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The Lure of the Moors

by Marion Shoard

(published in Valued Environments, edited by Jacqui Burgess and John Gold, London: Allen and Unwin, 1982)

Heather and grass moorland covers a third of the land surface of Britain: it is not in short supply. Nor is it unique to Britain: much vaster expanses of moorland blanket tracts of Scandinavia, Russia and Canada. Yet in Britain, the moors have captured a unique place in the imagination of many members of the countryside establishment. So much so, that the idea of protecting moorland has dominated countryside policy-making for almost the whole of the post-war period - at the expense of other types of landscape whose need has been greater. All ten of our national parks, for instance, have been selected to enshrine moorland, even though the official criteria for park designation suggest that remote moorland is far from the ideal candidate for national park status. While these parks were being designated, Britain's traditional lowland countryside - the patchwork quilt of fields, woods, downs and marshlands, separated by hedgerows, banks and winding streams - was undergoing a mounting onslaught from agricultural change. This lowland countryside is England's most distinctive landscape type, and survey evidence suggests it is the type most popular with the general public.

Yet in 1979, even after 30 years which had seen an agricultural revolution wipe out the character and recreation potential of huge tracts of lowland England, the Labour government's aborted Countryside Bill included tighter restrictions on the ploughing of moorland in national parks as its only real new proposals for landscape conservation. The Conservative government's 1980 Wildlife and Countryside Bill also confined itself largely to moorland in national parks as far as landscape protection was concerned. It was only in the debates on the Bill and amendments tabled to it that the needs of other forms of landscape began to be considered seriously. Today, any attempt to rethink countryside policy-making is still bedevilled by the long-standing presumption that the moors must take priority. So how has moorland managed to exert the spell it has over Britain's rulers for a quarter of a century? It is a long story and its roots lie in the history of landscape conservation in Britain and the psychology of our conservationist classes.

Tom Stephenson, who is now 88 years old, has devoted his life to preserving wild moor and mountain and opening it up to the public. In an article in the now defunct Daily Herald in 1935, he called for a public footpath running the whole length of the Pennines. Fourteen years later, Parliament lumbered into action, and todav the Pennine Way is one of eight long-distance paths which have opened up 1500 miles of the English and Welsh countryside to walkers.

In 1952, Tom Stephenson became the full-time secretary of the Ramblers' Association; he held the post for 21 years, retiring at the age of 76. He is still an active and influential member of conservation and recreation pressure groups.

For Tom Stephenson, it all started one clear, frosty, winter's day in early March 1906, when he was just 13 years old. He was living in a small Lancashire town called Whalley, lying in the Ribble Valley and hemmed in on either side by two great moorland massifs - the Forest of Pendle and the Forest of Bowland. On that bright March day, young Tom Stephenson climbed 1830 feet to the summit of Pendle Hill. Beneath him to the south he could see a great range of factories with chimneys belching out smoke that blanketed towns like Nelson, Colne and Burnley. The other way, as he put it to me in an interview in 1978: `It was just wild country, nothing at all. And the great attraction was that so easily you lost any sense of industrialisation or civilisation; you felt you were alone in the world.'

In the same year (1906) at the opposite end of England, a two-year-old girl, Sylvia Pleadwell, later to become Lady Sylvia Saver, was making her first attempt to ride a Dartmoor pony. Unlike Tom Stephenson, Lady Saver did not undergo a sudden conversion to wild country. She spent her childhood moving from one house to another in Plymouth, Portsmouth and Greenwich, but her grandparents had a house in the middle of Dartmoor. She spent holidays at Huccaby House from her earliest years, and Huccaby, set in wild moorland and with a Dartmoor stream within earshot of her bedroom, was the constant and magical place to which she longed to return.

Now 77 years old, Lady Sayer is writing her memoirs. Entitled Granite ill my Blood, they describe a lifetime's devotion to Dartmoor and battles to protect it from mining companies, water authorities, farmers, the Army and local councils - most of them fought during the 22 years she was chairman of the Dartmoor Preservation Association. She told me what she remembered of her earliest trips to Dartmoor: `I was horn in Plymouth and ... one did see in those days fields outside Plymouth and a little villa age where we were sometimes taken for church. But none of that meant anything. It was the moors, it was Huccaby ... Plymouth in those days was rather a smoky town. One never noticed that until one stepped out of the rather tiny train at Princetown station. As a child the very air was magic because it was so different, so clean and pure and absolutely heady ... But it was of course primarily the wildness, the feeling of freedom ... It was the freedom of it all which was so wonderful ... Instead of being in n terraced house in Plymouth there was all this lovely wild freedom.'

Kate Ashbrook is 24 years old. Born and brought up in Denham on the edge of London, she fell in love with Dartmoor at the age of twelve. This is how it happened: `It was a summer's evening and it was sunny but also hazy, and I remember being up on Hameldon, which is this great Iong ridge, and looking out over Dartmoor you couldn't see anything very dearly, just outlines of the hills. We were having a picnic supper and they said have a race to Hameldon Beacon but I just didn't feel like racing, I wanted to walk on my own. I felt how wonderful it was that here's Dartmoor, such a place existed and here I was experiencing it and what a wonderful thing it was. It made me feel very happy but emotional too: I remember crying.'

Kate chose Exeter as her university solely because of its closeness to Dartmoor. Since the beginning of her undergraduate days, she has devoted all her spare time to working for the Dartmoor Preservation Association. Sylvia Saver recognises in Kate the same love of Dartmoor that inspired her own lifetime's devotion to its preservation. Kate loves to ramble over Dartmoor, summer and winter alike. What does she think about out there? `I have a feeling of freedom on Dartmoor. Because it's far from civilisation. It does bring you back in proportion. You've been fussing over some beastly something or other, like exams, and it does make you think there's a lot more to life than your job. It has a wonderful therapeutic effect.'

I talked at length to five lovers of moorland, of different ages and from different walks of life, to try and find out what it is about the moors that inspires such fierce devotion. Tom Stephenson, Sylvia Sayer and Kate Ashbrook I have already described. The other two are Gerald McGuire and Malcolm MacEwen. Gerald McGuire was born in London in 1918. He served on the Countryside Commission from 1976 until 1980 and has worked for most of his life as an officer of the Youth Hostels' Association. He served on the North York Moors National Park Committee for 19 years and has been a leading figure in the Council for the Protection of Rural England for about the last ten years. Malcolm MacEwen was born in Inverness in 1911. He is a newcomer to the countryside movement and, unlike the others I talked to, he campaigns mainly alone. A journalist, broadcaster and architect by trade, MacEwen was appointed to the Exmoor National Park Committee in 1973. Since then he has fought hard to halt the ploughing up of the heather moorland of Exmoor, and it was his efforts more than those of anybody else that led the government to set up an inquiry into land use on Exmoor which reported in 1976, calling for greater control over moorland `reclamation' in the national park.

What has led these five people to devote themselves to protecting what many of their fellow citizens see as bleak, dull, forbidding wastelands? It is clear that all five see the moors in the same way. They regard them as a refuge whose remoteness cuts them off from the man-made environment in which they spend most of their lives. They find on the moors, and some of them on mountains too, what I shall call `wilderness'.

`Wilderness' is not always just what it might seem. Some people can feel quite apart from the rest of us merely by wandering on a well-vegetated piece of derelict land in London; others need to get hundreds of miles away from the nearest town. For the people I talked to, the only environments that provide a spiritual cocoon strong enough to keep out Man's works are moorland and, for some of them, also mountain. Because they believe that the experience of `wilderness' is central to human well-being, they become almost fanatical in promoting the conservation of what they believe to be our most important landscape types.

In the United States, where wilderness preservation completely dominates countryside protection policies, wildernesses are primaeval, usually forest landscapes.2 Not so in this country. People calling for the preservation of wilderness in this country are not seeking to preserve our oldest landscapes - those remains of the original post-Ice Age forest cover that still exist mainly in the Weald, Devon, Essex and Suffolk and are about 12000 years old.

Nor are they trying to preserve the first hedgerows with which our forefathers enclosed land. They are seeking to protect moor and mountain, although most moorlands are relatively recent landscapes, created at most 4000 years ago through the destruction of forest to provide wood, charcoal or sheep runs. What is more, most moors rely on Man's activities -burning and the grazing of his animals - for their continued existence: left to itself, heather moorland reverts to scrub or woodland within about 60 years.

Ecologically, moorland is not a rich habitat; some ecologists have gone so far as to label moors `biological deserts', compared with habitats like deciduous woodland and chalk grassland which contain a far greater variety of plant species per square metre. The reason for the lack of species variety of the moors is the way in which they are managed: grazing and burning operate selectively on the vegetation causing an increase in the number of plants resistant to these processes -heather, brackens, the moor grasses and fescues - at the expense of plants that cannot survive the continual removal of their leaves and stems, such as tree seedlings. On large parts of Bodmin Moor, heavy grazing and repeated burning over thousands of years have now destroyed even the heather, leaving only a few species of tough grass.

Pedigree, then, is not what makes `wilderness' in this country at least; so what is it that defines `wilderness' for the band of people in England and Wales who seem to associate the idea with moor and mountain? Unlike the gregarious bee or the solitary wolf, Man is both a herd animal and a loner. Since the dawn of the Romantic era, however, it is the human individual who has been venerated in the West, and we have all felt obligated to seek ourselves. Those attracted to wilderness landscape seem to be seeking a context for the pursuit of their individual identity away from the herd. To do this, they need to get away from the environment their fellow men have created for the group to a place as devoid as possible of what is obviously human handiwork. (It apparently does not matter if the landscape is in fact man-made - like a grouse moor- so long as it looks `natural'.) A variety of other living things is also unhelpful: what is sought is a blank canvas on which individuals can commune with themselves or their Maker.

Primary conditions for wilderness

There seem to be seven conditions, all of which landscape must meet if it is to arouse the enthusiasm of the wilderness lobby in this country. These conditions are: wildness, openness, asymmetry, homogeneity, height, freedom for the rambler to wander at will, and the absence of what is obviously human handiwork.

Wildness. Wildness, the antithesis of domestication, is the key quality of moorland in the eyes of its admirers - such as Tom Stephenson, who was attracted by the wildness of the Pennines when he first saw them from Pendle Hill 75 years ago. He has little time for the neat, tidy farmed landscape of lowland England: `I've learnt to endure lowland scenery. I realise that you can't help but admire a mountain, but to appreciate the more subtle lines of lowland landscape is more difficult - I think it's got to be acquired.'

Tom Stephenson now lives in Buckinghamshire close to the Chiltern hills. He often drives up to them for a walk, although their scenery does not attract him; the Chilterns are too tame for his taste and he visits them only for the exercise. For Tom Stephenson, the wilder and more rugged the country the better. Above all landscapes, he loves the Cuillins of Skye - moorland out of which rise rocky crags - because `they are gaunt, almost black at times -gabbro and basalt. They are shattered and pinnacled and you can see almost from one side of the mountain to the other through cracks in the rock.'

It is the wilderness of moorland that writers like Emily Bronte and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who have set novels in moorland, emphasise: their creatures of the moors - Heathcliff in Wuthering Heights and the eponymous hound in The Hound of the Baskervilles - are wild, tempestuous spirits, whose temperaments reflect the environment that nurtured them.

Openness. All five of my interviewees consider the `openness' of moorland central to its appeal. For Gerald McGuire at least, the fact that moorland landscapes are more open than mountain ones means that they are better. `The appeal of moorland in contrast particularly to mountains is this openness: this great vista and you're in the middle of it and you're preferably very much alone in it. Associated with the openness is the sky. You've got your great vista of moorland and you've got what seems a big sky. Northumberland is the country where this is somehow even more marked than North Yorkshire: these great wide skies.'

Gerald McGuire now lives in Hemel Hempstead in Hertfordshire, and after work in the evening he chooses to go for a stroll, not in a park where he could admire individual flowers, trees or birds but on a school playing field. He likes to walk across the field to the edge, where it drops 20 feet, and-then back again - a routine that recalls for him his more epic hikes over the North York Moors.

The emptiness and openness of moorland and the dominance of the sky seem to facilitate communion with the Creator. Gerald McGuire: `It's almost a religious experience. I talked about the wide open landscape and the sky, and there's a sense of God being there, Who made it all. It's spiritual in a very big way.'

Asymmetry and homogeneity. Wilderness landscapes must have no obvious pattern, but at the same time they must be simple. Moorland devotees like to see long ridges with smooth lines unhampered by objects such as trees and woods, let alone man-made artifacts like electricity pylons. These qualities and the absence of the variety of birds, flowers, trees and buildings found in lowland landscapes make moorland repellent to many ordinary people. As a retired miner from Rotherham in Yorkshire put it to me after he had taken a holiday trip round Exmoor: `The moors - they don't appeal. You've seen one bit of heather, you've seen the lot. Too much wide open spaces.'

Tom Stephenson, Sylvia Saver, Gerald McGuire and Malcolm MacEwen are uninterested in individual plants and animals when they are out on the moors. Spectacular birds like ravens, merlins, hen harriers, even peregrine falcons could flit past unnoticed or at least undistinguished. Nor do they bend down and admire, close up, a sprig of heather or gorse, lichens, mosses, fungi or a blade of grass. How then do these people perceive the living creatures of the moors if they do not look at them individually?

Birds are part of what Malcolm MacEwen calls `the silence with sounds' of the moors. The curlew and the buzzard, through their weird cries, are perceived as background noise, a feature of the moors rather than of the birds themselves. Flowers are perceived en masse through their smell and through their colour. Although all five of my enthusiasts are entranced by the richness and changing colours of the moors, in particular the brown and purple of the dying bracken and the heather in autumn, colour is not a primary condition for `wilderness' since these people love the moors at all seasons of the year.

Emily Bronte, writing in December 1838, explains in a poem why she felt compelled to wander on the bleak Pennine moors around Haworth Parsonage even in mid-winter. She writes:

How still, how happy! Now I feel Where silence dwells is sweeter far Than laughing mirth's most joyous swell, However pure its raptures are.

Come, sit down on this sunny stone; 'Tis wintry light o'er flowerless moors - But sit- for we are all alone and cleat expand heaven's breathless shores.

In these lines, she encapsulates something of the spell the moors cast over their admirers: the wide open spaces, the silence, the solitude. Although

Sylvia Saver thinks that the sight and smell of Dartmoor dressed in her lovely purple heather is breathtaking, she actually prefers the moors in winter because there are fewer holidaymakers around.

Height. For devotees of wild country, height is what distinguishes moorland from lowland heath. At first sight, lowland heaths such as those of Dorset, Surrey and the Suffolk Coast share many of the characteristics of moorland landscapes: monotony of vegetation - mainly heather and gorse - wildness, openness and silence. Yet none of the five people I talked to knew any lowland heaths well, let alone liked them: in general they were repelled by them. The main reason that the heaths have no hold over devotees of moorland is that they are low-lying. `Wilderness' seekers enjoy the muscular activity and physical exertion involved in their climb up to the moors and in changes in level once they are up there. Further, it does not seem unreasonable to suppose that the moor-lover's climb to the wilderness establishes an aloofness from his fellow men below, which helps foster the sense of individuality he seems to seek.

Freedom to wander at will. Devotees of moorland exult in the liberation they feel on the moors - liberation not only from imprisonment in the towns where most of them spend most of their lives, but also from the confinement of the lowland countryside, where public access is largely restricted to predetermined routes. They like to feel able to roam wherever the mood takes them. They may well be aware that, like the `naturalness' of the moors, this freedom is illusory, but it is no less important for that. Malcolm MacEwen: `The fact that you can walk where you like is in fact quite unrealistic in a way, because moorland is generally not very good walking: it's full of bogs and you find that when you move off the track it's quite hard going unless you know how, so you wouldn't. But the sense that you're free and that if you wish to you can move where you like is to my mind enormous.'

A track is an affront to freedom of movement: it is also usually evidence of human handiwork. Thus lovers of wilderness exult most in a completely trackless piece of moor.

The absence of human handiwork. `Wilderness' must appear `natural' and untouched by Man. It may have witnessed many activities, such as battles, over the centuries, but it must seem to have survived unblemished and unaltered since its creation. Devotees of `wilderness' may be well aware that the naturalness they admire is spurious because the landscape is the product of human activity. But it's the appearance that counts. `I emotionally and instinctively re gard moorland as being natural,' says Malcolm MacEwen, `but technically I know that it's dearly not the right term. I feel it in that way, as being untouched landscape although I know this is in fact to a certain degree an illusion.'

Secondary conditions

Besides the necessary conditions, a number of other characteristics may heighten the appeal of a piece of land to lovers of wilderness, although none of these secondary attributes is essential. Nor is any combination of them sufficient to qualify an area as `wilderness' in the absence of the seven primary conditions. The secondary characteristics include the possession of relics of ancient man, undulation, wind, and the absence of human beings not fully appreciative of the role of `wilderness'.

Relics of ancient man. Not all wilderness seekers feel the need to cut themselves off from all traces of their species. Whereas evidence of present-day man - in the form, for instance, of ice-cream vans, litter, nuclear power stations and country buses - seem to be able to destroy `wilderness' in a landscape which meets all the primary conditions, relics of prehistoric man can actually enhance `wilderness'.

Dartmoor more than any other British wildscape reeks of history. The archaeologist Jacquetta Hawkes has said that Dartmoor ought to bethought of as one great ancient monument. Dartmoor was the earliest home of man in Devon: it has been occupied for 40 centuries since Early Bronze Age man, in a kinder climate than that of today, grew corn and reared animals on the moor. Traces of past civilisations in the form of hut circles, rings of standing stones, cairns, barrows and mediaeval village remains abound on Dartmoor. It has been estimated that 50 per cent of Dartmoor's ancient monuments have not yet even been mapped. For both Sylvia Saver and Kate Ashbrook, the discovery of previously unrecorded ancient monuments, the monuments themselves, their preservation, and the strong link with the past that both the monuments and the landscape itself evoke are central features of their love of Dartmoor.

Prehistoric remains are at their most visible on moorland when the bracken has died down, and Kate Ashbrook loves to wander on Dartmoor in winter even though it is bleak, cold and black, largely because of the thrill she experiences in discovering prehistoric remains. For Sylvia Saver, the ancient monuments are the most interesting feature of the moor: wherever she goes on Dartmoor she finds herself searching for traces of past activity. What feelings do these ancient remains inspire? Sylvia Saver: `I just love every one of the ancient monuments and feel they have this great fascination: there were your forerunners and they lived on the moor, they could wring some sort of living out of its soil.'

Kate Ashbrook feels an even closer link with the actual people who lived and worked on the moor in centuries past: `Often when I'm walking alone I think of ancient man and I stand on the hillside, perhaps near a settlement, and 1 think he looked out from here and he loved this view. I do /eel that they appreciated where they were and they built their homes in certain places because they liked it. I often stand there and I look across to other settlements on other hills and think how they signalled to each other. It's terribly interesting and you do feel a real link and you know that perhaps you're feeling much the same as they did in appreciating it.'

Wind. As we have seen, the `silence with sounds' of the moors is an integral part of their spell, and one of these sounds is the wind. For Anne Bronte, at least, the sound of the wind enhanced the wildness of the moors. She wrote in 1830:

For long ago I loved to lie Upon the pathless moor, To hear the wild wind rushing by With never ceasing roar.

Its sound was music then to me, Its wild and lofty voice

Made my heart beat exultingly And my whole soul rejoice.

The absence of unsympathetic people. As a breed, wilderness lovers revel in solitude. `I've been alone most of my life', says Tom Stephenson. `I like to walk alone and feel I'm alone in the world. And 1 can get that on the moors more than anywhere else.'

However, solitude is not absolutely essential: the necessary experience seems to be obtainable in the company of a spouse or close friend. What does seem to be important is the absence of unappreciative people or people who appreciate the moors for the `wrong' reasons. If such people are noisy, untidy, or numerous, so much the worse.

Why preserve wilderness?

`Inspiration', particularly for townspeople, is the main reason Britain's champions of wilderness advance today to justify the protection of moor and mountain. Gerald Haythornthwaite, an indefatigable campaigner for wilderness and for many years chairman of the Standing Committee on National Parks, put it like this:

Man has need of direct personal relationship with his natural surroundings in which he can enjoy the grandeur and the richness of land and sea, and feel the force of the elements. A man is only half a man who cannot exult in a storm on a moor, or a mountain top, or in the sea, or be enraptured at the sight of a brown squirrel on the garden wall, or a fox in the field. Without such things I believe we shall lose contact with the source of all fresh inspiration.4

As something `natural' and as the antithesis of the man-made world, wilderness provides a perspective on city life and the human condition more generally. Gerald Haythornthwaite:

To find our true unaverage status, the unique importance that each individual possesses but which the world denies we must have places where we can withdraw and be remote from men and their material works and be enfolded by the natural order of things, able to feel that one can go back to the start and unravel the false conclusions of this and other ages.'

Wilderness does not even have to be visited for human beings to draw strength from it. For instance, Sylvia Saver believes that even though people may not go to wild areas something in human nature benefits from knowing that they are there. Comments Kate Ashbrook: `Even if 1'm away from it, just knowing Dartmoor is there is terribly important. It's because it's natural and basic, a raw material that everyone needs from time to time ... Dartmoor is so uncomplicated. It doesn't need anything material, nothing beastly and man-made to make it the way it is. '

However, moorland has more practical uses. Walking on the moors is difficult: unexpected peat bogs lie ready to trap the unsuspecting hiker. Even with a track, the rambler has to keep his wits about him to maintain any sense of direction, particularly in mist. The challenge that moorland walking provides, for instance for children striving for their Duke of Edinburgh awards, is a secondary justification wilderness lovers advance for its preservation. Kate Ashbrook: `The challenge is awfully important because life today, for the young included, has become far too soft and I think it is very important to have challenges left, so long as they don't do it in such numbers that it ceases to he a challenge at all because there's so many of them.' For Tom Stephenson, the sheer pleasure and physical well-being moorland walking can give are the main reasons for preserving the moors - and no less important in his eves, for opening them up for public access. He fought for many years to secure access to the Forest of Bowland so that it could become a great playground for Lancashire folk.

Sylvia Sayer does not advocate the preservation of wilderness solely for the benefit of human beings, however. Like Frank Fraser Darling b she believes man has a duty to preserve wildernesses for their own sake. So she believes all nature's wildernesses - even the vast tundra - should be preserved, unlike other conservationists, such as Malcolm MacEwen, who feel that the position of a tract of wild country largely determines it claims to preservation: he feels, for example, that Exmoor is important because moorland is scarce in the southern half of England.

The shaping of public policy

1949-55: clean sweep of the parks. Enthusiasm for moorland on the part of a small group of people of whom Tom Stephenson, Lady Saver and Gerald McGuire were three, dominated the post-war disposition of the Countrvside. All ten of our national parks, our most protected large landscapes, contain moorland. For more than half of them - Northumberland (which includes the Cheviots), the Brecon Beacons, the Peak District, Exmoor, Dartmoor, the Yorkshire Dales and the North York Moors - the presence of heather or grass moorland was one of the main reasons why the National Parks Commission selected them. However, such evidence as there is - for instance Lowenthal and Prince's Survey of English landscape tastes' - suggests that the passion for moorland of those such as Tom Stephenson and Lady Saver is not shared by the mass of the people, who prefer gentler landscapes. So how did the lovers of moorland gain their ascendancy?

Parliament decreed in the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act of 1949 that national parks should be selected for their natural beauty and the opportunities they afforded for open-air recreation, having regard both to their character and to their proximity to centres of population. This might seem to suggest such areas as the Cotswolds, the Chilterns, the Weald, the North Downs and the Dorset Downs as candidates. None of these areas has been selected or even discussed seriously during the last 50 years. Our national parks enshrine only three significant landscape types - moorland, mountain and cliff top. There is no chalk downland, wealden landscape or fen country in any national park, nor any sizeable stretches of coastal marshland. Our lowland vales with their patchwork of field and hedge, down and wood, spinney and stream -highly prized by many people, especially overseas visitors - are nowhere specifically protected by national park designation. What is more, despite the Act's emphasis on accessibility to large centres of population, there is still no national park near London, Southampton, Birmingham or Bristol. Instead, most of our parks are far from rather than close to our largest towns and cities.

A 1971 survey by the Geographical Maqazine8 has provided the only indication so far of the general public's preferences for new national parks. The magazine asked its readers: `If you had a choice, which other areas would you designate as national parks?' The areas put forward by the 3000 readers who replied were ranked in order of preference. The Cotswolds came out top; eight of the top ten proposals were in lowland Britain and included such areas as the South Downs, New Forest, Norfolk Broads, Dorset Coast, Chilterns, Weald, and the North Downs of Kent and Surrey.

One reason for the upland bias of our national parks seems to be that the countryside establishment- the people in a position to influence the choice of national parks - was dominated during the 1930s, '40s and '50s by lovers of wild country. At the time, there was no counter-lobby promoting the claims of the lowlands.

It was not just that most people active in the countryside movement during these years preferred mountain and moorland: some of them also considered that these landscapes would `do people more good' than other types. Professor G. M. Trevelyan, for example, wrote in 1931:

Nature, no doubt, acts as a comforter and giver of strength even in southern woodlands and on smooth hillsides. But to many of us the moorland and the mountain seem to have more rugged strength and faithfulness with which in solitude we can converse and draw thence strength and comfort. And the mountain above all seems to have personality which says to us as we gaze on it at evening from the valleyhead below - I know, I understand. Such is the lot of man. I watched him through the ages. But there is a secret behind. It will always be a secret. 9

During the 1930s, Vaughan Cornish was the most prolific writer on landscape aesthetics and a leading conservationist. A typical child of the Romantic Movement, Cornish thought that the supreme forms of landscape were `the mountain peak soaring to the clouds' and dramatic sea-cliffs, `The bold headland wreathed above in driving mist and drenched below by the spray of battering waves.'

He was not interested in lowland agricultural scenery, which was redeemed in his eyes only by the element of drama provided by buildings, especially church steeples.

Undoubtedly the most influential figure in determining the type of countryside that came to make up our national parks was John Dower. It was his Government-commissioned report on national parks,11 published in 1945, which was to prove the key to the shape of Britain's national parks. John Dower was born and brought up at Ilkley and lived in Northumberland and the Yorkshire Dales. He was a hill-walker, preferring wild moor and mountain to lowland countryside. The ten areas he put forward as candidates for priority designation were all dominated by mountain, moor and sea-cliff, particularly moor; understandably so, since he stated unequivocally in his definition of a national park that national parks should be confined to `wild country'. Dower justified this restriction on the grounds that it is only in wild country that the public either wants widespread access or can be given it, but it seems that his decision was also influenced by his personal preference for wildscape.

Shortly after the Dower Report was published, the Government appointed a committee chaired by Sir Arthur Hobhouse, to consider and report on Dower's recommendations.l2 Anxious that national parks should cover a wider variety of landscape than Dower had suggested, the Hobhouse Committee proposed two more areas - the South Downs and the Norfolk Broads.

This move came to nothing. The Broads were ruled out by the National Parks Commission as unsuitable. When the commission first discussed the South Downs, Tom Stephenson, who was then a member, moved that they be rejected because they were not wild enough; the commission then shelved the idea of designating them. When, in 1956, the possibility of designating the Downs was revived, so much of the rough grass had been ploughed up that the commission thought them no longer suitable: no large areas were left over which the public could wander at will, in their view an essential requirement for a national park.

Having dropped the Broads and the Downs, the National Parks Commission did not replace them with other areas representing types of landscape other than wild country. Instead, they added to Dower's list the high, wild moors of the Cheviots. The inclusion of these hills in the Northumberland National Park owes more to Tom Stephenson than to anybody else. Stephenson, who was on the Commission between 1949 and 1953 when six of our ten national parks were designated and when negotiations started for a further three, is convinced that wild country is the sine qua non of our national parks. Like all but one of the conservationists I interviewed, Tom Stephenson referred to John Dower and to `wild country' when asked to define a national park - although Parliament omitted this phrase from the definition in the 1949 Act.

Four other factors were also at play that made the decision-makers turn their eyes almost unhesitatingly to the uplands when establishing Britain's national parks. There was the precedent of North America, where national parks were established in the 1870s and have always been used to preserve, and open up for public access, spectacular and wild landscapes. At the same time as the first national parks were being designated in the United States, a campaign to secure public access to mountains began in Britain.

This campaign was later widened to embrace moorland (during the 1930s the campaign was focused on the grouse moors of the Peak District which were then barred to walkers) but it did not take in other types of landscape feature such as woodland. In addition, there was the prevailing idea that national parks should be areas where the public could roam freely, an idea which started with Vaughan Cornish and was supported by Dower. Lowland farmed countryside was therefore ruled out not because it lacked appeal, but because access was mainly confined to footpaths.

There was, however, another powerful reason for omitting lowland vales and chalk downland from the list of national parks. During the early postwar years in particular, the importance of food production loomed large in the legislators' minds. The wartime threat posed to our food imports by German submarines had demonstrated the strategic importance of our farmland. In 1949, the acid and poorly drained moors of the north and west looked bad prospects for agriculture, but the chalk downland of the south-east had been shown to have enormous potential: large tracts had been ploughed up in wartime `reclamation' schemes. These four factors combined to make it seem beyond question that lovers of wilderness should see the areas they most loved consecrated as national parks.

1955-80: unquestioned priority. From the mid-1950s until 1980, the moors received priority in almost all discussion of countryside protection. National parks have always been considered our most important countryside, and since the term `national park' has become synonymous with moorland, this priority was reinforced. For example, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food decided in 1980 to alter the arrangements governing the issuing of capital grants to farmers for schemes to increase output such as wetland drainage, the erection offences, the conversion of rough grassland to ryegrass pasture and so on; but for the national parks, and therefore moorland, special procedures were introduced to increase the prospects for conservation of areas of land for which capital grant was being sought.

The thinking of the 1960s, enshrined in the Countryside Act 1968, moulded countryside recreation provision in England and Wales for the following 20 years, and one of the main objectives of the policies devised in this period was, the need to protect moorland for the wilderness seeker. 14 The mood of the period was set by architect and planner John Dower in a treatise entitled The Fourth Wave which prophesied a large increase in the numbers of car-borne visitors to the countryside and proposed that instead of allowing them to spread throughout the country, they should be concentrated in sites where they would do little harm. `We must discriminate,' said Dower, `fitting each feature and region to the recreation it can best satisfy, gathering the crowds into places which can take them, keeping the high, wild places for the man who seeks solitude."15

The mid- to late-1970s did, however, see a questioning of the automatic priority to moorland. In 1973, the Government commissioned the first study of the national parks system that had been established 24 years earlier, and the Sandford Committee, reporting in 1974,16 noted the uneven distribution of the parks and their overall lack of landscape variety.

To remedy these imbalances, the Committee recommended that the Countryside Commission should examine more diverse types of landscape when considering possible new parks, and should seek to redress to some extent the uneven geographical spread of the existing parks. The Government supported this recommendation in 1976.17

The Countryside Commission responded in 1977 by asking for public reaction to the suitability of national park status for the Norfolk Broads. This proposal was later shelved because of opposition from the local authorities concerned. The Commission is not at present scouring the lowlands for other candidates for national park status, and shows no likelihood of doing so in the future.

Nevertheless, the Sandford Committee did also put forward a recommendation which, had it been implemented, would have radically strengthened the protection afforded to moorland (and mountain) at the expense of other landscape types. The Sandford Committee proposed that the wildest heartlands of our existing national parks should be specially designated as `national heritage areas'. This new designation would replace national park status as the highest form of protection available to landscape in England and Wales. Within the new areas, the majority of which would almost certainly have consisted of moor and mountain, no development would be permitted without parliamentary approval and the entry of vehicles would be strictly limited. The idea behind the national heritage area was not new: the United States Wilderness Preservation Act, 1964, provided for the establishment of `wilderness areas' in addition to the system of national parks, and 127 such areas had already been set aside by the end of 1976. Nearer home, the national heritage area concept resembles closely a proposal made in 1973 by the journalist Jon Tinker that `wilderness areas' be established in the wildest parts of moor and mountain in our existing national parks and that these areas should have more protection than other landscapes. 18

The national heritage area idea reappeared in 1979 with a proposal by the Countryside Review Committee, a group of civil servants with most responsibility for the countryside, that the system of national parks and areas of outstanding natural beauty should be replaced by a system of first-tier areas and second-tier areas. 19 This proposal has also been formally turned down by the government, but it does reflect an approach which still finds favour in many official circles. The first-tier areas that the Review Committee envisaged would have occupied only between two and three per cent of the land area of England and Wales, and development would not have been permitted without Parliament's approval. The Review Committee, however, did believe that first-tier areas should be selected from within the present AONB areas as well as the national parks and in a few cases from outside both.

1980 onward: hegemony challenged. 1980 seems to have been a watershed as far as the hegemony of moorland is concerned. Although the Conservatives' 1980 Wildlife and Countryside Bill, like its aborted Labour predecessor, confined its landscape conservation provisions to measures to increase the protection afforded to moorland in national parks, the debates on the Bill and the amendments tabled reflected a sudden and growing concern with Britain's long-neglected lowland countryside.

One amendment, for instance, tabled by Lord Winstanley, sought to extend the principle of advance notification for the ploughing of tracts of moorland in national parks covered by -orders under Section 14 of the Countryside Act 20 to a range of lowland as well as upland landscape types. Under the terms of the amendment, which was not adopted, any owner or occupier who wished to convert to intensive agricultural land a tract of mountain, moor, heath, down, cliff roughland, foreshore or woodland anywhere in the country Would have had to notify his local planning authority before he went ahead.

An amendment tabled by Lord Melchett, the opposition's chief spokesman on the Bill, and by Baroness David, sought to extend the scope of development control to embrace the removal of the features that characterise the ordinary, basic countryside of England and Wales: hedgerows and hedgerow tree,,. woodlands and marshes, streams and ponds, downland and heathland as well as moor. Lord Melchett's amendment followed a period of considerable public debate about conservation in which a number of important trends emerged. One of these was the growing belief that the countryside as a whole serves a wide range of important functions, and that it is this countryside, not just wild moorland in national parks, that matters most to most people. Professor Sir Colin Buchanan put this point well in a letter published in The Times on 18 November 1980. He wrote: `Surely the point about the countryside is that it is used for so many different purposes. Farming is one; looking at it from cars or trains is another. It is also used for exercise, for rambling, for camping, for riding, for adventure-training, and it provides source material for artists, poets, biologists, ornithologists, zoologists, archaeologists, architects, historians and many other people.'

It now seems likely that the moors will face competition for their privileged place in the hierarchy of landscape features meriting protection. In future, they are likely to bid for support alongside chalk downland and lowland vale, river vallev and woodland, coastal marshland and fen country. In this competition, they may lose their long-held supremacy, but they should be able to hold their own. For there is now real popular enthusiasm for the moors even if it is not sufficient to justify their past privileges. On Ilfracombe promenade in August 1975, I asked a few holidaymakers how they felt about Exmoor. A nursing sister told me it was the moors' aura of history that appealed to her: `They've been there untouched for hundreds of years; people have been fighting battles over the same moors.' An electricity board showroom manager with whom I spoke loved the natural life of the moors; a Chinese student relished the sense of freedom - `it broadens your heart . . .'; a retired miner from Rotherham liked the individual heather plants; a young factory girl spoke of the peacefulness of the moors. For the visitors to whom I talked, the colours of the moors were the most generally popular feature, and it is this feature that makes the attractions of the moors for Britain's artists understandable. There are few more breathtaking sights anywhere in the world than Dartmoor in August, aflame with a mosaic of golden gorse and purple heather, ripening moor grass and the russet hues of dying bracken. Quite apart from their other intrinsic charms, the moors are also a vital ingredient in the whole landscape mix of England and Wales. Their rough open spaces provide a contrast with the gentle patchwork of fields and hedges below that emphasises the pastoral intimacy of our typical lowland countryside.

The moors do have conservation needs. Rich deposits of mineral ores underlie many of our moors and quarrying can damage the landscape. Road building and road widening, house and factory building threaten parts of the moors; and the Army's occupation of a third of Dartmoor has caused much damage, particularly to ancient monuments on the moor, and has necessitated restrictions on public access. As in Britain as a whole, however, the impact of activities like these is dwarfed by that of agricultural change, though this has affected moorland less dramatically than other landscape types up till now. It has been estimated that Britain's moors have been enclosed and reclaimed for intensive agriculture at an average rate of 12 000 acres a year since the war. 21 Because the original acreage of moorland was so great, the impact of this annual rate of change has been less obvious than the impact of agricultural change on other landscape types.

Nonetheless, it has already had far-reaching implications for landscape, access and wildlife in particular places and threatens to grow into a far larger problem in future. The enclosure of moorland and its conversion to ryegrass monoculture for feeding animals has already eaten away one fifth of the moorland of Exmoor since the war; and nearly 60 square miles of moor, most of it with de facto public access, were fenced off and `improved' for intensive agriculture or planted with conifers in the North York Moors National Park between 1950 and 1975.22 Both these activities do, of course, destroy completely the fragile sense of wilderness of the moors. Enclosure for agriculture destroys the freedom to wander at will as well as the point of it. The sense of timelessness evaporates when the `silence with sounds' of curlew and buzzard gives way to the drone of farm and forestry machinery. And the conversion of the wilderness to a food or timber factory may seem to some wilderness lovers more offensive than the fouling of Man's own nest.

It is forestry, however, that looks set to pose the greatest threat to our moors over the next 50 years. Although the government has not Vet announced precisely what scale of new planting it will encourage, two reports point the way. All that would be needed from the government for a major expansion in forestry would be a commitment to guarantee the present level of tax advantages and planting grants for private foresters coupled with some support for the Forestry Commission. For forestry, like agriculture, may take more or less all the land it wants, since the industry is exempted from the need to seek the consent of the community as a whole through the planning process before the environment is changed. The Forestry Commission's 1977 report, The Wood Production Outlook in Britain, suggests that it is reasonable to assume that 1700 square miles of upland country in England and Wales alone will be planted within the next 50 years: this would mean that one third of the existing open moorland in England and Wales will be covered in plantations within the next century. The Centre for Agricultural Strategy's report, Strategy for the UK Forestry Industry, published in 1980, forecasts a 50 per cent increase in UK consumption of wood and wood products between 1980 and the year 2000, and a 90 per cent increase between 1980 and 2025.

As it predicts that this massive increase in demand will take place at a time when the world price of timber is likely to increase, the report suggests that the maximum feasible rate of planting in Britain to meet this demand is an extra 185 square miles every year between 1980 and 1990, leading to an extra 7500 square miles more land covered in forestry plantations (largely conifer) by 2030. If planting on this sort of scale goes ahead, and agricultural intensification continues to bite into other areas of moorland, then the threat forestry poses to the moors may come to match that which agriculture poses to the lowlands. Uplands and lowlands may then have to face together a similar challenge. If we allow the challenge to prevail, the landscapes that will greet our grandchildren in the next century will be vast prairies of cereals or grass monoculture in the lowlands and, in the uplands, great timber factories. It is right that the moorlands should share the privileges which have caused other landscapes to be deprived of the help they have needed more urgently than the moors. Yet it would be sad indeed if this process were to be accompanied by a real loss of interest in moorland just when it is coming to need the attention it has enjoyed for so long.

Notes

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6 Darling, F. F. 1970. Wilderness and Plenty. The Reith Lectures. British Broadcasting Corporation.

7 Lowenthal, D. and H. C. Prince 1964. The English landscape. Geog. Rev. 54, 309-46 and idem 1965. English landscape tastes. Geog. Rev. 55, 186-222.

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1 10 Cornish, V. 1930. National Parks and the Heritage of Scenery. London: Sifton Praed. 11 Dower, J. 1945. National Parks in England and Wales. Cmd 6628. London: HMSO.

12 Report of the National Parks Committee (England and Wales) 1947. Cmd 7121. London: HMSO.

13 Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food 1980. Agriculture and Horticulture Development Requlations. London: HMSO.

14 For a detailed report of the way in which this thinking was translated into policies see my article (1979): Metropolitan escape routes. The London Journal 5, 87-112.

15 Dower, M. 1965. Fourth wave. Arch itects' Journal, 20 January.

16 Report of the National Parks Policies Review Committee 1974. London: HMSO.

17 Department of the Environment and the Welsh Office 1976. Report of the National Parks Policies Review Committee. Circular 4/76. London: HMSO.

18 Tinker, J. 1973. Do we need wilderness areas? New Scientist 60, 42-4.

19 Countryside Review Committee 1979. Conservation and the Countryside Heritage. London: HMSO.

20 Section 14 of the Countryside Act 1968 empowers the Secretary of State for the Environment to make orders covering areas of national park. Any person intending to plough up unimproved moorland in an area covered by an order must first notify his national park authority of his intention to do so. The authority may then seek to preserve the moor in question through land acquisition or through a legal and financial agreement with the landowner, which almost always involves their paying the landowner compensation.

21 Parry, M., A. Bruce and C. Harkness 1981. The plight of British moorlands. New Scientist 90, 550-1.

22 For a detailed account of the impact of agricultural change on moorland in England, see my book (1980): The Theft of The Countryside. London: Temple Smith.