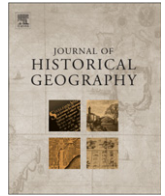


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Historical Geography at Large

'A local habitation and a name': Writing Britain[☆]

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Abstract

The history, natural resources, and constitution of the land of Britain have preoccupied writers from the ancient Greeks onwards. The *Writing Britain: Wastelands to Wonderlands* exhibition currently at the British Library presents these histories in a tour around a series of place-writing genres (Rural Dreams, Dark Satanic Mills, Wild Places, Beyond the City, Cockney Visions, and Waterlands), using the work of individual authors to build an eclectic composition of the magical and factual realm of Britain. In both the exhibition and the accompanying catalogue, a neo-romantic version of the idea of *genius loci* works to celebrate literary Britain as a 'cornucopia' of local and localised texts, invoking chorographical traditions. This article examines the problematic geographical vision of *Writing Britain*, particularly its supra-historical approach, its reductive truth binaries, and its conservative reliance on belonging. Its 'exhibition as landscape' approach is also compared to that of the 1951 Festival of Britain and to another 2012 exhibition at Tate Britain, *The Robinson Institute*.

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The history, natural resources, and constitution of the land of Britain have been a subject of its literatures from the ancient Greeks onwards. The *Writing Britain: Wastelands to Wonderlands* exhibition at the British Library presents these histories in a neo-romantic present, arranging them into a tour around a series of landscape genres (Rural Dreams, Dark Satanic Mills, Wild Places, Beyond the City, Cockney Visions, and Waterlands) which reflect particularly enduring forms of British place-writing.¹ The exhibition comprises over 150 works on loan or from the library collections, but takes pains to avoid coming across as merely bookish: these items include woodcuts, video panels, sound installations, archival films, maps, drawings, frontispieces, notebooks, folio editions, original serialisations, guide books, letters, a board game, a vinyl sleeve, and a 17-m long concertina book. The aim is to show cultural imaginations of the land as the locus of collective lore and identity, using the work of individual writers to build an eclectic composition of the magical and factual realm of Britain.

The exhibition is arranged as a grand tour around illuminated texts and artefacts in the British Library's cavernous dark gallery space, with each of the six constructed areas designed to reflect the

nature and associations of the sites themselves. In 'Rural Dreams', the texts are displayed under large-scale wood engravings of the seasons of agricultural life by renowned book illustrator Clare Leighton. In 'Dark Satanic Mills', they are laid out between a set of metal tracks and a ribbon of film stills of mechanised actions from 'English industrial and poverty scenes' (1933), while the visitor is surrounded by the continuous grating noise of industrial cotton-making machines, a sound installation by composer Mark Peter Wright. In 'Wild Places', free standing display tables in small ridges – like standing stones on a hill – look out upon the surrounding swathes of a black and white contour map. In 'Beyond the City', private cul-de-sacs of display tables show items dealing with the associations of suburbia in literature, from Little Metro-Land and *The Smiths of Surbiton* to J.G. Ballard's violent visions of Shepperton, each of these spaces divided from the others by large aerial photos of sleepy suburbs. In 'Cockney Visions', mismatching fragments of London boroughs and historical maps jostle across the floor and ceiling, and in 'Waterlands', texts are lined up against panoramas of archival footage of seaside towns, coastal locations, and the Thames (plus a watery soundscape by Mark Peter Wright).

[☆] *Writing Britain: Wastelands to Wonderlands*, exhibition at the British Library, London, 11 May to 25 September 2012. The exhibition display included curator's notes (referred to throughout the present text as WB), and was accompanied by a catalogue written by Christina Hardyment. The title of this article is from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

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¹ This arrangement follows in the footsteps of G. Tindall, *Countries of the Mind: The Meaning of Place to Writers*, Boston, 1991. Both the exhibition and the exhibition catalogue draw heavily from her arrangement of chapter titles, such as 'Engines of Change', 'Those Blue Remembered Hills', 'The Dream of Town', and 'London Mythology'.

These six sites are not arranged in a linear sequence, and the resourcefulness of their construction – they are separated not by walls, but by low-hanging maps and decorative features – means that a visitor can travel freely around these vernacular places. The approach can be compared to the principle of ‘the exhibition as landscape’, which the *Architectural Review* adopted in its 1951 article on the Festival of Britain, in which exhibition visitors are invited to travel around the ‘thematic story’ of a ‘subtly designed’ layout of courtyards, kiosks, enclosures, and natural geological features of the Land of Britain, created by the ‘devices of the town-designer, as well as the exhibition architect’.² *Writing Britain* is careful to avoid a strict compartmentalisation of these spaces, seeking to organise them in a way conducive to their respective literary ‘atmospheric evocations’ (WB). The exhibition experiments with place-making techniques other than the textual, including the place-making of sound, and varied kinds of visual place-making of maps and scenographic documents. Keats’ ‘Lady of the Lake’ features beside a tourist guide to the Trossachs, Robert Burns’ ‘Lines on the Fall of Fyers near Loch-Ness’ (1787) is displayed alongside Thomas Walmsley’s view of the ‘Upper Falls of Fyers’ (1810), and a letter by Keats including his apostrophe ‘To Ailsa Craig’ (1818) is displayed alongside William Daniell’s nineteenth-century aquatint ‘The Craig of Ailsa’, from his *A Voyage round Great Britain* series. These relationships are not tautological, but implicate various representative traditions around the same sites in the British landscape.

Notable sections show the extensive research which has gone into the exhibition. In the conurbation of displays about suburbs, the collection of pulp 1960s novels set in New Towns is particularly well curated, while the ‘Sweet Thames, run softly’ section in Waterlands marks the political, industrial and symbolic histories of the river and its pageantry through John Leland’s *Cyanea Cantio* (1545), the Water Poet John Taylor’s *The Sculler* (1612), Edmund Spenser’s *Prothalamion* (1596), and T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922). The need to assemble publically famous texts for a public exhibition – and the necessary roll calls of books by Enid Blyton, Jane Austen, J.R. Tolkein, etc. – is counterbalanced by an interest in alternative versions of publications (with various small press and folio editions), as well as in the informal stages of literary texts, in writers’ jottings (see Fig. 1) and typed manuscripts. Particular choices also provide class and gender counters to the more mainstream texts – such as the inclusion of ‘the Woolsorter poet’ John Nicholson, who etched his poems in the grease left by the fleeces he worked with in an Airedale mill, or of Mary Collier’s *The Woman’s Labour* (1739).

But the exhibition as a whole lulls us into a false sense of security about the authenticity of written place. By focussing its curatorial signals on what might be called the topo-biographical – deliberating over writers’ birthplaces, places of settlement, and places of inspiration – the exhibition tends to reinforce conservative and sentimental meanings of belonging, civic spirit, and anti-historical ‘genius loci’. It dwells in the realm of reified meaning rather than in the literary form itself.

In scouting out the historical and the fabulous in the ‘matter of Britain’, from Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia regum Britannie* to Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*, the exhibition compiles a rich history of Britain’s literary myths. Yet the topic is dealt with self-consciously, as if the only axis of textual variation is between the real and the unreal, the verisimilar and the visionary. ‘Stark realities’ are balanced against ‘timeless visions’ (WB). The hunt is on for geographical referents and factual errors, treating literature as

a kind of documentary fiction (for example, Jerome K. Jerome’s *Three Men in a Boat* is displayed alongside receipts and a map from a ‘real-life river holiday’). ‘Every poet of place has to balance the demands of the muse with the accuracy of their fictional depictions’, the curator’s note goes, stolidly. On this spectrum, literary constructions are reduced to geographically precise acts of magical conjuring.

While the non-textual is repeatedly referred to as ‘ordinary’, fiction is treated either in terms of falsity or in terms of magic. In the social condition novels, the former performs a functional task of measuring truth-value against the real conditions of industry; so Richard Llewellyn’s *How Green Was My Valley* is displayed alongside authentic miners’ accounts from Chesterfield and the North East, and J.C. Grant’s representation of the mining village of ‘Hagger’ is displayed alongside a response by the secretary of the North-umberland Miners’ Association (‘miners have never lived under [such] conditions’ (WB)). But the sharpness of distinction between truth and fiction is often wrenched into notice. James Thomson’s *The City of Dreadful Night* (1874) is thus described as ‘more a metaphorical city’ of the alcoholic and melancholic mind, in comparison to ‘Depictions of the real London under-class found in Gustave Doré’s engravings for *London: A Pilgrimage* (1872)’ (WB, emphasis mine) – ignoring the fact that Doré was an artist well-known for the Gothic intensity of his illustrations to works such as *Paradise Lost* and *The Divine Comedy*. The quotidian world is persistently described as a factual and ‘ordinary’ (WB) place which awaits transformation into the wonderlands of narrative (‘Ballantyne successfully turned the facts into an adventure story’ (WB)) (see Waterhouse’s M25, Fig. 2).

Beyond the fact/fiction binary, *Writing Britain* is interested in competing voices. An excellent selection on London presents the linguistic richness and social complexity of the city through texts including Samuel Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) narrated in Trinidadian dialect, the juxtaposition of Jamaican and Standard English by Caribbean poet James Berry, Fanny Burney’s epistolary London novel *Evelina* (1770), Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (2000), and George Bernard Shaw’s presentation of early twentieth-century attitudes to language in *Pygmalion* (1912), including the playwright’s recommendations for pronouncing the broad Cockney dialect. Elsewhere the exhibition works around ideas of dialect and vernacular authority in writers such as R.D. Blackmore, Thomas Hardy, and D.H. Lawrence. The numerous sound recordings in the exhibition also allow for different voices to be heard – including scholars performing in Middle English and *Sunset Song* read in Doric dialect.

However, these competing voices take their place within straightforward categorisations of literary language. The exhibition describes literary style in three ways – as plain and realistic; as colloquial dialect; or as hyperbolic and overwrought. Plath’s ‘Hardcastle Crag’ is thus ‘descriptive, realistic’; J.C. Grant’s *The Back-To-Backs* is made up of ‘overwrought descriptions’; Tony Harrison’s ‘colloquial speech and idiom’ adds to the ‘sense of place in Liverpool’; Alan Sillitoe’s *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* describes ‘everyday experience in everyday speech’ (WB). By flattening out any other textual distinctions, it is assumed that writing both could and should provide unmediated truths when not encumbered with the extravagances of style. This belongs to the humanistic fashion for seeing the experiential and subjective aspects of literature as merely a cue to a greater truth – for instance, giving a snapshot of the writer’s mind and their infusion of the environment (thus texts are straightforwardly

² The exhibition as landscape, *Architectural Review* 110, no. 666 (August 1951) 50. See also ‘The Exhibition as a Town Builder’s Pattern Book’, *Architectural Review* 110, no. 666 (August 1951) 108.

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