

A word to the wild

Robert Macfarlane is on a mission to collect vanishing natural words and release them back into our habitat

ILLUSTRATION BY MELISSA CASTRILLON

In 2007, a new edition of the *Oxford Junior Dictionary* was published, aimed at seven-to-nine-year-olds. A sharp-eyed reader soon noticed that a number of words for nature had been removed from the edition. Under pressure, Oxford University Press revealed a list of the entries that – remarkably – it no longer considered relevant to a modern-day childhood. The deletions formed a near-perfect A to Z, and they included *acorn, adder, ash, beech, bluebell, buttercup, conker, cowslip, crocus, cygnet, dandelion, fern, gorse, hazel, heather, heron, horse chestnut, ivy, kingfisher, lark, minnow, newt, otter, pasture, poppy, starling, sycamore, wren* and *willow*. Among the words taking their places in the new edition were *attachment, block-graph, blog, broadband, bullet-point, celebrity, chatroom, committee, compulsory, cut-and-paste, MP3 player* and *voice-mail*.

My first reaction on learning of the deletions was astonishment. For *blackberry*, read *Blackberry*? My second was dismay. Acorn – gone! Bluebell – gone! I tried to imagine walking through a landscape in which the creatures and plants themselves had vanished, where grey gaps were all that remained of kingfishers, larks, beeches and poppies. My third reaction was to resolve to do something in response.

For years now I have been fascinated by the relations of language and landscape. It has become a habit, while travelling in Britain and Ireland, to note down place-words as I encounter them: terms for particular features of terrain, elements, weather and creaturely life as they exist in the dozens of languages and dialects of our islands. *Smeuse*, say, a Sussex word for ‘the gap in the base of a hedgerow made by the regular passage of a small animal’, or *crizzle*, a Northamptonshire verb for ‘the freezing of open water’, or *zawn*, a term used in Cornwall for ‘a wave-smashed chasm in a sea-cliff’.

Some of these terms are beautiful for their compressive precision – *ammil* is a Devon term for ‘the gleaming film of ice that cases twigs and grass-blades when a freeze follows a thaw’ – and others for their visual poetry: *rionnach maoim*, for instance, a Hebridean Gaelic phrase meaning ‘the shadows cast on the moorland by clouds moving across the sky on a bright and windy day’. I’ve come to relish words such as these for the quality of attention to the natural world that they record.

When I learned of the OUP deletions, I decided to put my word-collecting on a more active footing. I wanted to gather as many of these place-terms as possible – and then to release them ➤➤

➔ back into imaginative circulation, in the hope of rewilding our language for landscape. For several years I travelled to meet the users and keepers of such place-words around Britain: crofters, farmers, sailors, fishermen, naturalists, poets, artists and countless everyday people who knew and loved their particular landscapes. I pored over glossaries and dictionaries from the 18th and 19th centuries in archives and on the Web; I sent out letters and emails to hundreds of people.

And the place-words came flooding in. By 2014, I had collected over 3,000 terms from more than 30 languages, dialects and idiolects, from *aftermath* ('the first fresh growth of grass after a meadow has been cut') to *zwer* (used on Exmoor to denote 'the sound made by a covey of partridges taking flight'). I organised them into nine distinct glossaries (Uplands, Woodlands, Coastlands, etc) and then in the spring of this year I published the glossaries as part of a book called *Landmarks*, the subject of which was language's wonderful capacity to enchant the natural world.

It is clear that a literacy of landscape is fast falling from us, up and down the ages. The substitutions made in the *Oxford Junior Dictionary* (the outdoor and the natural being displaced by the indoor and the virtual) are not the cause but a symptom of shifts in our culture and language. The Head of Children's Dictionaries at OUP explained the changes on the grounds that the dictionary needed to reflect the consensus-experience of modern-day childhood. 'When you look back at older versions of dictionaries, there were lots of examples of flowers, for instance,' she said. 'That was because many children lived in

semi-rural environments and saw the seasons. Nowadays, the environment has changed.'

There is a realism to her response – but also a worrying acceptance of the idea that children might no longer see the seasons, or that the 'semi-rural' environment might be so unproblematically disposable. In 2012 the National Trust commissioned a report into childhood experience of nature. The findings were alarming: between 1970 and 2010, the area in which British children were permitted to play unsupervised shrank by 90 per cent. Screen-time has increased dramatically. Nine out of ten children can identify a Dalek; three out of ten a magpie. The disconnection from nature is greater now than it has ever been. 'The children out in the woods, out in the fields,' said Chris Packham in May 2014, 'enjoying nature on their own – they're extinct.'

The Trust's response was its inspired and inspiring '50 things to do before you're 11¾' campaign. My own was to send my glossaries out into the world. And when I published *Landmarks*, I asked readers to send in, by postcard and letter, by email or carrier pigeon, their own wild words.

I anticipated a light flurry of correspondence; I got an avalanche. I have been sent more than a thousand new words – and still they keep coming. I went away for a week, and had to borrow a four-foot mailbag to carry the letters home when I returned. Along with the words have come poems, books, stones, photographs, paintings, notebooks and leaves. The letters have come from nine-year-olds and 90-year-olds, from former miners and active farmers, from a lollipop man, and from all over the country. *Puthery, dumberclash, dimmity, strish, ystrad, ghoyle, soss, canch, rhiw, skolder, haggery...*



Someone wrote to say that she has been collecting place-words for 40 years, keeping them on notecards in a wooden box, and offering to share the contents of that treasure-chest and word-hoard with me.

Many of the letters referred in shocked terms to the *OJD* deletions. A number have come from parents who have taken their own children out into the landscape and encouraged them to learn old words for nature – and to make new ones up: *wunnels* for ‘the wild tunnels pushed through bramble patches by creatures’, *crittlecronks* for ‘the spiky root-remnants of a tree felled by a storm’.

This whirl of words speaks powerfully, I think, of the care and knowledge that people still possess of their places, and the joy taken by so many in the close relations of language and landscape. So, if you have place- and nature-words of your own, please do send them to me and the National Trust. When *Landmarks* is published in paperback next year, I plan to include a new glossary, which collects and shares these new wild words I have so generously been given. ○



Acclaimed landscape and travel writer **Robert Macfarlane** is a Fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge. His most recent book, *Landmarks*, encourages readers to re-engage with the language of the natural world.

i For more details on the Trust’s work to connect children with nature: nationaltrust.org.uk/mag/childrenandnature

Natural words

Robert’s top discoveries

Roak

(East Yorkshire): a sea mist that rolls into shore.

Snow-scarts

(Borders Scots): the long thin patches of snow that still lie in stream-cuts and lee hollows after a thaw.

Rhew

(Welsh): a footpath on the steeply rising slope of a hill.

Dimmity, dimpsey

(Devon): twilight.

Wicker

(Cheshire): a goldfinch.

Burra

(Oxfordshire): a sheltered spot, tucked away out of the wind, where certain flowers are able to grow.

Kesh

(Northern Ireland): a makeshift ramp or bridge over a stream or marsh.

Hazeling

(Hertfordshire): of a spring morning, warm and damp and good for sowing seed.

Do you have a natural word to share? Email magazine@nationaltrust.org.uk with ‘Nature words’ as the subject, or write to the address on p9. Robert will publish the words we collect, attributed to National Trust members, in the paperback edition of *Landmarks*, due to be published in May 2016.