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Matthew Kelly

## Finding Dartmoor

History isn't autobiography, but experience can deliver the historian her subject. I grew up in Devon in the UK, the county that hosts the landscapes of Dartmoor, a varied upland that was designated a national park in 1951. Not all Devonians are "Dartmoor lovers"—a phrase so clichéd it is painful to type—but I am, and though I cannot recall the moment of infatuation, it dates from the period of infatuations, a constituting thread of my *Bildungsroman*. Dartmoor's open spaces, wide and secluded, were places of freedom and exertion, where excess energy was converted into the endorphin-fuelled euphoria of adolescence, a Wordsworthian hit that can still deliver. Four days at Pixies Holt with my classmates when I was 12; a snowy midnight walk with the hippie-eco Woodcraft Folk; ne'er do well hostelling weekends with friends when I was 15 or 16; ritualistic pilgrimages with willing friends over the coming years; and that Proustian moment in north Oxford, when the blustery night somehow brought Dartmoor's olfactory sweet nothings of earth, stone, wood, and animal in through an open window.

As a prospective PhD student, it didn't occur to me that Dartmoor might be a historical subject. And my romanticism only partly accounts for this. I had been weaned in the mid-90s on a curriculum that was rigorous and demanding, that exposed students to highly developed historiographies and fetishized scepticism. The New Cultural History—not yet a "turn"—was our cutting edge and it was Le Roy Ladurie, Natalie Zemon Davies, Joan Wallach Scott, Benedict Anderson, Robert Darnton, and their invented traditions, imagined nations, massacred cats, and rough music who kept us up at night. There was no teat in Oxford for a suckling runt like environmental history. I took on one of those big themes—nationalism—and wrote about the Fenian ideal in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Ireland. At that time, Irish historiography was fraught with what retrospectively looks like a classic revisionist/anti-revisionist controversy, except in Ireland the disputed past had a material impact on the present. In 1998, the year the Provisional IRA and loyalist paramilitaries gave up armed struggle and the Good Friday Agreement was signed, I wrote my Master's dissertation on a nationalist literary association from the 1880s. My supervisor, Roy Foster, had done much to define the terms of the debate, and at age 22 it was a little bewildering to find myself a tiny voice in that very loud discussion.

Flicking through the book (2006) that emerged from my postgraduate work, I find very little awareness of how perceptions of the Irish landscape might have shaped cultural nationalism. In a later article I touch on evidence suggesting a young nationalist came to political consciousness as he became aware of the material precipitates of British power in the Irish landscape, but my treatment was incidental to the larger argument. Landscape features more significantly in the book I wrote about the experiences of my grandmother, her sister, and her mother as Polish deportees to Kazakhstan during the Second World War. In letters the girls subsequently wrote to their father from refugee camps in Asia, they idealised the *kresy*—Poland’s eastern borderlands—as both the lost domain of childhood and the canvas on which they painted their future hopes. There was to be no return, and at the end of the war they were transported to Britain, reunited with their father, and settled alongside other Polish refugees in a disused US army hospital on the edge of Dartmoor at Plasterdown. My great-grandfather had arrived there ahead of his family, and in optimistic letters he pictured the landscape as needing improvement, comparing it to the *kresy* where he and his wife had settled as a young married couple 20 years earlier.

Historical forces beyond their control had placed this Polish family in a landscape that allowed them to reassemble shattered hopes through a relationship with the land that symbolically connected Poland’s former eastern borderlands with England’s West Country. To learn that my grandmother, at age 16, had cycled the lanes of Dartmoor’s low-lying western fringe added another layer of connective tissue to the story, but it took a more mundane observation to awaken my historical imagination. In the last stages of writing *Finding Poland* (2010), I visited Plasterdown and my unpractised eye found almost no evidence of its previous incarnation as the site of a refugee camp. And it was this that got me thinking about what a history of Dartmoor might be.

Unwittingly, I had stumbled upon W. G. Hoskins’ idea of the landscape as palimpsest, one of the most influential ideas in late twentieth-century British landscape history. As another cliché has it, the landscape historian must begin her research with a good map and a preparedness to get her boots muddy. Much of course has changed since Hoskins wrote, not least the development of geo-mapping technologies, but the old notion persists that the landscape is a text the historian must learn to read for evidence of past lives. The cultural turn, however, had done its work and I found myself drawn not to high-tech methodologies but to written texts and the subjectivities, grammars of representation, and so on that they contain. What had Dartmoor signified and how had that



The author, some cows, and Devonport Leat in Dartmoor, below Bearddown Tors (courtesy of the author).

changed during the modern period? What values, hopes, and fears had been invested in this landscape? Standing at Plasterdown, unsure whether I was on a site that nature had reconquered or that had been restored by human hands, I understood that the material reality of what was under my feet could not be reduced to a series of texts comprising a free-floating semantic field. What I had long intuited was suddenly clear. Dartmoor was not “unspoilt,” a great wilderness touched only by sheep, ponies, and our imaginations, but its material fabric was fundamentally of human making. Delimited, yes, by its natural characteristics—I got that—but produced nonetheless. Looking at David Blackbourne’s *The Conquest of Nature*, long on my largely fanciful to-read list, suddenly seemed pressing, as did revisiting Simon Schama’s *Landscape and Memory*, a book that had enthralled me as an undergraduate.

“Nature writing,” my agent said, alert to the current market, “this is nature writing.” I insisted it had to be history. The world hardly needs more sub-MacFarlane narcissism, and I’ve a head of department as well as a publisher to keep happy. Dan Franklin at Jonathan Cape had taken *Finding Poland* and now gave *Quartz and Feldspar* the nod. I really was going to spend the next few years writing about Dartmoor! I conceived of

the book in four parts: Antiquarianism and Archaeology; Improvement and Incarceration; Preservation and Amenity; and Commoners and Folk. The serendipitous moment came a year or so into the project when I was invited to give a paper at the University of Bristol. Peter Coates told me about the Rachel Carson Center; I had a weekend to get the fellowship application in.

### **Shane McCorristine on the Arctic**

I still try to think about European exploration in the Arctic as a passage, and narrations of Arctic exploration as descriptions of movement, rather than static snapshots of unadapted bodies in an unforgiving landscape. Having travelled to Arctic Canada, I no longer assume that everything is rooted and static. Places can also be buoyant and atmospheric; the sea, the ice, the land, the stars, and the sky are all part of Arctic place.

And so, in September 2012 I arrived at the RCC with a stack of research notes, a laptop, and a sense of being an imposter. In February 2013, I left Munich with a lot of new friends, a thing for the Alps, a liking for Bavaria's sweet beer and nutty bread, a desire to eat some green vegetables, an even longer to-read list, 40,000 words worried over, a commitment to co-convene a workshop on nature conservation, and the possibility that I might be on the way to becoming an environmental historian.