

Marion Shoard

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'The Essential Marion Shoard'

by Jim Perrin

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"I don't go to the countryside only to escape from mankind, but also to revel in the complexity of what can be found there, including human elements." She directs a levelling look across the table at me in the Macclesfield café where we're skulking and avoiding the inevitable moment when we have to go out into the rain. Do I dare to disagree with her?

Well – if I did fancy my chances in an argument, I'd have to make sure my facts were sound and well-marshaled, the reasoning coherent, and both of them firmly underpinned by a radical egalitarianism - otherwise I would surely meet the intellectual equivalent of the fate that a terrier visits upon a rat. As it is, and notwithstanding the challenge of an arching right eyebrow that flicks amusedly upward in anticipation of a response after her every question, I happen to concur. My own writing project seeks to occupy much the same territory as Marion Shoard's statement.

This is all well and vague, however. I would hope we all revel in the complexity of potential responses to landscape, that none of us discounts those human dimensions that so add to the interest and resonance of the outdoor experience. But within this area Marion has produced a body of work that seems to me vital and exemplary. In the face of an era characterised by land-despoliation and the increasing and oblique restriction upon its public usage, she has defined and promoted a radical charter of the right to land access in Britain, and has supported it with the most scrupulous, wide-ranging and exact research and analysis. To my mind, she's one of the treasures of the outdoor movement. If more copies of her books - *The Theft of the Countryside* (1980), *This Land is our Land* (1987), and *A Right to Roam* (1999) - sat on our bookshelves, our countryside might be better protected as a result and we would certainly be a whole lot better informed about our rights there, and how to counteract the self-interested factional bluster that all too often keeps us from the exercise of them.

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So - I'm a fan. I've reviewed Marion's books. I've spoken from the same platform as her at access rallies over the years. But I didn't really know the character of author and speaker and was looking forward to the opportunity for more extended conversation. Who is this exacting, pugnacious, encyclopedically well-informed theoretician of our country rights? What's she like? Is she as formidable as her work might suggest? In cold, wet weather I'd driven across from Wales one morning to pick her up from a backstreet pub where, a little eccentrically, she'd been staying in Bollington - the little gritstone mill town above Macclesfield in the western hill-margins of the Peak District. She'd already alerted me to the fact that she is "no long-distance hiker" but one who prefers "to pootle around and if I see, say, an enticing wood, wander into its depths and soak myself in its atmosphere and intricacies".

On a day like this, that was fine by me, so we drove down from Bollington into Macclesfield for coffee, or in Marion's case a pot of fine and delicate tea, before soaking up some complexity and rain. To divert her from interrogating me on the history of land tenure in my home area of Wales, for this is a woman who is never long off the case, I quizzed her about her own background. Her father was a radio operator. She was born in the far west of Cornwall, where he was stationed, in 1949. When she was five, her family moved to the Isle of Thanet in East Kent - a very peculiar region, and one where the sense of the outdoors first grew upon her. She muses on a walk into the countryside in a group with a maths teacher from school when she was 12, recounts too family days out to Pegwell Bay, where, she reminds me, Hengist and Horsa and Saint Augustine and the Roman army of invasion all made their first landings in Britain. She evokes for me a fennel-scented childhood mood of clifftop paths and shining saltflats; red setters chasing smells; her mother stooping to identify lady's bedstraw, wild mignonette, tufted vetch; she and her "daring and frolicsome" father and brother vying to find the steepest and most exciting paths; beachcombing under cliffs of chalk and loess for ships' timbers and delicate pink venus shells; crossing the wooden causeway that led through calf-deep black mud to firm sand where they would play for hours until the evening sun slanted down and set the bay - a precious place, its atmosphere lost in the late 1960s to "development" (in this case a hovercraft terminal which is now defunct) - ablaze.

All this gleams out of her before she passes on to tell of going to Oxford, reading natural science at St Hilda's, working on pest control for the Agricultural Research Council in Cardiff, changing direction to take a diploma in town and country planning, joining the Council for the Protection of Rural England as assistant secretary responsible for planning and conservation, and later becoming a lecturer in rural policy and environmental planning, firstly at Reading University and later at University College London, where she still works. She has a daughter, Catherine, now at university, and she lives in Dorking in Surrey, which she claims to like, where she walks on the Downs, has an allotment, spends evenings with friends enjoying themselves with duets of Gershwin: "Your turn with the satin dress tonight, darling." Thus the brief biography of our best champion of outdoor rights.

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By now the time has come for us to brave the weather - an eventuality for which Marion is not particularly well prepared. We drive out of Macclesfield intent on a little trespass through some strictly-private-and-preserved parkland at Henbury - through which, since the rain chooses to increase rather than abate, we drive instead of walk. As we do so, I keep a cautious eye on various characters who issue out of buildings scattered throughout the parkland to assume threatening postures under whatever shelter they can find, from which timidity I deduce that their threat is none too serious, merely an oppressive and watchful suspicion that would turn to exclusion only if the sun shone. Marion, meanwhile, fishes out of her handbag photocopies of material from Pevsner or the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments Invenlom, and regales me with facts and exact architectural descriptions of buildings obviously magnificent beyond the blur of the rain. Although the latter ensures that we drive straight through instead of stopping to walk, a certain bristle has entered her tone. As she points out to me the characteristics of the 18th Century parkland - the sculpted landscape, the maturity of great stands of trees, the artful vistas - her refrain is a lament that it is available for appreciation by so few, and this in a place only 20 miles from the largest British conurbation outside London. It leads us into a joint and mutual radical rant of enthusiasm for the works of Gerrard Winstanley, the leader of the Diggers during the English Revolution, for his idea that the Earth should be "a common treasury for all", and for his apostrophising of the lords-of-the-manor of his time in the following uncompromising terms:

"The power of enclosing land and owning property was brought into creation by your ancestors by the sword; which first did murder their fellow-creatures, men, and after plunder or steal away their land, and left this land successively to you, their children. And therefore, though you did not kill or thieve, yet you hold that cursed thing in your hand by the power of the sword."

In conclusion, and as we drive out of the park, she glances back over the rich land, purses her lips into an expression of sardonic assessment and slips me a quick smile to suggest that in her view certain fundamentals remain unchanged down the centuries and are perhaps likely to stay so, all the best (and inevitably compromised) intentions of New Labour notwithstanding. I begin to warm to her and continue in that vein of appreciation as, in a diminishing downpour, we arrive at the start of a public footpath through the Capesthorne estate and quit the car to walk along it. She is warming to her theme of the outrage offered to public sensibility by our continuing exclusion from so many of the prime landscapes in Britain, delivers a damning critique of the unworkability and dire implications of new rights of access in England and Wales and the way that vested interests will capitalise on the administration of these. I tag along, listening intently, interjecting or prompting occasionally, enjoying the diatribe hugely and trying meanwhile despite the rain to take photographs of her to illustrate this article - to which the endearing vanity of her response is to ask to be allowed to take off her glasses, "because they make me look dotty".

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We get a little wet. We go for lunch back in Bollington. She relaxes, spices her comments with a lovely, sly, dry, wry humour. And afterwards we walk up Kerridge Hill to White Nancy. On the path up there she directs upon the flowers she finds a bright, enquiring tenderness ("What is this? I'm not very good on vetches, I'm afraid..."), reaches out sensually and self-absorbedly to caress a bed of bright moss, discourses upon the patterning of the landscape that spreads out beneath us, is startled by the weirdness of White Nancy, tells what she's learnt of the history of this odd folly from a companion on a previous day, discloses her delight in the society of enthusiasts on her walks who can open up for her new aspects of the outdoors. She is so earnestly assimilative, but so funny, charming, and ingenuous somehow in her enthusiasm. The strong simplicity of her belief in our right to enjoy the land is completely heartening. A cold wind drives rain in across the ridge and we hurry down to Bollington again. She invites me into the pub to dry off but I slip reluctantly away, back to Wales. A few days later a sheaf of speeches and articles by her arrives through the post: a Levellers' Day Address ("Although land is property in theory, there are all sorts of subtle indications that deep down we really don't believe this at all"); a speech to a countryside recreation network conference: celebrations of landscapes loved by Robert Frost, Edward Thomas and W. H. Davies; an encomium on the use of country bus services ("Many a time on a country bus I have got out my OS map only to be joined in my seat by local people proffering fascinating snippets of information unavailable in the guide-book and making me feel part of the local community before I ever alight"). Their combined effect is somehow to place her, for me, as part of a great tradition of concerned and vigorous writers on the countryside who together comprise one of the uncelebrated glories of Britain's literature. Buy one of her books, read it and you'll see what I mean; and perhaps come, as I did, to delight through reading it in as warm, intelligent, well-informed, elegantly articulate and engaged a commentator as our community has ever possessed.