Arthur Rackham, 'Landscape at Houghton / Near Amberley' (*c.*1925).

A Walk through Rackham Land

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Ideally, if you go into Rackham Land you should go on your own. Take a deep breath and walk. Don't look for Rackham. Let him come to you. Walk until the brambles snag your right sleeve and the relish of a cool October wind comes sneaking through the thickets. This will be Rackham's discreet hailing.

The marches of Rackham Land are hemmed on three sides by fast roads. The fourth side is open to the east with woodland and downland, and not a town in sight. It is a quiet demesne; far quieter now, perhaps, than it has been for two millennia or so. True, the shimmer zips of infrequent trains cut straight through the middle, but there are scarcely any people on the paths.

Burpham lies on the south side of the downs, which is the tamest lee. It is good to start here as the walk will take you down to the long carved river and then up into what I know as the 'empty quarter.' There is a leper's window low in the wall of Burpham Church. In the Middle Ages the afflicted could come and watch the miracle of the mass. On the Sabbath they would shuffle for miles from a quarantined colony at Lee Farm and no one else would walk their route that day. It is still called the Leper's Path.

The church is the well-spring of tracks that utter across the chalk. Now of course Rackham Land is only a place of the imagination. Its borders and expanses are arbitrary. But then all landscapes are imaginary. The Grand Canyon cares nothing for us, although we invest it with splendour. So too with this small bailiwick of English countryside, a few miles long and fewer across. Place only opens in names, reminiscence and witness.

For instance, the name Burpham purrs with the reason of its existence. In the year 900, when the Vikings were marauding, King Alfred decreed that stockaded settlements should be built right across southern England. These were refuges for the people. Livestock could be quartered and food stored. Troops were garrisoned behind the ditch and palisades. *Burh* in Old English is 'fortification.' The Saxons built defensive walls on this high place overlooking the Arun. In time a small village grew there, so Burpham is the 'hamlet within the fortress.' The poet Ted Hughes once said that every word has a goblin inside it and that this goblin is its meaning and its life. I know that Rackham would have understood this (but more of his goblins later).

Take a stick, a crooked one, when you come to Rackham Land. A stick for swishing and poking, and for pointing down its warped beam at far-off promontories. Hold the stick level on two fingers and the past and present will be balanced. Rackham is an excellent pathfinder. With his jackdaw's stare he spied over all the nooks and stooks of the land and used them.

I start my walk by going through the churchyard and stepping over the gap in the wall that is a kind of stile into a field. This is the threshold. The instant I tread the corn stubble I am in Rackham Land. To my right there is a metaled road as far Peppering Farm. I look back along the river. The teeth of Arundel Castle's turrets and chimneys are clean in the autumn sunlight. Across the valley the steep ranked trees of Herons Wood and Offham Hanger are an outlying relic of the Wealden forest. As the road becomes a loose track the gravel amplifies my footsteps. Very quickly it is as if there are two pairs of boots climbing slowly up, instead of one.

It is here between the hedgerows that Arthur Rackham begins to stroll alongside me with a dry 'ahem' at my elbow. He is alert as a squirrel and energetic as a cricket in his walking britches. The way he links my arm is thoroughly Edwardian. He is taking me to beat the bounds of his green compass.

It is 1920; Rackham, his wife Edyth and their daughter Barbara have taken an old flint-walled house at Houghton. He is from Lewisham and occasionally refers to himself as a cockney. He is an outsider but carries a hunch that his family sprang from here long ago, for he discovers that Rackham Hill rears two or three miles away. 'It is more than likely that we did originally live there and took the name when we migrated.' In Old English 'hreac' meant 'hayrick,' so Rackham is the place, or house, of the hayricks. Now there is certainly something rickety and tumble-blown about the man himself. Even in his tweeds he looks like a gangly London clerk, so the surname fits him well. He is as breeze-ridden and spindly as his drawings.

Rackham and I are now going downhill to the river. He shows me how the early October hedges are still busy with birds. There are flicks and skitters at the side of our vision. There is a cross-stitch of industry and mischief. Here a quick black eye shines among the brambles. Here a yellow beak gives an outraged needle-cry of territory defended. These are the inklings of Rackham's pixies, goblins and pucks; the gleeful, pointy little child-sprites who hide under the beech tree in Arundel Park.

We cross to North Stoke on the wooden suspension bridge. It wasn't here in 1920 but Rackham comments in his dry South London voice that he could have used it as a prompt for illustrating Washington Irving's *Legend of Sleepy Hollow*. It is worth remembering that by 1920 Rackham is already an internationally acclaimed artist. He has travelled widely. He has exhibited in Paris and Barcelona and New York.

The Arun tide is a strong, guttering muscle. Three rushes seethe in the soft wind. He is staring at them and I can see how he will use their dance in his drawing. He traces their shift and poise with his long fingers. I mentioned earlier that Rackham Land is quiet. There is hardly any human sound at North Stoke. I can hear a chainsaw a long way off, but nothing more. As the church door swings shut the cold nave chants with silent echoes.

It is scarcely more populated when the Rackhams arrive in 1920. The Great War has winnowed the young farm labourers. In gun harnesses the big draught horses have thrashed and died in morasses on the western front. And, in any case, by 1920 the drift away from the land has been going on for at least two generations. Thomas Hardy's novels portrayed a world that was already dying in the 1880s.

Down here in the valley you cannot help but see that the landscape is long tamed. We have no wilderness. In Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* the Wife of Bath says that once 'All was this land fulfild of fayerye ... But now can no man see none elves mo.' And that was in the 14th century. For a long, long time there has been little to fear here. The wolf was gone by the 1200s.

So when, in the peace after the great slaughter, Rackham comes, he finds the spinneys and banks and hills all drained of story. This church at North Stoke is only rarely used in his time, because a Duke of Norfolk chose long ago to enclose the land for sheep pasture and its population gradually drifted away.

Yet Rackham is propelled here on a baggage train of 19th-century romanticism. It is no wonder that he loved the stories of the brothers Grimm. In the pulses of industrialisation, the loss of faith and the rising sense of national identity they went inward and downwards to glean the remaining tales of the peasantry. It is much this way with Rackham, but in his sketches and painting, he seems to be intent on re-wilding this vacant space. For perhaps in the end, we, as humans, are scared of being the only witness. Scared of being alone.

We have seen coppices on our journey but there are more here at North Stoke. The fretwork of splayed poles with pools of bright water behind them put a gleam on Rackham's spectacles. I am still thinking of the imps, like pointy-hooded naughty toddlers with the faces of old men, who busy themselves at the edge of his pictures. But it seems, as I look up, that there has been some instant conjuration at work. We started our walk in autumn a mere half an hour ago, but now it is not morning. It is an afternoon in early winter. The branches are dark against a sharp late November sun.

Houghton lies across the river and there is the house he bought after 'pecking about looking for the right one.' Since Rackham is a ghost only I can hear his reminiscences of the long quiet nights of candlelight and the laughter at garden parties on Midsummer's Eve. I tell him that as he is a ghost, it is probably not a good idea to try and cross water or go any closer to the flint cottage. He smiles in that sad way of the dead and agrees. He takes a golden coin from his jacket. He explains in his meticulous junior clerk's voice

that it is a 'gold angel 1380, found beneath the earth floor of the barn next to the house.' He smiles again and puts the coin away.

I wonder if he is trying to tell me that the house was in some way given to him as a kind of mysterious endowment, of which the golden angel is a symbol. But Rackham is leading me away now with his ink-stained fingers and there is no time for more talking.

For a moment we hunch in the fresh slake of a keen breeze, as we look across to the white cliffs at Amberley. He nods his head towards them. That way then, and upwards, into the 'empty quarter.' I swing my stick in the new crispness.

Now Rackham is bent forward a little and intent on his progress. One, three, five, seven magpies skirt along ahead of us. Bold and canny they stop to wait for us around every corner. After the cliffs the climb begins, first on the High Titten road, then onto the chalk path. Colder and colder, up and up, until at some secret cue the magpies burst into flight above our heads.

My legs tremble as we come to Amberley Mount. To our left is Glatting Beacon. A dragon sleeps on Bignor Hill and there is a happy little villa in the fields below that some forgotten Roman built. Across and across the miles of the weald lie the Surrey Hills. Rackham looks towards them. Here, on the northern border of his land, is he thinking of Lewisham? I hear a tuneless murmur. He is humming under his breath.

The downs are sharp and tall here. Downs, *Dun* – the old Celtic word for fortress. What did they guard? Who did they hold off? Here are the graves of very ancient men, below their heaped barrows. Kings and chieftains all along the green tops of the ridge towards Chanctonbury, Cissbury and Ditchling.

And this is a scoured place. We stride here and I feel that there are fierce eyes on my back, and the only sound is the lost-soul bleating of the sheep. To meet one of Rackham's little sprites would be a delight. But here is the darker tinge of his imagination. I listen to Rackham's humming and recognise one of the tunes, the bloody chant of *Clerk Saunders*.

There's nae room at my head, Margaret
Nae room at my feet;
My bed it is fu lowly now
Amang the hungry worms I sleep.

Cauld is my covering now
But and my winding sheet;
The dew it falls nae sooner down
Than my resting place is wet.

In 1919 he illustrates a book of the old grim ballads. 'The Wife of Usher's Well', 'Proud Lady Margaret' and 'Tam Lyn'. Thomas the Rhymer, who kissed the Queen of Elfland and was constellated. Ghosts and lovers, and a going to and from the earth. His depicts Tam Lyn rearing as a tree, snaring the unsuspecting girl, who has been so foolhardy as to wander into the forest alone.

> And when it was done she twist about
> To ask her true love's name
> But she nothing heard and she nothing saw
> And all the woods grew dim
> Grew dim
> And all the woods grew dim.

Now the wind seesaws in the fleece-snagged barbed wire, like an old violin being played backwards. These are gibbet hills and this is Rackham singing a gallows song. If I squint I can almost see two ravens perched on a blasted ash branch.

> Ye'll sit on his white hause-bane
> And I'll pike out his bonny blue e'en
> Wi' ae lock o his gowden hair
> We'll theek our nest when it grows bare.

Shivering, earthy and oddly living, Rackham's illustrations tremble. You can feel a similar shudder in the comments of the ancient Roman poet Lucan when he describes the pagan groves of northern Europe with their 'dark springs and grim faced figures of gods uncouthly hewn by the axe from the untrimmed tree-trunk rotted to whiteness'. Bitter sap; writhing and storm-stunted bushes; it is equally bleak up here. In the dark a night-hag might bear down on you. Or a goblin from a nightmare might rear up and force you to gamble for your soul.

At last we pitch at his name place – Rackham Hill. I have a long walk back across lowering paths to the car park at Burpham, but it seems that Rackham is going no further. He looks down at the Rackham Banks which are stepped by furrows eked by medieval farmers. The bones of his ancestors are in the soil below us. Rackham, the outsider, will stay here high as a sentinel post.

The wind robs the words from my mouth and makes my eyes stream. Here, on the cloud-ridden downs and standing alongside Rackham, it is one of those moments described by Stephen Graham:

As you lie prone under the trees of the forest, or sprawl wet
legged by a mountain stream, the great door, that does not
look like a door, opens.

I look round. There is no thin balding man in gorse-green tweeds and half-moon spectacles. Instead there stands a crooked hawthorn, torqued twice around itself and warped sideways. Its two gnarly branches reach towards Houghton.

I walk the quick way home across the open hills, lest I too become a spiny tree-rick, a creaking harp of twigs, through which the wind of Rackham Land whistles the tune of Tamlyn.

And all the woods grew dim
Grew dim
And all the woods grew dim.

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