

Stepping Off

REWILDING
—AND
BELONGING
IN THE
SOUTH-WEST

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FREMANTLE PRESS

Because we have not made our lives to fit
Our places, the forests are ruined, the fields eroded,
The streams polluted, the mountains overturned. Hope
Then to belong to your place by your own knowledge
Of what it is that no other place is, and by
Your caring for it as you care for no other place, this
Place that you belong to though it is not yours,
For it was from the beginning and will be to the end.

– Wendell Berry, '2007, VI'

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INTRODUCTION
THE BOOK MY PARENTS
DID NOT GIVE ME

Perhaps it's no surprise that I'm attracted to the natural world. My father always enjoyed exploring untamed land and, before I was born, had spent much of his spare time in the Kimberley or along the southern coast of Western Australia. My mother's guiding star was always nature. She was born in England to parents who owned a small dairy farm near Land's End in Cornwall, and then later in the 70s an orchard on the Spanish island of Menorca. Her father, my grandfather, took Wordsworth's poem 'Tintern Abbey' as the closest to gospel our atheist lineage would ever countenance. When I look back at photos from my childhood most of them were taken outdoors. Some of these photos were from a farm on Mt Shadforth, a wild piece of land behind the small town of Denmark on the south coast of Western Australia, where we lived briefly before my brother was born. I'm pictured climbing an apricot tree, at a time when I would not yet have been able to walk. By the age of eight I was avidly reading Gerald Durrell's book *My Family and Other Animals*, and telling interested passers-by that I wanted to be a zoologist when I grew up.

And yet, in my teenage years, skateboarding, girls and hip-hop became more interesting to me than fields and

trees. I never lost affection for animals and the natural world, but such matters slunk into the background, and things stayed this way till my mid-twenties.

When I was studying for a BA at the Australian National University in the late 90s, I remember enjoying writing an essay on the way in which the English tradition of landscape gardening reflected relations between humans and nature over the centuries. However it was only during my PhD studies at the University of Western Australia that I really discovered and confirmed the importance of the biosphere for my view of the world. For my PhD I was researching the writings of naturalist and nature writer John Fowles. At this time, during an extended visit to the French colony of Réunion Island, a volcanic island in the middle of the Indian Ocean, someone mailed me a paperback edition of *The Diversity of Life*, by the premier prose stylist of modern ecology, Edward O. Wilson. This moment turned out to be my Road to Damascus. Although, considering the circumstances, it would be more accurate to call it my Voyage of the *Beagle*.

Wilson's elegant prose traced the way in which every living species has taken a long journey to become exquisitely adapted to the ecological niche it inhabits. As I trod the precipitous volcanic slopes of a geologically young tropical island, I for the first time really began to see and understand the long evolutionary history of the palms and trees, crabs and spiders, coral and fish around me. What had previously been little more than hieroglyphics jumped into meaningful relief. Further I realised that I too was a biological organism making up one strand in this ancient yet recurrent web of species diversity. Those few weeks were pivotal. Standing on the dark basalt shore of Réunion Island, backed by tall palm-

covered crags, with Edward O. Wilson's evolutionary primer in my pocket, I felt a deep sense of reverence and of belonging, in my body and on the planet.

Later, I left Réunion Island, and travelled north across the equator, to the temperate forests and fields of south-west England. I found myself in the basement of Exeter University library, poring over the unpublished journals of John Fowles for my PhD. One afternoon I asked a librarian there if I could photocopy a page of the journals. The librarian called Fowles' agent. The agent turned out to be Sarah Fowles, John's wife. Then I found myself on the end of the phone chatting with Sarah and, moments later, being invited to lunch at their house. I couldn't believe my good fortune.

On Sunday I found myself at a small regional train station in Dorset where a red-haired elderly woman smiled at me from across the platform. Sarah and I exchanged greetings, and then, as we passed the train station entrance to buy tickets for the return journey, Sarah remarked: 'Oh, that's the famous writer.' For a moment two worlds collided. The godlike figure whose name was embossed on the spines of countless hardbacks on shelves throughout the English-speaking world was also a very frail old man waiting in a parked Mazda.

That day, my friendship with John and Sarah Fowles began. In 2003, I stayed with them in the seaside village of Lyme Regis for a few weeks. While staying at Belmont House and studying Fowles' journals, I took the opportunity to walk daily in the Underwood, an area of topographically topsy-turvy coastal wilderness and beech wood to the west of Lyme. This period, like my time on Réunion Island, reinforced my sense of belonging in the global biosphere.

I returned home. Like most people in Perth, I was living in suburbia, but I made regular visits to Kings Park, Bold Park, and other areas where I could feel connected to natural ecosystems, and I started to try to identify a few species of plant and tree, and of bird and flower.

However it began to be apparent to me that I didn't really understand the natural environment of the place where I was born. I found myself wishing that my parents had given me a book as I was growing up that revealed to me my homeland beyond the suburbs and the city. I went looking for a comprehensive guide that did just this, but found nothing beyond a few field guides to the plants and animals, a few scholarly bricks on Western Australia's geological history, a journal article or two on its evolutionary history. There was no single volume primer to introduce the traveller or curious local to the identity of this place, to quickly acquaint them with the contours of both its environmental and human history.

Traditionally, we use the empirical method developed during the Enlightenment to understand the physical world around us. I have found many opportunities to develop a connection with the landscape of my home through the lens of biological science. However, seeing this landscape through only the physical sciences is incomplete. For this reason this book links the insights of biology to those of literature and culture. It connects understanding from geology and evolutionary science with the letters and journals, poems and paintings of the people who have lived here. It seeks to return memory to its current inhabitants, and to take its cues from ecological realities just as much as from social ones. It seeks to provide a broader view, so that we can construct a meaningful relationship with our home.

*

Environmental history is the study of the human interactions with the natural world at different times. Environmental historians discuss subjects as diverse as the causes of the dustbowl of 1930s America and the development of agriculture in ancient Egypt. This book contains environmental history, but it is also a guide to the stones and rivers, plants and animals of this place – it blends geology, anthropology, and cultural history, in ways that traditional, anthropocentric, human histories of Australia do not. In reading this book, you may be acquiring knowledge but, more than that, it may give you the opportunity to deepen your relationship with your home. The American essayist Scott Russell Sanders writes, ‘I cannot have a spiritual center without having a geographical one; I cannot live a grounded life without being grounded in a place.’¹ Part of what this book seeks to create is a sense of self that is grounded in a place, and is meaningful.

There are elements of my history in this book, but every personal history is part of a much bigger one. Although, like most people, I live in the city, this book looks beyond the urban bubble. And although I am a product of my time, this book’s purview reaches far beyond that time, in both directions.

If you live somewhere else, then this story won’t be your story. However, you may still recognise the feeling of not truly knowing where you live. I encourage you too to make a journey of discovery in similar ways.

*

Western Australia is a place of new arrivals. More than fifty per cent of us are likely to have been born, or have parents that were born, overseas. Most of us who arrive in Perth, recently or a generation ago, have our own traditions, and cultural and geographical baggage.

In 1830, my family got off their ship at present day South Beach south of Fremantle with their sheep, pigs and other trappings of traditional British agriculture. The baggage my forebears arrived with has done great damage to Australia. My forebears, and many like them, tried to remake this country in the image they knew and understood. But this was not their homeland of rich, dark soils and heavy annual rainfalls. Things work differently here.

‘Perth’ itself is a relatively recent invention. It only assumed the size and status of a city in the twentieth century. By 1962 the isolated city was clearly visible to John Glenn, an American astronaut whose spaceship crossed the Australian continent at night. Perth became ‘the city of light’.

In a state of 2.5 million square kilometres, most of us live in a space that is 6,500 square kilometres, in suburbs that sprawl north, east and south. We live on the grid, and that means not only having the essentials of life piped into our houses, such as power and water, but, for many, being connected to an American culture machine through the medium of our TV sets and electronic devices. For those who live in contemporary Perth, circumstances do not facilitate a deep connection with the land.

Even for those born here and attentive to its ecological and human history, the knowledge we receive about our home may be only two or three generations old. Because although human beings have been living here for more

than 47,000 years, there is a strange collective amnesia about what has come before. When my grandmother was in her twenties she might have gone camping in the hills and, while lying on a camp stretcher at night, have heard a range of strange thuddings and scufflings outside in the dark. These were the sounds of quendas, boodies, bilbies, chuditch and other original inhabitants of the forest, hopping and waddling along their nocturnal paths. In the space of two generations, these animals have nearly all gone, along with their habitat around Perth: woodland, swampland and heath. Sprawling suburbs and shopping centres, paved roads and grassy ovals have replaced what came before. Most of these animals are today not even a memory in the minds of those of us who live here. Collectively, we have forgotten what this land looked like, even quite recently, and how it was lived in for thousands of years before that.

*

In 2003, I stood looking out over John and Sarah Fowles' vast and botanically diverse garden that rambled down the hill in front of his eighteenth century home. On that very first day I arrived, I noticed a kangaroo paw sitting in a small pot in the sun at the back of Belmont House. The plant had been positioned in pride of place above the lawn.

The red-and-green kangaroo paw (*Anigozanthos manglesii*) is named after Robert Mangles, who raised a specimen from seed in his English garden in the late 1830s.² The stems of these flowers are a vivid red, while the ends of the flowers are a deep green, and the plant covered with a fine, wool-like hair. This is Western Australia's floral emblem. Back in the 1830s, at the same

time as my ancestors arrived in Australia, Robert Mangles had succeeded in growing this plant in murky English weather. More than a century and a half later, John Fowles was following a historically old English yearning towards the exotic and the antipodean by growing this bright flowering herb in his garden.

On that day in south-west England, I looked at that plant with interest. I was also oddly comforted by its hint at another vivid, botanical universe, far across the seas to the south. However, if Fowles had talked to me over lunch that day of cowslip orchids, I would have struggled to tell him the name of a Western Australian plant in return.

Thankfully things are different now.