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Next the Sea: Eccles and the Anthroposcenic

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the Anthroposcenic, whereby landscape becomes emblematic of processes marking the Anthropocene, through a specific site, Eccles on the northeast coast of Norfolk, England. The coast has become a key landscape for reflections on the Anthropocene, not least through processes of erosion and sea level change; the title phrase 'next the sea' here carries both spatial and temporal meaning. Through Eccles the paper investigates cultural-historical Anthropocene signatures over the past two centuries. Between 1862 and 1895 a church tower stood on Eccles beach; in preceding decades the tower was half-buried in sand dunes, but emerged after these were eroded by the sea. In 1895 the tower fell in a storm, although fragments remained intermittently visible over the following century, depending on the state of the beach. The paper takes Eccles tower as a focus for the exploration of themes indicative and/or anticipatory of the Anthropocene, including sea defence and geological speculation on land and sea levels, Eccles featuring in Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology*. The tower became a visitor attraction, and discussions around the 1895 fall are examined, in relation to the spectacle of ruin, claims over the site and anxieties over defence. The periodic beach exposure of bones from the former churchyard prompted reflections on mortality, also present in literary engagements with Eccles by figures such as Henry Rider Haggard. The paper traces the persistence of fragmentary ruin memory through twentieth-century sea defence initiatives, and the ways in which late twentieth-century concerns for climate change and sea level rise generated a rediscovery of the site, yet also led to its effective disappearance as the beach built up following new sea defence construction. Eccles beach speaks to twenty-first-century preoccupations, aspects of its history over two hundred years making it emblematically Anthroposcenic.

If, on a calm summer's day, a visitor came to Eccles, on the coast of northeast Norfolk, in eastern England, knowing nothing of the place's past, and walked through the dunes at North Gap, they would find a beach of soft sand, and the North Sea. Due east, northern Holland. Immediately south, offshore defensive rock reefs shield the village of Sea Palling. North, soft cliffs rise to Happisburgh, with scant protection and rapid erosion. At Eccles, sand dunes top, and sometimes bury, a concrete wall. The narrow, dog-legging lanes to the gap lend remoteness; a few houses and shacks behind the marrams, minimal designated parking, and no facilities. A decent stretch of beach; all you see is sand.

On 23 January 1895 a church tower fell here. Circular, with octagonal upper section, and around seventy-five feet high, the tower of St Mary's, a relic of the former Eccles village, stood in isolation on Eccles beach.[1] If such a tower fell today, it would likely be taken as a sign of coastal and climatic instability, an anxious portent. Dunes had covered the lower parts for preceding decades, until late in 1862 a storm cut sand and marrams away. After thirty-three years' beach standing, a January gale toppled the tower. Today's casual visitor would never know; no trace remains, no signs alert.

Eccles and the Anthroposcenic

The title of this essay, 'Next the Sea', has on occasion formed part of Eccles' given name, as in W.H. Cooke's 1908 study, *Eccles next the Sea*, and in Ronald Pestell and David Stannard's local histories of *Eccles-Juxta-Mare*.[2] Today Ordnance Survey maps show a plainer

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[1] The commonly attributed date for the destruction of Eccles village in a storm is 1604, but in 2014 local historian David Stannard posited 1570 as more likely. See D. Stannard, The timing of the destruction of Eccles juxta Mare, *Norfolk Archaeology* 47 (2014) 45–54.

[2] The phrase 'next the sea' survives locally in common usage for the north Norfolk seaside town of Wells-next-the-Sea, itself now a mile from the sea following salt marsh accretion and defensive pine plantation.

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'Eccles on Sea'. 'Next the Sea' works here as a title however for its combination of spatial and temporal meaning; position and destination, adjacency and fate. Erosion makes the place grow smaller. Eccles dwindles from medieval village to scattered dwellings, in the main no longer next to but below sea waters.

In a time when shorelines register climate change, and sea levels signal geologically epochal re-designation, Eccles beach becomes 'Anthroposcenic'.[3] The term Anthroposcenic denotes landscape emblematic of processes marking the Anthropocene, indicating ways in which cultural and historical geographic approaches to landscape might inform Anthropocene debate, harnessing landscape's capacity to shuttle between solid ground and imaginative subject, different registers and modes of value. Anthroposcenic landscape activates plural voices, cohabiting sites through time; this Eccles essay shows voices scientific, artistic, literary, religious, antiquarian, touristic, residential, proprietal, archaeological, all preoccupied with the beach. The Anthroposcenic works emblematically not only as reflective or symbolic of processes such as sea level rise and coastal erosion, but as generative, landscape articulating the Anthropocene in terms of both narrative voice and the connective meaning of 'articulation'. Through the Anthroposcenic, diverse and ostensibly independent themes may connect, landscape gaining prismatic quality. A site where human structures have been eroded by the sea, where defensive measures have claimed success or failed, and where geologists, policy makers, property owners and pleasure seekers have pondered why a tower might have been on a beach, seems apt for Anthroposcenic study.

A group of geologists led by Jan Zalasiewicz have recently explored 'the stratigraphical signature of the Anthropocene in England', tracing deposits carrying signals including pesticide residues, microplastics and artificial radionuclides, in 'an initial sketch of how the Anthropocene might be recognized in England'.[4] This essay pursues complementary cultural-historical landscape 'signatures' of the Anthropocene, indicating a potential seam of science-humanities exchange. From the geologists' stratigraphical signatures, future cultural-historical studies might emerge of, say, upland farms affected by Chernobyl fallout, seasides marked by microplastics, or coastal landfill sites where marine action exposes an archaeology of late twentieth-century consumption. Landfill erosion might thus give us the plastic human figure, from a precisely-dateable Christmas toy craze, tumbling to the beach. Here might be a twenty-first century extension of a longstanding cultural trope of coastal erosion, encountered at Eccles and elsewhere and discussed below, of human bones exposed from coastal graves.

This essay gathers Anthroposcenic material across two hundred years, in part concerned with how Eccles beach, faraway in time or recently past, becomes resonant for today. The Anthropocene, unique in being epochally prospective as well as retrospective, raises complex temporalities, with past, present and future entangled, notwithstanding the stratigraphic imperative for an inaugural 'golden spike' in the sediment record, with the current favourite being from post-1950 atmospheric nuclear weapons tests.[5] Whatever the precise dating required by the International Commission on Stratigraphy, the processes making the Anthropocene were evidently set in train long before 1950, and the Anthropocene is also prefigured by a genealogy of commentary on the human geological presence. Cultural-historical Anthropocene signatures should thereby acknowledge but not be confined by formal periodisation, indeed they may register what Caitlin DeSilvey terms 'anticipatory history', landscape now and landscape then conversing.[6] Emblematic landscapes of environmental change carry complex histories to the present, and this essay therefore crosses prospective chronological epochal borders in taking a story from the mid nineteenth century to now. One prediction for the Anthropocene, should it be formally designated, might be that the scientific requirement for precise stratigraphic temporal demarcation will jostle with Anthropocene stories migrating across such lines. This essay thereby anticipates a question for future histories, given that the Anthropocene may, in geological terms, have a peculiarly precise dating, even down to a calendar year. Should Anthropocene histories stop at the beginning, with, say, 1950 becoming a checkpoint, beyond which lies Holocene territory? This would seem unduly restrictive, and this essay therefore follows a permissive path over two centuries. In doing so it encounters past figures making distinctly anticipatory statements, as when Charles Lyell discusses in *Principles of Geology* (considered below for its account of Eccles) the geology of humankind: 'The earth's crust must be remodelled more than once before all the memorials of man which are continually becoming entombed in the rocks now forming will be destroyed'.[7]

In examining Eccles as anticipatory site, this paper echoes other landscape research seeking to activate the past. Thus, in work on 'sustainable flood memory', Lindsey McEwan, Owain Jones and others examine, in the context of 2007 and 2014 river flooding in southwest England, the ways in which history and memory may foster resilience in traumatic times, sometimes confounding prevailing expectations by including elements of joy alongside grief.[8] Attention to Eccles beach echoes DeSilvey's comment that:

> We live in a world dense with things left behind by those who came before us, but we only single out some of these things for our attention and care. We ask certain buildings, objects, and landscapes to function as mnemonic devices, to remember the pasts that produced them, and to make those pasts available for our contemplation and concern.[9]

DeSilvey notes that while such requests are often made in connection with efforts of preservation or restoration, they might also apply where intervention is resisted, and change embraced. Eccles, with the church as fallen structure, where only minor efforts were ever made to preserve the tower, here offers a pertinent story. The fallen tower also points to the particular form of change classified as ruination, on which work has proliferated in recent years, with some, as in Hayden Lorimer and Simon Murray's study of a crumbling modernist seminary, taking a 'site-specific' approach,

[3] D. Matless, The Anthroposcenic, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 42 (2017) 363–376; D. Matless, Climate change stories and the Anthroposcenic, *Nature Climate Change* 6 (2016) 118–119; D. Matless, Seaview: the Anthroposcenic, in: T. Dee (Ed.), *Ground Work*, London, 2018, 185–188.

[4] J. Zalasiewicz, C. Waters, M. Williams, D. Aldridge and I. Wilkinson, The stratigraphical signature of the Anthropocene in England, *Proceedings of the Geologists' Association* (2017) in press, published online, quotation from page 2 of online text.

[5] C. Waters et al., The Anthropocene is functionally and stratigraphically different from the Holocene, *Science* 351, 6269 (2016) 137–147 and J. Zalasiewicz et al., The Working Group on the Anthropocene: summary of evidence and interim recommendations, *Anthropocene* 19 (2017) 55–60.

[6] C. DeSilvey, Making sense of transience: an anticipatory history, *Cultural Geographies* 19 (2012) 31–54.

[7] C. Lyell, *Principles of Geology*, volume II, London, 1866, 563.

[8] L. McEwen, O. Jones and I. Robertson, 'A glorious time?' Some reflections on flooding in the Somerset Levels, *Geographical Journal* 180 (2014) 326–337; J. Garde-Hansen, L. McEwen, A. Holmes and O. Jones, Sustainable flood memory: remembering as resilience, *Memory Studies* 10 (2017) 384–405; L. McEwen, J. Garde-Hansen, A. Holmes, O. Jones and F. Krause, Sustainable flood memories, lay knowledges and the development of community resilience to future flood risk, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 42 (2017) 14–28.

[9] C. DeSilvey, *Curating Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving*, Minneapolis, 2017, 3.