



William Havell,  
'Tintern Abbey' (1804).

# Merlin's Isle of Gramarye

Diane Purkiss

And see you marks that show and fade,  
Like shadows on the Downs?  
O they are the lines the Flint Men made,  
To guard their wondrous towns.  
Trackway and Camp and City lost,  
Salt Marsh where now is corn;  
Old Wars, old Peace, old Arts that cease,  
And so was England born!  
She is not any common Earth,  
Water or wood or air,  
But Merlin's Isle of Gramarye,  
Where you and I will fare.

(Rudyard Kipling, *Puck of Pook's Hill*)

When strangers come to the British Isles, they know about the obviously magical sites. They know about Stonehenge. They know about haunted houses. They know about Platform 9¾ at King's Cross Station. And perhaps they also sense, but can't quite locate, the eerie aura of Deep England: with its mysterious little tumps and bumps, its half-forgotten shapes under turf that mark what was once a medieval village, the pathways and tracks, some of them barely traceable, that are older than any surviving building, tracks like the Ridgeway, the Icknield Way, the Fosse Way, Watling Street. And the little things you stumble across. All the Gallows Hills. All the Skimming Dish Lanes. Once you would have tripped over worse: the dried-out skin of a hanged man, all the people buried at the crossroads two hundred or four hundred years ago, staked to the earth with the ends of the stakes left above ground, so the dead would be a warning to others.

So many words for it – eerie, an onomatopoeic word that sounds like a shriek; eldritch, a word that seems to contain the scratch of a dry branch on the window after midnight. Buried beneath the surface of everything we see are older, hidden meanings – older and often darker:

Precisely because England is so small, the signs of the past crowd thick. And because England didn't adopt big-field farming until the 1970s, the countryside close to the big industrial conurbations has often seemed eternal, identical to that seen by the Romans and the tribes which preceded them. Bounded by hedges, studded with copses and spinneys,

interrupted by ancient forests and broken by old mines that look like castles and castles that still stand, it is a living past.

What helps to sustain the eerie power is that physical sites are made visible by the storytellers that have noticed them and put them into stories. Inspired by the riches of the landscape, writers as diverse as the Gawain poet, Shakespeare, and magical realist fantasists like Arthur Machen, G.K. Chesterton, M.R. James, and, more recently, C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Alan Garner and Susan Cooper, began to write out of and also deep into the landscape.

In other landscapes, too, there are old story paths half-buried: the songlines of the Australian Aborigines, the strandlines of the South African coasts, the trails of Native American nations. But to the newcomers to and conquerors of these lands, these ways are not ours. Our ancestors chose to pretend those ways didn't matter: they chose not to listen. Even if we listen now, we mostly hear the weeping and screams of the dancers at Wounded Knee, not the song with which they tried to remake the culture whites had already taken from them. The strandlopers, like the Lakota, are all but vanished; whites interested in their past are far less interested in the misery of their present. The same applies to the Australian Aborigines, whose life expectancy is ten or more years below that of their white conquerors.

However, the songlines of England are honestly *ours*, and they are as rich and various as any others – richer, perhaps, for being mostly forgotten. We don't think of ourselves as romantic or nostalgic. While the French pride themselves on their individual devotion to pieces of *la France profonde*, and the Italians on *campanalismo*, England is often said to be too post-industrial, too urban, dead to its own *terroirs*.

This picture is immediately excised by even a quick glance at English literature, and in particular the literature of the countryside – the bits without cities, whether nature there is wild or tame. The genius poet who wrote *Gawain and the Green Knight* was among the first to appreciate the need to move backwards in time in order to travel through a land once roamed by ogres and werewolves. Gawain's winter journey to what he thinks is certain death is a search for a place marked on no map, known only orally and locally. He knows it only as the Green Chapel. Gawain must find it to keep his sworn word. It is set deep in a landscape white with snow and ice, where each hill wears a hat of cloud and a mist-cloak huge. In among the white and grey, the terrible and unnatural green of the Chapel Gawain seeks is not a sign of the renewal of life, but of his death. In fact, the poem has a happy ending: Gawain need not die, and his journey through winter to a hidden secret of the land is actually redemptive, even shamanic.

It is possible that the poet was inspired by a real and genuinely hidden place: Ludchurch, a deep chasm just south-west of the Peak District, a place said to have been a refuge for everyone in flight, from the Lollards to Bonnie Prince Charlie. Medieval scholar Ralph Elliott suggests this locale, with a name – Lud – echoing that of a Celtic deity and a fairy lord – is the site and inspiration for the poet's evocation of a chapel at once Christian and not-

Christian.<sup>1</sup> Only a little way from Ludchurch are such evocatively named places as Thorpe Cloud and Thor's Cave, and even nearer to it lie Wild Boar Clough and Shining Tor. The 'stupendous cleft' of Ludchurch rightly signifies the hidden depths of the land. The tone, the feel, of *Gawain and the Green Knight* is transferred by the poet's fidelity to this truth of the land, which goes far beyond other superficially similar tales, such as *Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle* or *Gawain and the Loathly Lady*. The unknown poet began or perhaps enriched a tradition that continued, subtle and persistent, until the present day.

If it is unlikely that William Shakespeare knew the work of the Gawain poet directly, he was certainly just as invested in the depths of the landscape as his predecessor. Wildly vague about exact map locations and travelling times, Shakespeare's near-sight is jewel-precise. Every flower and bird is significant, mythically, morally, and also just joyfully as themselves. No matter that the flora of the wood outside Athens is really that of Warwickshire. Never mind that the pignuts Caliban offers to dig for the drunkards on Prospero's island are part of Shakespeare's childhood, remembered exactly; Caliban's long nails are vital for extracting the tapering root whole from the ground. Never mind that larks and nightingales are probably uncommon in walled city-states, and that 'temple-haunting martlet[s]' may not really approve of many Scottish castles. Like John Clare later, and Edward Thomas later still, Shakespeare understands the land primarily as a venue for the movement and sight of living things.

This close attentiveness has an unexpected consequence. Knowing that every tree contains unseen and unrecognised life, knowing that the grass of every meadow is home to lives disregarded by men as they walk by indifferently, all three of these poets' fancy was stimulated to imagine that areas of dark and shade – night, woods, streams – might have other inhabitants, as forgotten and as unseen as the birds and the flowers.

Shakespeare's 'native wood-notes wild' led him to people the countryside with figures familiar from ballad, song and folktale. These old wives' tales were as much part of the fabric of his childhood as the birds of the air. And John Clare, too, wove the strange into the familiar, with his recollections of ghost stories and children's games.

But most intriguing of all is Edward Thomas. In his poem 'Lob', the secrets of England are not hidden in the land, but in the mind of a single man, Lob, the one who knows the round of the year. In 'Lob', the speaker is seeking an old man whose face he remembers, an old man who told him of a footpath with "bits/ Of mounds – that's where they opened up the barrows/ ... They thought as there was something to find there,/ But couldn't find it, by digging, anywhere.' What they sought is 'the ancient' himself. As the speaker goes in search of him, it turns out that every village has someone like this – but all of them might be one man, Lob-lie-by-the-fire, 'in England as long as dove and daw', and he it is who has given the flowers names unknown to botany, names like Traveller's Joy and Love-in-Idleness, and he also names the landscape, the Hog's Back, Mother Dunch's Buttocks; he is Herne the Hunter, and he dies at Waterloo and Agincourt. He is knowledge. He is the past and its landscape.

Thomas himself said that Richard Jefferies 'came to express part of the silence of uncounted generations',<sup>2</sup> and in the poem *Lob* remains silent, though he is spoken *about* as a speaker. Thomas's inspiration is a poem by Rudyard Kipling, also a believer in the past of the land, local knowledge of how each field worked, rain or shine. The image of the walking secrets of the past influenced Kipling's 'The Land', which describes a figure initially called Hobdenius, who knows why wheat can't be sown by the river field unless it's drained; he goes on to advise Dane and Saxon and Norman and, finally, Kipling himself. In similar spirit, Thomas proposes that a true history of England should centre on a parish, or on a road and its bends and swoops, and this for him means that we too have fought with Arthur and Alexander.<sup>3</sup>

For Kipling, such knowledge parallels the knowledge of the land Kim finds on the North-West Frontier; he is among the first to see that the eerie depth of other landscapes could also – could especially – be found in England. For Kipling, the magic was mostly gone and past. In 'Dymchurch Flit', the fairies – or Pharisees – leave an England with which they are increasingly out of tune. Kipling is interested in discontinuities as well as timeless remains, and some of the land's memories are of such violent dislocations. The very title of Kipling's book *Rewards and Fairies* alludes to a poem which calls old abbeys to 'lament, lament' because of 'the fairies' lost command'; Richard Corbet, the 17th-century writer, comments that 'they did but change priests' babies/ But some have changed your land.'<sup>4</sup> Corbet's allusion to the dissolution of the monasteries points to the presence in the English landscape of visible and material markers of a different era. Such ruins were frequently understood as loci of the supernatural; there was even a particular category of ghost, the abbey lubber, which supposedly inhabited them, wailing for the past. As Alison Shell has shown, the trepidation roused by ruined abbeys had at least part of its origins in guilt about the land grab that had accompanied the dissolution, but the anxiety also had to do with the widespread anti-papist perception that the monks were guilty of using magic.<sup>5</sup> That may be why the so-called Prophecies of Merlin and those of Mother Shipton were said to be found in abbey walls, bricked up in them as secrets.

Part, then, of the depth into which English eeriness can sink is the deep of the long, half-remembered, half-forgotten history of an old country, a history of acts of individual and collective violences. If we were to try to make a songline around all of England, it would take in Cobbler's Mound, at Shebham, where a cobbler's quick lie saved the village from the Devil, and Adam's Rocks, where a giant once lived, and Arthur's Stone, where a king fought a battle with another king, and the Kington Whetstone, which they say goes down to drink at the nearby stream as soon as it hears the first cock crow, and the chapel at Kington Church where Black Vaughan was buried, until it became clear to all that he would not lie quiet in his grave, but had to roam as a fly that stung and tormented horses, and Orcop, where a woman found her two children would no longer speak to her because they were not children at all, but fairies, or farises. And that is just in one county,

Herefordshire.<sup>6</sup> Like other counties – perhaps especially those bordering seas or Celtic lands, perhaps even more especially those that contain a proportion of wild, uncultivated land – Herefordshire also has figures around whom layers of story gather; one is Jack o' Kent, a wizard boy who sold himself body and soul to the Devil, who would take him to hell whether he was buried in or out of the church. He arranged to be interred in the church wall, so he was neither in nor out. Crows, cared for by Jack's master the Devil, clustered around him, sitting with Satan along barn ridge-poles.

Jack is a trickster, like the crows and like the Devil. Tricksters are universal, and yet they can also be local and also therefore eerie, uncanny. It is in part their transformative power that makes them uncanny; is that a stone, or a man? Yet the ability to reassimilate all such transformations and actions is a survival strategy for men and women, and also for institutions. The medieval Christian church in England was a broad one, willing for the most part to allow sacred springs and barrows, for example, providing the former could take to themselves new stories of the miraculous healing springs that leapt from the footprints of saints, and the latter left to fade quietly into a half-understood past, re-dressed with new traditions. As Nicola Whyte has shown, the people of Norfolk were willing to reconstrue them as half-known, part of a legendary world of others.<sup>7</sup> The result was to retain as normal and usual a landscape full of what was only partially understood. It was not that the church ever approved of older traces of paganism, but in medieval England it often chose to incorporate them into itself rather than to seek their extirpation. In Valerie Flint's phrase, the church sought to rescue the shrines and stones as it had rescued the people.<sup>8</sup> But some ideas of rescue were designed to alienate and even frighten the former votaries. Ancient burial mounds, including Sutton Hoo in Suffolk, became gallows hills, places for executing criminals. Alex Walsham remarks that the idea was to convert landmarks into 'accursed sites tainted by their association with the deviant dead'.<sup>9</sup> However, such layered fearsomeness also works to deepen the power of such sites, and the same was true of those repackaged as dragons' lairs or the graves of the restless dead. As Sarah Semple's work shows, all sites are consistently reintegrated into new stories.<sup>10</sup> The cumulative result is to maintain their importance to new generations; fear, more than love, limns a landscape with areas of deep significance.

Perhaps the leading explorer of the dark deeps of England was Richard Jefferies. Born in a small Wiltshire village within a shout of the newly burgeoning Swindon, his home was a small farm, but his heart always lay in the surrounding countryside, where he and his father snared rabbits for the pot atavistically, like the hunter-gatherers of long ago. He made friends with others like himself, recognising them as his kin, such as the gamekeeper on a nearby estate belonging to the archetypal Hodges of Wiltshire. Like many of those in love with deep England, Jefferies turned to the figure of the innocent child as a way of making himself less of an exile. His two novels about a boy called Bevis show Bevis able to understand the secret language of the birds and animals, the stream and the wind. Not all the animals are benign,



and by the second book Bevis is no longer listening to them anyway, becoming instead a happy noble savage. The narrative mirrors that of Jefferies' most remarkable book, *After London* (1885), which depicts the loss of the population of London to some unnamed disaster. Gradually, the city goes wild. Roads are overgrown, domestic animals run wild, and London sinks into being a poisonous swamp – into being exactly the kind of forgotten mysterious survival that dots the countryside, a surreal mystery gesturing at an unimaginable past, like the marsh at Lindow Common from which bog burial 'Pete Marsh' was pulled. Presciently, fragments not published with the original text show Jefferies' imagined London destroyed by freak winters. The novel positions *us* and *our* civilisation as the crumbling ruins the land holds secret. It influenced William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890) because it imagines extreme change, and also his *Well at the World's End* (1896), which according to Paul Fussell was one of the most popular novels in the Flanders trenches. In the later novel, Ralph must journey through the Wood Perilous to the eponymous Well, which grants life and vitality and is very like many a healing well in the English landscape. The soldiers in the trenches, perhaps thinking of the 'forever England' for which they said they fought, were attracted by the way Morris placed something salvific and ancient within their own landscape.<sup>11</sup>

Both Jefferies and Morris had an enormous influence on C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, both of whom – in Narnia and Middle Earth – created landscapes studded with mysteries and half-forgotten ruins, landscapes both based on England, though an England of long ago. Even in the first Narnia book, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the Stone Table is covered in mysterious signs that seem to date back to a time of law and sacrifice that nobody can remember. (It might be *supposed* to symbolise the stone of the Decalogue, but it *looks* like a menhir.) Later, in *Prince Caspian*, the children discover a ruined castle in a mysterious, haunted wood, only to find that it is their own old home, Cair Paravel. The ruin is not strange, but part of their own past. Later, two of the children go through a long, dark tunnel, deep into the heart of the mound of Aslan's How, and yet they know that the tunnel is more recent than they are. The heart of the mystery is always the same: 'to arrive again at our beginnings/ and know the place for the first time', as T.S. Eliot puts it in his own evocation of time and timelessness. It is exactly the same in Middle Earth, where the Third Age landscape is dotted with inscrutable, dangerous ruins – the Barrow Downs, Weathertop, Deadman's Dike, the stones of Hollin that remember the elves, and the shattered, demonically haunted kingdom of Moria. The sense of incomprehension is generated by the hobbits, who know no history but do know many fearsome superstitions of ghosts and frights – some at least of which are fully borne out by events.

Middle Earth also contains not just one but two special kinds of ruin, the drowned lands of Beleriand and of Númenor. Such drowned lands haunt the European imagination, but perhaps especially our own islands, surrounded by an unfriendly ocean. The loss of the two drowned cultures infuses Tolkien's work with a deep attachment to its relics and remains, material and human. Every fragment of stone may be part of the disappearing culture of

the High Elves, and their Nùmenorean descendants. The sense of a landscape filled with a profound loss and sadness is also established with reference to the terrible battlefields of the First World War, where Tolkien lost his three closest friends. While the Dead Marshes with their restless dead clearly refer to the nightmarish fields of France, as John Garth has shown,<sup>12</sup> there are many other sites haunted not by death and slaughter but by something harder to name, but exemplified by the survival of the ruins of Eregion long after the elves who built them are 'gone. They sought the Havens long ago'. This is reminiscent not of a war zone, but of the landscape of ruined monasteries and churches in England. To Catholic writers like Tolkien, these ruins are not merely ghostly; they are ineffably sad and autumnal, markers of a culture as lost as Lyonesse. G.K. Chesterton, too, has his Catholic detective Father Brown look up at an abbey church, and muse, 'a great graven stone. And that was also stolen' ('The Red Moon of Meru'). It was only a short step from this kind of reflection to the idea that such eerie, creepy pieces of the past might be capable of being awakened, and of retransforming the world back into the one that shaped them. Tangling with ruins can be an effort to cleanse them – an idea almost caricatured when the Famous Five plunge into tunnels to rout out the criminals who infest them – but such efforts can backfire spectacularly. The sudden mass of magical realist English fantasy writing just before and just after the Great War was in part an attempt to find ways of writing tales about a still-Romantic landscape emerging into the age of telephones and machine guns. Writers like Arthur Machen (1863-1947), Algernon Blackwood (1869-1951), Clark Ashton Smith (1893-1961) and M.R. James (1862-1936) exemplified the mix of insatiable curiosity and acute dread that the land of the buried past could inspire in men who knew too well the often concealed horrors of the very recent past. Machen's novella, *The Great God Pan*, exemplifies the trend. Denounced for disclosing frankly that at least some of what is buried is sexuality, the text mixes repeated encounters with the Roman statue of a satyr's head with neo-Gothic accounts of Frankensteinian experimentation on the brain. The victims disappear into the woods, or undergo transformations between animal and human; it turns out that Pan has possessed one of his votaries, and his return is far more uncomfortable than the cosier Pan of Kenneth Grahame's *Wind in the Willows*.

Much of the dread, as is proper, arises from the fact that the reader is left to puzzle over clues, mystified, as lost as the culture mourned and feared. The specific re-emergence of the Roman past is recurrent in all the fictions of this historical moment, from Machen's own *The Hill of Dreams* to Kipling's 'The Lost Legion' and 'The Finest Story in the World'. Kipling's poem 'The Lost Legion' connects the famous lost Ninth Roman Legion – which may truly never have been 'listed' – with those contemporary British soldiers given impossible jobs for which they will not be given credit. Similarly silenced by history are the Romans who were not noticed, but to whom Kipling implicitly credits the task of civilising us, the Britons. We meet the Romans too in *Puck of Pook's Hill*, where in 'A Centurion of the Thirtieth' Kipling presents Parnesius, a British Roman who by displeasing a commander



has condemned himself to spend his life on Hadrian's Wall, facing the Picts and the Scandinavian raiders; we also know he will eventually be defeated. However, Parnesius chooses to get to know some of the Pictish leaders, and this enables them to suggest that the Picts could be allies in holding off the Saxons, a strategy which we know will succeed. The hymn to Mithras, 'also a soldier' and 'god of the noontide', reminds us of a kind of religion more urgently relevant to any soldier than Christianity; it accentuates and annihilates the difference between past and present. In 'The Finest Story in the World', one of Kipling's most dazzling and brilliant, the apparently humble London clerk Charlie Mears is the one who understands the ancient world directly, materially and physically, producing fragmentary memories of Ancient Greek and of rowing an ancient world ship. His knowledge is an organic part of him, disrupted only by falling in love, which seems to anchor him in the present. This is Kipling's most uncanny story, because Charlie cannot decipher the signs of the past that are lodged inside him. He is remembering a time he never knew, and he is lost in it. Kipling implies that the same might be true for us all.

Such musings often hinge on the Romans, known and unknown. The idea of Roman Britain as both visible and gone matches the medieval Britain that inspired Tolkien. It is especially the fate of the lost legion of the Ninth and the lighting of the last beacon at Dover, calling for aid, that metaphorise this present absence. Yet the association of the Romans with power and civilisation makes their absence an apt warning to Britannia at the height of imperial power. At the same time, what fascinates Machen is not the white imperial surface of Roman culture, but *its* underside, an underside of woodlands and wildernesses roamed by pans, satyrs and fauns. That underside is strikingly physically like England, with its forests and pastoral landscapes.

Machen's interest in the *stone* that brings the past into the present is almost eerily proleptic of the work of Alan Garner. *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen*, *Red Shift's* stone axe (a real artefact – I've seen it) and the *Stone Book Quartet* are written into a landscape that is also a landscarp, the straight side of Alderley Edge. Goldenstone, Saddlebole, Stormy Point, Shining Tor, Shuttlingslow, the Wizard Inn – all are real places in Cheshire, along with the abandoned mines on the Edge. You can visit these places – if you've still a mind to, after you've read Garner's stories about them. Most stone-hearted of all is *Red Shift*. There are many ways *Red Shift* could be described: it is a retelling of the ballad of Tam Lin; it is an historical novel that weaves together tales of three Thomases, the epileptic visionary that is one of the last survivors of the lost Roman Ninth Legion, the man on whom a hideous English Civil War massacre turns, and the confused, brilliant, over-educated teenager whose doomed romance is the trigger for madness and despair. The eventual denouement is itself private; unless the reader has worked out both code and code word, Tom's final letter to Jan cannot be read, so that it too becomes part of a past inscrutable to us now, as the stone axe is inscrutable to Tom, except as an artefact, a museum piece, a *thing*. Because Garner has shown us where it has been, it is not a thing to us. In Garner's Cheshire, the history and

the stone and the names of places must not merely be admired. The present must embrace them, in all their bloodstained truth. The same is true in *Thursbitch*: out for a walk on the moor in our day, Jan and Sal find old stones, buildings not on maps; their compasses don't work. Time, history, the past: inescapable as the death Sal is facing, intractable as her 18th-century counterpart's sacrifices in the face of the deracination that Calvinism and 'progress' bring with them. Thursbitch is the name of the valley that holds their stories in place; like the other valleys in Garner's works, it is filled with story that cannot be abstracted from place, just as the Green Chapel is. Like the axe in *Red Shift*, the piece of Derbyshire Blue John holds the past tight to the present, keeping to itself Jack's religion, of bulls and sacrifice and stone. The very name, Thursbitch, is an unread clue; it means valley of a devil, and for the novel and its maker a valley where stones transform and are transformed in their turn.

Such landscapes are in the novel called 'sentient', the places where archaeologists might be unsurprised to find traditions of sacred use – and reuse, for as Sarah Semple's work demonstrates, the Anglo-Saxons reframed Neolithic barrows as the homes of fearsome dragons; they did not dismiss the mound's eerie power, but they replaced it in a different tale – the tale, in fact, of the dragon in the epic poem, *Beowulf*. To us, this poem is unimaginably old, but it was in part made of pieces still older, still real, still meaning-laden. As we wander today by Neolithic barrows renamed as Hetty Pegler's Tump and Wayland's Smithy, the overwhelming might of a past so storied might seem as frighteningly deep as it does to Garner and to M.R. James, both of whom constantly remind us that we are but strangers in a land that will outlive us by many centuries.

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### Notes

1. Ralph Elliott, *The Gawain Country* (Leeds Texts and Monographs, 1984), 111-15.
2. Edward Thomas, *Richard Jefferies* (Faber & Faber, 1978), 20.
3. Edward Thomas, *The South Country* (Little Toller, 2009), 137.
4. Richard Corbet, 'A Proper New Ballad' (1647).
5. Alison Shell, *Oral Culture and Catholicism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge University Press: 2007).
6. Ella Leather, *The Folk-lore of Herefordshire* (Hereford: Lapridge, 1991).
7. Nicola Whyte, 'The Deviant Dead in the Norfolk Landscape', *Landscapes*, 1 (2003), 24-39.
8. Valerie Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Princeton University Press: 1994).
9. Alex Walsham, *The Reformation of the Landscape* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 34.
10. Sarah Semple, 'A Fear of the Past: The Place of the Prehistoric Burial Mound in the Ideology of Middle and Later Anglo-Saxon England', *World Archaeology*, 30 (1998), 109-26.
11. Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford University Press, 2000).
12. John Garth, *Tolkien and the Great War* (HarperCollins, 2011).

### Further reading

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