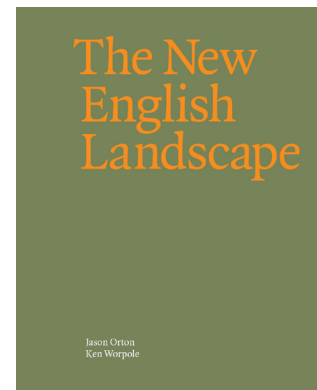


Ken Worpole & Jason Orton:
The New English Landscape
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As I was reading *The New English Landscape*, *The Times* was trailing its series on The Wild Places of Britain. If ‘wildness’ is taken to mean the absence of human interference, then the series is wilfully self-defeating; an invitation to put an end to exactly what it celebrates. It is in fact a fairly safe bet that there is nowhere in the country that has not already been substantially shaped or reshaped by human hands. So where is wildness to be found? And what is left to be discovered? The answers according to this book, and a number of others now reaching our book stands, or at least our mail order catalogues, seem to lie not in a flight to the exotic but in the re-evaluation of the local and familiar. It is to be found looking deeper in to the marginal, the neglected and the overlooked; in appreciating or interpreting the landscapes of disruption. It is in developing what Worpole calls ‘a new landscape aesthetic’ that the real adventure lies.

Scattered across the four essays that make up Ken Worpole’s contribution to *The New English Landscape*, there’s something of a potted history of our changing appreciation of environment. In one essay he details the shift from *landschaft*, an approach to landscape that chronicles custom, labour and culture, to *landskip*, the more romanticised approach of pictorial representation. In another he talks of the huge social changes that follow the Second World War and ‘the unique political settlement of the period’. This, he argues, ‘democratised attitudes to landscape and access to it’ as well as creating the concept of landscape as a common heritage. In the final essay he looks at some modern approaches to landscape restoration; lessons ‘in the sympathetic recuperation and re-enchantment of some of the most blighted landscapes’. Above all, and perhaps what all this is leading up to, he states his belief that ‘the requirement to interpret and re-evaluate contemporary landscapes... is vital’. It is already prefigured in what he calls ‘a renegade aesthetic’. One that is perhaps shared by the increasing number of writers who document the edgelands, an aesthetic which takes in to account the impacts of industrial construction, post-industrial decay, the increasing blurring of town and country and the strange phenomenon of a countryside which, whilst bearing the huge imprint of humanity, can sometimes be strangely devoid of humans.

When writing about these subjects Worpole is clearly influenced by his own love of the eastern margins: the landscapes of the River Lea, the Thames estuary and of coastal Essex. In fact, he argues that a post-war shift in our attitude to landscape has been accompanied by an eastward shift in the ‘locus of the English imagination’. Previously it was the ‘Arcadian interior’ that represented the imaginative English landscape -the bucolic central England scenes of rolling hills, winding lanes, long hedgerows and a distant church spire. Now it has migrated, he says, to the broad horizons of East Anglia, the bleaker beauty of the marshlands and coastal edges and the disrupted landscapes of Essex. I am not certain how far such a shift has happened, is happening, or remains part of the renegade aesthetic. Certainly images of the earlier idealised England –the one that fits with John Major’s warm beer and cricket matches on the village green- still greeted me on posters at Heathrow Airport when I passed through it last week. But certainly there is a swell of interest in the landscapes of eastern England and his own affection for them is palpable. It surfaces particularly when he allows himself to

slip into personal reminiscence; of a childhood on Canvey Island, of the canal boat on which he toured the River Lea with his wife or of his explorations of the tortuous Essex coastline.

He is, in short, a champion of everything east of Hackney. His knowledge of Essex in particular emerges in such fascinating accounts as that of the many experiments in communal and idealised living that were established in the county; colonies that were Tolstoyan, anarchist, socialist, pacifist or municipal, some of which left their decaying remnants behind. As efforts in social reform or moral renewal, job creation or a 'return to the land' ethic, they were as instructive in their failures as they were inspirational in their visions. Just as interestingly, he explores the county's uneasy relationship with the sea, the flatlands where the separation between land and water is uncertain and constantly shifting. It is, he says, 'a place where our understanding of the sharp division between the categories of things become amorphous ... where the land, the sea and the sky blend into each other in unstable measures.'

This instability is well illustrated in his account of the 1953 floods, the Great Tide that took 300 lives in eastern England and another 1,800 in the Netherlands, most of whom, trapped in their beds, 'awoke to die'. It is an instability that will be increasingly felt as the effects of climate change and rising sea levels take hold.

It seems appropriate that in his final essay Worpole quotes Burke's statement that the sublime is 'an admixture of beauty, order and terror', for the element of menace seems a continuous thread in this new approach to landscape appreciation, whether the edgelands or the eastern margins. It is there in both the disruption and the decay, in the massive imprint of humanity as well as the constant reminders of human limitation, the post-industrial equivalents of Ozymandias. We are perhaps witnessing a modern reinvention of the Romantic sensibility. The early stages of the industrial revolution and their impact on the countryside, engendered in the poets and painters of the early 19th century, a passion for the sublime as manifested in the wildness of rock and torrent, mountain and waterfall, wind and cloud and storm-tossed sky. This was their reminder of the elemental forces of nature, raw in their beauty, massive and menacing, and speaking of mortality and human insignificance. Now as we enter the new era of the Anthropocene, in which human activity has become the dominant force in shaping both climate and environment, we find something of the same sensibility in the menacing lines of marching pylons, the rows of decaying riverside cranes, the vast acres of landfill and of polluted wasteland, the collapsing sheds and abandoned military sites, the rotting hulks of barges and the blank-faced, mysteriously humming and disturbingly unpeopled factories. In both approaches the shaping hand behind the massive force of things seems equally invisible.

This is perfectly illustrated in the photographs by Jason Orton which make up the other half of the book. There are twenty of them and in not one does a single human figure appear. They are perfectly pitched to accompany the various themes in the text and, apart from a few more pastoral scenes of the Lea Valley, they seem largely to document either damage or decay. They show the vast and desolate plateau of mud that is the earth-moving exercise for the new Gateway container port, its immensity of scale giving it the appearance of a machine-made desert. Or the defenestrated and overgrown greenhouses of the abandoned colony at Mayland. Or mudflats and marshlands dissolving into the sky and the sea and peppered with lichen covered jetties, wind pumps, rotting posts and abandoned sea defences. Collectively they have the feel of something post-apocalyptic. They are the very antithesis of the Arcadian interior, but are in their own way sublime. In their wide views, their watery, washed-out colours and in their very emptiness, they have a strange serenity. But this is the calm after a storm. It is as though humanity, having made its mark, has moved on. They document not just an impact but an ending.

If all this sounds dour, then I should issue a corrective. These are beautiful photographs and this is a fascinating book. I highly recommend it. It is part of the poetry of place.