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Mountaineering Literature as Dark Pastoral

We were a 70-year-old father and a 40-year-old son on our annual May Day climbing trip to Scotland from Somerset and Lincolnshire respectively. We had just avoided a rock climb in these inauspicious conditions and had turned away from the darkness of a dangerous uncertainty. Now we could enjoy the pastoral view with a mixture of relief and relaxed delight. Not that our unroped 'walk' to reach this point had been without its dark moments; we had negotiated an undercut diagonal ramp of heather, rock and woodrush grass below the mountain's summit rock wall. Even the rock-climbing guide advised that 'great care should be exercised when ascending Ledge 3 as it involves exposed moves on dubious combinations of heather and crumbling rock.' But now, as we leaned back on our heavy rucksacks of unused climbing gear in the sodden heather, we could zip up tight against the wind and watch the lightshow of sea and mist and sun in contention below.

It had begun with the familiar narrative of following a burn up over a boulder-strewn lip into a high corrie. In his book *At The Sharp End* (1988) Paul Nunn described this experience of walking into a mountain valley for a mountaineer as one of warm recognition: 'one feels that one is coming home.' He probably knew that he was echoing John Muir who wrote of late 19th century Americans discovering their first national parks, that 'going to the mountains is going home.' But Nunn was also aware that these were dangerous environments, referring enigmatically to an 'inescapable foreboding in Llanberis or Glencoe'. Writing about walking on the approach to climbs in the Himalaya under seracs he knew that at this stage of the mountaineering narrative death was not far away: 'One day soon some must fall. Oh, that we will not be there!' On 6 August 1995, walking down from the summit of Haramosh II (6666m) in the Karakoram range, close to his base camp Paul Nunn was killed by a falling serac. An experienced and respected figure in world mountaineering, whose caution had resulted in a succession of expeditions on which he had turned back before the summit, Paul is still greatly missed by those of us in the Sheffield climbing community who benefitted from his generous and lively friendship.

In *Reconnecting with John Muir* (2006) I argued that the literature of mountaineering, at its best, could be read as post-pastoral: enacting the classic pastoral movement of retreat and return, but all too aware of the dangers of idealisation in an unforgiving and unstable environment. Discussing the amazing variety, quantity and quality of mountaineering literature I wrote that 'the earliest British alpinists were scholars of English literature who

Terry Gifford's ideas about mountain literature being a form of 'dark pastoralism' are illustrated by the work of an artist whose work at least echoes that idea. Paul Evans was an outstanding sport climber and boulderer in the 1980s and 1990s living in Sheffield, and his insight as a climber undoubtedly informs this sequence of paintings of gritstone edges near the city. Evans is known for his cooperation with the academic world and creative writers and the focus of his work is nature, although more from the biological perspective than the Romantic. He wants his paintings to move viewers 'in the experience of both body and mind', and quotes James Elkins, who saw painting as 'liquid thinking'. 'In the final analysis,' Evans writes, 'my aim is to achieve something of a fragile balance between order and entropy. So, when successful, the paintings signify (for me at least) something of the fragile, yet sublime, beauty of nature in all its forms.' For more information on Evans and his work, see *www.pkevans.co.uk*. This first painting is 'Burbage South', oil and mixed media on canvas, 113cm x 70cm. *(All paintings reproduced with permission of the artist.)*

wrote about their new sport as an escape from their professional business of writing about other people's writing'. This tradition has continued from Leslie Stephen, the Victorian literary critic and author of *The Playground of Europe* (1871), to the journalist, poet and writer Geoffrey Winthrop Young, to the adult education university lecturer in English literature George Mallory, to the languages teacher Wilfrid Noyce, author of *Scholar Mountaineers* (1950), to Al Alvarez, kingmaker of poets in the 1950s and 1960s as literary editor of the *Observer*, and on to the *Guardian* writer and editor of the *Alpine Journal* Ed Douglas.

Women mountaineers, although fewer in number, have been equally talented writers, from the prolific American Himalayan explorer Fanny Bullock Workman, author of seven books published around the opening of the 20th century, to Dorothy Pilley, wife of the critic I A Richards and author of *Climbing Days* (1935), to Janet Adam Smith, literary editor of the *New Statesman* (1952-60) and biographer of John Buchan, to Katie Ives, current editor of the American journal *Alpinist*.

Anthologies of the best of this literary tradition abound, including *The Winding Trail: A Selection of Articles and Essays for Walkers and Backpackers* (1981), which retains a definitive status. Actually, an anthology for walkers titled *The Open Road: A Little Book for Wayfarers* (1899) was a set text for D H Lawrence at Nottingham University College when he took his teacher's certificate examinations. Of course, Lawrence was a keen walker, having heard of the outbreak of the First World War only when he descended from a walking tour in the Lake District. He famously crossing the Alps with Frieda in what served as a rather trying honeymoon during which they occasionally lost their way on mountain passes.

When Heather I Sullivan coined the term 'dark pastoral' in 2016 she did not have in mind the mountaineering experience or its vast and varied literature. Her conception was a larger one that could characterise literature in a pastoral mode that engaged with the paradoxes of the Anthropocene in a strategic 'doubled movement closer towards and away from green fantasies.' By 'refusing to separate our green dreams from the material manifestations of the new toxic nature' dark pastoral 'enacts the Anthropocene's vivid extremes.'[1] Might the 'green dreams' of a mountaineer's apparently feeling 'at home' in an environment that is not untouched by the consequences of the Anthropocene be read in the frame of dark pastoral? Wherever the mountaineer looks there is evidence of the Anthropocene and a growing sense of culpability, from the micro-level of plant disturbance by the 'gardening' of cracks by rock climbers documented by Paula Wright in *Alpinist*[2] to the macro-level of the problems presented to the mountaineer by glacial retreat in the Anthropocene reported in the *Alpine Journal*.[3] What mountain walkers refer to as the daily 'conditions' is, of course, the micro-evidence of the Anthropocene. A walker on Ben Nevis on 21 August 2017 would find no snow patches anywhere on the mountain that day. She might not know that this is the first day for eleven years that this has been the case, but she is most likely observing climate change at work. Walkers in mountains, who by definition must have 'green dreams' of a certain kind, are also only too aware of the agency of their environment and judging that agency is, of course, what is happening when mountaineers and hill-walkers 'assess the conditions', as my son and I were doing, to avoid dangerous choices.

So there is clearly a relationship between a literal sense of dark pastoral as an experience of personal danger in a beautiful and often idealised mountain environment, and the human culpability in contributing to the larger forces of climate as weather, or climate change as rock fall, or global warming as glacial retreat. As Sullivan puts it, 'dark pastoral is [also] a means of thinking in terms of material ecocriticism's emphasis on flows and non-human agency together with human agency.' So might Sullivan's notion of dark pastoral offer a sharper, more nuanced way of reading mountaineering

1. H Sullivan, 'The Dark Pastoral: Goethe and Atwood', *Green Letters*, 20(1), 2016, p48.
2. P Wright, 'Refuge', *Alpinist* 58, 2017, pp105-10.
3. W Haeberli, 'The Alps without Ice?', *Alpine Journal* 2008, pp201-2 and J Bamber, R Alley and D Lunt 'The Response of Glaciers to Climate Change', *Alpine Journal*, 2017, pp143-54.

literature? What might be highlighted and what might be overlooked in applying this frame to reading this body of work? Indeed, what might be considered to be lacking in the literature if it is read as 'dark pastoral' in Sullivan's sense of 'green fantasies' shadowed by the Anthropocene? In order to provide a current sample of the genre one might consider the five very different books shortlisted for the Boardman Tasker Award for Mountain Literature in 2016 for which the current author was one of the three judges.

Alex Honnold's book *Alone on the Wall*, written with David Roberts, describes the life of an un-roped solo climber as its sensational subject. Its cover shows Honnold walking across the thank-god ledge high on the north-west face of Half Dome at the head of Yosemite Valley. Honnold has his back to the wall and below his toes there is a vast drop as he edges sideways along the exposed ledge that is going to get narrower than his foot before he reaches a vertical crack. This is mountain climbing at its most simple and committing. But it is the quality of Honnold's articulation of his approach to this purest of pursuits that engages the reader, together with his honesty about the personal costs of his lifestyle and amazing achievements. He is philosophical when his girlfriend finally decided that, not only could she no longer watch his moving up, and then down, unroped, as he found the way to succeed on difficult moves, but that her own career could no longer be sacrificed to Honnold's nomadic lifestyle. On the other hand, Honnold's lifestyle led to his creation of the Honnold Foundation. After five years of living out of a van, the twenty-six year old was earning enough to have surplus income to donate to projects that make environmentally low impact, sustainable, alleviations of poverty worldwide. 'I'm deeply worried about the future of the world in the face of climate change, the unbridled use of fossil fuels, and so on. It's this passion, as much as anything, that led to the idea of the Honnald Foundation.' At the end of the book, Honnold, still in his twenties, writes: 'With my Honnold Foundation, what I really hope to do in the coming years is to improve the lives of the most vulnerable people in the world in a way that helps the environment. To support projects that both help the earth and lift people out of poverty.' Honnold's ability to control his fear and have complete faith in the techniques of his body to read rock in situations that define the sublime might provide one sense of dark pastoral. But his choosing to use his skill of bodily attunement to material nature to alleviate the consequences of the Anthropocene for some vulnerable groups of people completes a 'double movement' – in Sullivan's terms – of both horrific personal risk and environmental generosity.

More indirectly perhaps, this is also the case with Mark Vallance's memoir *Wild Country: the Man who Made Friends*. Following a traditional mentorship as a schoolboy by his head-teacher Robin Hodgkin and Sir Jack Longland, the father of his best friend, Vallance committed to the cold pastoral of Antarctica where he was base commander of the UK's most southerly scientific station at Halley Bay. It was here that the first of a succession of difficult decisions in his life tested his personal judgement and integrity. But his crucial life-changing decision followed his meeting, whilst climbing in

'Curbar', oil and mixed media on canvas, 113cm x 70cm. 'By applying paint in both upright and horizontal planes,' Evans says, 'I aim to exploit the drying, dripping and sedimentary processes to the full. Flooding the canvas on the floor allows beautiful tidemarks to appear as the paint dries. When the canvas is in the vertical plane, drips create a gravity-driven dynamic. Although there is a great deal of risk in this process, the results – with their direct correlation to processes that occur in nature – are often meditative in effect.' *(Paul Evans)*

America, with Ray Jardine who had invented what became known as 'the Friends'. They had too many parts to be judged commercially viable by US manufacturers, so Vallance came home to Derbyshire to take the financial risk and construct Friends himself on his kitchen table, with a welcome boost from his appearance on the TV show *Tomorrow's World*. Thus was his business Wild Country formed and as it prospered Vallance established the Wild Country Foundation, writing, 'I wanted to make a forceful statement to the climbing world that a company was willing to take a stand in favour of certain values to do with sustainability and strong ethics, much as Patagonia does now in the United States.' The explicit aims were 'the promotion of adventure in climbing and the preservation of the climbing environment'. Eight years down the line, when he found that his business partner wanted to make and sell military equipment, Vallance made a bold decision to sell out to him, although in the end it was his partner who sold to Vallance. Meanwhile, expecting to lose Wild Country, Vallance had committed to opening an imaginatively designed outdoor store in the countryside of the Peak District called Outside, the success of which led to the building of the first modern climbing gym in Britain, the Foundry, in Sheffield.

Five years of working for the Peak District National Park on return from the Antarctic informed six years on the board of the national park board as

'Curbar', oil and mixed media on canvas, 113cm x 70cm. In contrast to the dynamic effect of drips, this perspective of Curbar is about accretion with the depth of paint on the main part of the crag fissuring in a way that dominates the viewer's attention. *(Paul Evans)*

a nominee of the BMC where Vallance had been founding secretary of the Access and Conservation Committee, organising a mountain conservation symposium in 1977. So it was no surprise when he became president of the BMC in 2002, although there was a darker reason for his decision. He had been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, but wanted to keep 'involved in the mountaineering world': 'I like to think of my loss as the BMC's gain, but not everyone would agree with that.' Part of the reason for the success of *Wild Country* is the way in which it demonstrates that the spirit brought to bear on friendships, climbs, tough business dilemmas and BMC management, can ultimately be harnessed to deal with the onset of Parkinson's disease. But at its heart is an appreciation of upland pastoral landscapes and their vulnerability, especially for walkers and climbers in Britain, Vallance's version of Sullivan's 'double movement'.

That an apprenticeship on British uplands can lead to dark experiences on snowy mountains is illustrated in Simon McCartney's book, *The Bond*, although the reader might be left feeling that his personal survival is most in doubt in McCartney's account of two climbs in Alaska. The title is the theme of his book: the bond between climbers upon which he increasingly comes to rely in his accounts of two epic new routes in Alaska in 1978 and 1980 that demonstrate a remarkable self-awareness verging upon hubris, as he readily admits. It would be easy to say of this book that it is mostly dark with very little pastoral in that McCartney survives these two climbs only through a combination of luck and the generosity of other climbers.

The beautiful mountains that he chose to climb happen to be the most dangerous and the realisation after the second of these epics that both his skills and his psyche could not and must not be tested to such a degree ever again leads to his giving up mountaineering altogether. For a mountaineering audience such qualities resulted in this book, written with the hindsight of thirty years, winning the Boardman Tasker Award for 2016. From an ecocritical perspective perhaps the most telling image in the book is captioned 'The lighting of Studio City Macau is typical of our company's design build activity in Asia – calculated risks all.' Now living between Australia and Hong Kong McCartney makes his living from designing architectural lighting projects. In the Anthropocene such light offers an image of a very dark urban pastoral.

Also short-listed in 2016 was the biography of an Australian who travelled in the opposite direction and made his life in Britain. Robert Wainwright's biography of the Australian rebel George Finch, *The Maverick Mountaineer: The Remarkable Life of George Ingle Finch: Climber, Scientist, Inventor*, who demonstrated the value of oxygen in reaching almost 27,000ft on Everest in 1922, reveals an eccentric scientist and inventor with a complicated personal life. As a 13-year-old boy he was inspired to become a mountaineer by a view from a hill over the New South Wales bush in the spring of 1901: 'The picture was beautiful; precise and accurate as the work of a draughtsman's pen, but fuller of meaning than any map.' Although conceived as an artifice, this view was embedded with 'meaning' as well as 'accuracy'. 'I had made up my mind to see the world; to see it from above, from the tops of mountains whence I could get that wide and comprehensive view which is denied to those who observe things from their own plane.' George and his brother Max found themselves living in Paris with their bohemian mother and they began a traditional Alpine education by employing guides. Eventually one of the best climbers in Europe, George Finch also excelled academically and devoted himself initially to researching the development of chemical technology at Imperial College, London. Finch's research and personal experiments led him to controversially advocate the use of oxygen in early Everest expeditions, much against the views of the establishment and the cynicism of fellow climbers. But Finch's research back at Imperial College on his return from Everest came to earn him an international scientific reputation: he became a fellow of the Royal Society and a member of the panel awarding the Nobel Prize for physics. That research ranged widely in exploring various modes of fuel efficiency that had industrial applications taken up in a variety of worldwide industries. Quite clearly Finch was a mountaineer who was engaged with the Anthropocene in a practical scientific contribution before the Anthropocene was announced. So, without intending to, Wainwright's book exemplifies several dimensions of dark pastoral.

Finally, and by way of complete contrast, the shortlist of the Boardman Tasker Award included American science writer Steve Olson's book about a mountain event, *Eruption: The Untold Story of Mount St. Helens* (2016). When a smoking Mount St Helens actually erupted at 8.30 on the spring Sunday

morning of 18 May 1980, 57 people were killed. Olson not only tells their personal stories, he also turns the tension between the science and the cultural assumptions at play on that day into a tragic thriller. Olson intends his book as a kind of allegory about our attitudes towards our planet in the Anthropocene, 'thinking the risk was small'. The mountain had been smoking for almost two months and the Forest Service had not closed off the areas where those camping out that weekend chose to pitch their tents and tarps. Olson carefully untangles the conflicting positions of the scientists, commercial logging interests, the Forest Service, politicians of different levels, conservationists, forest cabin owners and the recreational users of the mountain. It is a case study in the mismanagement of a natural event in which economic interests guided policymaking that put hikers and others at risk. That more people did not die was a matter of luck. If it had been a weekday hundreds of loggers would have been killed. On the Saturday or the Sunday afternoons there would have been day hikers. Only the weekend before, the Mount St Helens Protective Association had led a group of twenty local people on a hike up the Green River to show supporters the old growth trees that they wanted to save from the loggers. The Forest Service gave them the all clear, but an elderly mountaineer in the party, who had climbed Mount St Helens twenty times, became increasingly uncomfortable and returned to his car. Actually, ash fell three feet thick up to 20 miles north of the mountain. Downwind to the east two inches of ash fell from a black cloud 150 miles away. Olson reports that, 'students at Washington State University in Pullman, on the border with Idaho, made emergency runs to the convenience store to stock up on beer.'

In his epilogue, Olson points out the allegorical significance of this story as 'everyone on earth faces the certainty of higher temperatures, more intense storms, degraded ecosystems, and higher sea levels as we continue to pump more carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. In many ways we are all like the people camping northwest of Mount St Helens in the weeks and days before the volcano's eruption, blissfully unaware of the risks we face.' *Eruption* represents the epitome of the dark pastoral: walkers drawn by the direct experience of pastoral awe, many of them having an intimate knowledge of this mountain, had underestimated its dark potential for life-threatening instability, having been left exposed by the compromises and complacency of the politicians and land managers. If 'going to the mountains is going home', this is a home about which many things are still to be understood, including our best relationship with it.

One evening, from our camp at Lochranza below the mountains on the Isle of Arran, Tom and I took a walk back into the history of geological knowledge. From our sea level campsite we walked along the raised beach to round Newton Point under increasingly high former sea cliffs to search for Hutton's Unconformity. Tom had a degree in geology and hopping across rocks on the shoreline he found it first, explaining that, at this point the grey Precambrian schists sloping one way were overlaid by the sedimentary red sandstone sloping the other way. It was precisely here in 1787

'Derwent Edge', oil and mixed media on canvas, 113cm x 70cm. *(Paul Evans)*

that James Hutton first began his deductions that undermined the biblical view of the single-moment creation of the earth by showing that its formation came from processes that are still continuously at work, as indeed, the raised beach on which we camped demonstrated. Hutton's paper of 1788 concluded: 'The result, therefore, of our present enquiry is, that we find no vestige of a beginning, no prospect of an end.'[4] It was at this very spot on Arran that the modern science of geology began, and it is due to be changed again by the continuing, indeed accelerated, processes of the Anthropocene as the sea rises to cover our campsite. Both short and long-term 'darknesses' are at work on this pastoral mountainous island. Awareness of this lends a certain frisson to the psychogeography of walking on Arran, just as it does to reading contemporary mountaineering literature.

Yet, since we walkers and wanders in mountains are also wonderers, I could not help feeling that there was something missing from this notion of dark pastoral, something prompted by walking beside my son and wondering about his daughters, strong walkers and wonderers already. What exactly is this need to walk where we do not live and work, and to walk on mountains in sight of a sea that will eventually submerge our homes in Somerset and Lincolnshire? What do we take back from this archipelagic pastoral momentum of retreat and return between periphery and centre? Perhaps it is a higher hope that can engage with the darknesses, for all the unsatisfactory and paradoxically unsustainable costs of our journeys of retreat.

Perhaps it is a belief that the fundamental power of awe will inform our

4. J Hutton, 'Theory of the Earth', *Transactions of the Royal Society of Edinburgh* 1, 1788, p304.

anxieties, that awe and anxiety will heighten each other as, back in our home places, we negotiate our daily dilemmas carrying these precious memories as core values, which, in turn, are why we contemplate a notion like the dark pastoral itself. Indeed, the challenge in negotiating this 'double movement' towards and away from our 'green dreams' is to avoid the darkness overwhelming the pastoral. It is certain that we must not only accept losses of biodiversity and losses in recalibrating what counts as quality of human life, but accept losses in our lives in order to have any long-term hope. But how much loss for how much hope? Perhaps we should all take a walk and talk that through.

'Tidemark', 75m, Severe, Cíoch na h-Oighe, Isle of Arran, 1 May 2017

Is it dry?

The grey rock is dry.

But we have to cross those two
wet patches of weeping moss.

Wet feet onto dry rock.

Is the wind a problem round the arête?

We'll not hear each other.

Is that mist rising or falling?

Hard to tell in this wind.

Well, we've pushed it to get here
traversing those wet rock moves in big boots.

I took a different line
but it was still dodgy.

Are these twa corbies
telling us something?

Perhaps they have.

Shall we wait awhile?

We are.

Have we made a decision?

I think we have.

Do you see that shaft of light on the sea?

It's changing by the second.

What a place to be.

Two hours from the car
and up that wet heather ramp.

Shall we go to the summit?

Let's wait a bit longer.

We are.

Look at that sea
Shining back the sunlight.

Now there's the ferry.

What a place to be.

Let's wait a bit longer.