

## LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

**Robert Macfarlane (2019) *Underland: A Deep Time Journey*. London: Hamish Hamilton. 488 pp., £20.00, ISBN 9780241143803.**

David Farrier has argued that we, as humans, experience the Anthropocene in two, simultaneous registers. First is the 'terror and wonder, fashioned to fit a vision of the sublime'. Secondly, however, is the realisation that "[t]here is also something disturbingly banal about the Anthropocene. Arguably, it's in the encounter with everyday objects, surfaces and textures that we get the best sense of its scope and scale' (Farrier 2016). *Underland*, Robert Macfarlane's latest tome, seeks to find a way to live in awareness of both of these registers. He sets out to address one of the greatest questions of our time: how can we continue to live in the here-and-now, in our everyday lives, taking human-sized steps through the world, when we are increasingly aware of the vastness of deep time and the awful things that we as a species have done to the world? 'We are presently living in the Anthropocene, an epoch of immense and often frightening change at a planetary scale' Macfarlane writes:

Time is profoundly out of joint - and so is place. Things that should have stayed buried are rising up unbidden. When confronted by such surfacings it can be hard to look away, seized by the obscenity of the intrusion (14).

This is a recognition of Rob Nixon's claim that '[w]e're simply not accustomed—maybe even equipped—to conceive of human consequences across such a vastly expanded temporal stage' (Nixon 2016). Macfarlane nonetheless argues that we do need to engage. In a powerful call to action, he writes:

We should resist such inertial thinking; indeed, we should urge its opposite - deep time as a radical perspective, provoking us to action not apathy. For to think in deep time can be a means not of escaping our trouble present, but rather of re-imagining it... with older, slower stories of making and unmaking (15).

These older, slower stories are the key tool with which we can equip ourselves, as a species, to live with and through the changing times and places of the Anthropocene. *Underland*, then, is a sustained argument for the practice of storytelling and literary earth writing (or, literary geography, if you will), as a more-than-representational means of learning to live in these troubled times. Many years ago, after reading the introduction to Macfarlane's *The Old Ways*, I thought the way in which he described leaving his writing desk in the middle of the night to venture out into the cold, dark world and to lie on the earth's surface, was a subtle argument for the distancing of writing and living. That pens belong

in the study and bodies belong out-of-doors. Encountering *Underland*, however, which Macfarlane characterises as the end point in a five-book-long ‘project of deep-mapping’ (17), it is now apparent that Macfarlane is making a more subtle and compelling case: that writing is a practice, one that can promote action as well as new perspectives, and that storytelling is a powerful means of radically reshaping how we see the world, one which brings us together as people.

Through the heart of the book run two different but connected forms of story-living and story-writing. Macfarlane uses these together to create a new poetics for knowing, living with, and together tackling the changes wrought by the Anthropocene. First is the book’s close-up focus on various embodied movements through the places of deep time. Macfarlane is aware that his call to action on a deep time scale is likely to get lost amongst the brute difficulty of thinking far into the future. ‘But to think ahead in deep time runs against the mind’s grain’, he writes. ‘Try it yourself, now. Imagine forwards a year. Now ten. Now a century. Imagination falters, details thin out’ (76). To counter this difficulty and convey the sense of immediacy with which we really need to be thinking about our place on this earth at this time, Macfarlane turns to language to convey the material, sensory and primal feelings that press themselves on him as he explores the places of the underland. His description of descending into the potash drift underneath the northern English coast is exemplary of this technique:

Ear defenders on. Respirator hooked at the belt... Yellow cage door clangs shut, cage starts to its drop, steady but still stranding the stomach. Roar of the fan-house fading away, cage speeding up. Halfway down a shudder and blast as the other cage crosses on its way up, squeezing the air between cages with a *crash-whoosh* like two trains passing in opposite directions. Slow, slow, slow, bump, stop, cage door clangs open - and voices are yelling, “Ears off, lights on! Ears off, lights on!” Rock dust swirls in the air, thick enough to taste, salty on the tongue. Black mouths of drift lead away under the ocean, into the Permian (62-63).

In other, similar passages, whether describing the ‘body-bending’ wriggles through tight spaces in the Mendip caves (35), or the ‘*whump*’ sound of a transit van driven too-fast underground, in the dark, with no headlights (79), Macfarlane’s writing brings the ephemeral or unreachable depths of the underland into our bodily, human frame of reference with a jarring immediacy.

Secondly, Macfarlane’s tale is replete with social encounters which work to remind us that we cannot begin to understand how to live in a world defined by the here-and-now and by distant deep time without overcoming society’s individualistic impulse and working together. The social connections which make Macfarlane’s deep time journey possible are a far cry from the pan-global connectedness that institutions like the UN’s Paris Accords or the recent school strikes have promoted (as important as they are). For Macfarlane, who is interested in how all of us can live through the changing times and places of the Anthropocene within the multiple scales of our own lives, social connection is a necessarily intimate thing.

In the woods east of London, Macfarlane spends hours wandering with and learning from a plant scientist called Merlin Sheldrake. They end their exploration with a social gathering in the woods at a place called ‘Friendship Rise’, where ‘the fire works its magic of storytelling and conviviality’ (115). Later, moving through the catacombs under the Parisian streets, Macfarlane relies on the good will

and companionship of two cataphiles named Lina and Jay, without whom these journeys would be impossible. Perhaps the most heartwarming example of the power and necessity of sociality and friendship for living in the Anthropocene comes from his visit to Italy, where, in Lucia and Maria Carmen, his guides to the ‘wind-soured, sun-beaten rock of the Carso’ (179) he finds ‘two of the gentlest people it is my good fortune to have met’ (182).

This twin focus on embodied, sensory and human-scale encounters of the earth in its deep time existence, and the necessity of convivial, intimate social connectedness to find our way through the Anthropocenic changes, mark *Underland* out from the crop of New Nature writing that has sprung up in the past decade, such as Helen Macdonald’s *H is for Hawk* (2014) or Rob Cowan’s *Common Ground Encounters with Nature at the Edges of Life* (2015). Macfarlane’s book breaks from the likes of Roger Deakin’s *Wildwood: A journey through trees* (2007) and even his own older writings such as *Mountains of the Mind* (2003), to take a new path. This new book, which focuses firmly on humanity’s entanglement within the earth and its future and on the writing, language and storytelling as practical efforts to get us through these changing times, speaks to new works such as Mark Boyle’s *The Way Home* (2019) and Melissa Harrison’s *Rain* (2016), which seek to use movement, stillness, storytelling and human connections to help us take up again our proper place in this more-than-human world.

## Works Cited

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