far right on the move again and being taken seriously in a way that would have seemed unthinkable 20 years ago."

Perhaps, drunk on birdsong, drowsy among the wildflowers, we half-imagine that Old England, that green and pleasant land, was real after all, and not, as Helen Macdonald has said, "an imaginary place, a landscape built from words, woodcuts, films, paintings, picturesque engravings".

"We take solace in pictures," Macdonald writes, "and wipe the hills of history." We lose ourselves in reveries of Eden. The snake whispers to us, and we listen.

Richard Smyth's books include "A Sweet, Wild Note: What We Hear When the Birds Sing" (Elliott & Thompson). A shorter version of this piece originally appeared in New Humanist magazine

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