

The depths of the wild

Wilderlands begins when Britain's landscape was still relatively wild. Relatively, because Eloise Kane begins about 12,000 years ago, when the glaciers of the last Ice Age were succeeded by the wildwood that is now the stuff of fairy tales. By that point, the landscape was already a human product, most of the megafauna that had shaped earlier ecosystems having become extinct, quite possibly through hunting. This is, however, when people established a permanent presence in Britain and our era of direct influence truly began.

The wildwood didn't last long. About 6,000 years ago, Britons realized that they didn't need to rely on wild food for sustenance: they could raise crops and manage herds instead. From thereon, the landscape changed radically. Kane outlines the dewilding that began in the Neolithic period and continued, with a temporary reprieve around the early Middle Ages, into modern times.

Other writers have told this story, most notably the landscape historian Oliver Rackham. There have been two books published in the past fifteen years called *The Making of the British Landscape*, by Francis Pryor (2010) and Nicholas Crane (2016). But *Wilderlands* earns its place on the shelf. Kane works within the rapidly developing discipline of palaeoecology, which uses advances in pollen analysis and ancient DNA to provide a more sophisticated and localized window into the past, and she provides a useful service in collating the most recent science and outlining the most pertinent debates. Combined with accounts of her own fieldwork – including a foray into the depths of Silbury Hill – this gives the feeling of being accompanied by a capable guide.

It is perhaps Kane's academic background that prevents her falling into the trap of romanticization that has tripped up so many other nature writers who have explored the ancient past. Artefacts found in watery places, she writes, are possibly evidence of ancient ritual, but then again may be evidence of the prehistoric equivalent of a recycling bin. Similarly, the Caledonian Forest was nothing but a myth peddled by Roman writers.

But where Kane really travels beyond the previous literature is in her treatment

of the human relationship with the wild. Extracting meaningful insights into the psychology of our ancestors is difficult. What to make, for instance, of the eagles interred alongside humans, 1,000 years after the original burial? Were they nesting in the cliffs or placed there intentionally? When faced with such mysteries, there is an “inherent danger ... that our *current* view of the wild is what leads us to believe that these birds had a special place in later prehistory”. What these eagles actually meant, we will probably never know. Similarly mysterious is Seahenge, a Bronze Age monument made of tree trunks that Kane suggests may have represented the woodlands that were rapidly disappearing due to agriculture and climatic shifts – an early example, she posits, of ecological grief. Kane weaves a credible portrait of our ancestors from such fragments, and breathes life into our ancestors in a way that feels rare and authentic.

It also feels necessary, given the dominance of rewilding in nature conservation. British people today have a somewhat tortured relationship with the wild, writes Kane, marked out by shame, longing, curiosity and entitlement. At the same time, the notion of the wild has become a powerful marketing tool, used to describe species and landscapes that are really anything but: the rebranding of a network of small country roads along the Irish coast as the Wild Atlantic Way, for example, attracted some 8.4 million tourists in 2019. Archaeology has too often taken a backseat in the discussion of how we should design the wild landscapes of the future, but to make sure they are places not built on “nostalgia, guilt and ideas of what is beautiful”, deepening our understanding of the living world of the past is essential.

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Notes

Are you able to transcribe my notes if I were to write them and include them on the back of the article?