

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Edgelands

Paul Farley
and Michael Symmons Roberts

About the Book

Paul Farley is the author of four collections of poetry and has won the Forward Prize for Best First Collection, the Whitbread Poetry Award and the E.M. Forster Award.

Michael Symmons Roberts has published two novels and four collections of poetry, including *Corpus*, which won the Whitbread Poetry Award. He is a frequent collaborator with the composer James Macmillan. *Edgelands* explores a wilderness that is much closer than you think: a debatable zone, neither the city nor the countryside, but a place in-between – so familiar it is never seen for looking. Passed through, negotiated, unnamed, ignored, the edgelands have become the great wild places on our doorsteps, places so difficult to acknowledge they barely exist. *Edgelands* forms a critique of what we value as ‘wild’, and allows our allotments, railways, motorways, wasteland and water a presence in the world, and a strange beauty all of their own.

Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts – both well-known poets – have lived and worked and known these places all their lives, and in *Edgelands* their journeying prose fuses, in the anonymous tradition, to allow this in-between world to speak up for itself. They write about mobile masts and gravel pits, business parks and landfill sites in the same way the Romantic writers forged a way of looking at an overlooked – but now familiar – landscape of hills and lakes and rivers. England, the first country to industrialise, now offers the world’s most mature post-industrial terrain, and is still in a state of flux: *Edgelands* takes the reader on a journey through its forgotten spaces so that we can marvel at this richly mysterious, cheek-by-jowl region in our midst.

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EDGELANDS

Journeys into England's True Wilderness

Paul Farley
and
Michael Symmons Roberts



Jonathan Cape
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Introduction

'Une ville, une campagne, de loin, c'est une ville et une campagne, mais à mesure qu'on s'approche, ce sont des maisons, des arbres, des tuiles, des feuilles, des herbes, des fourmis, des jambes de fourmis, à l'infini. Tout cela s'enveloppe sous le nom de campagne.'

Pascal, *Pensées*

[‘A city, a countryside from a distance is a city and a countryside; but as you approach, they are houses, trees, shingles, leaves, grass, ants, legs of ants, and so on to infinity: all this is enveloped in the name “countryside”.’]

In the English imagination, the great escape might go something like this: you get into your car, merge into traffic, and join a busy motorway via one of the feeder roads from the city; after an hour or two, you leave at the correct junction and join an A-road, which you follow for a while before turning off on to smaller, quieter roads that elide into narrow lanes; eventually, the lane dips and climbs through wooded hollows, affording sudden views as it follows the line of a ridge, then descends to a track where an ivy-clad cottage waits, a light burning in its window; the key is under the mat, you notice the cottage has a name rather than a

number ('Albion'); you let yourself in to its cool, wainscoted hallway, where a clock ticks and time runs backwards.

For a long while, an entire childhood in fact, we wondered where the countryside actually was, or even if it really existed. Growing up on the edge of two cities – Liverpool and Manchester – in the early Seventies, it was easy enough to walk for a short while and soon find yourself lost in back lanes or waste ground, to follow the wooded perimeters of a golf course, an old path leading through scratchy shrubland, or the course of a drainage ditch. It was easy enough to find yourself on the edges of arable land, to follow the track bed of a dismantled railway or descend into an abandoned quarry. But none of this ever really felt like the countryside: the sunlit uplands of jigsaw puzzles and Ladybird books, the rolling hills of biscuit-tin lids, the meadowlands and glades in the framed, reproduced pastorals our parents hung on our living-room walls or that we saw on television or read about.

We were sceptical, to a point at which we wondered whether this Elsewhere was in fact a total fiction, lit and staged in the same way the moon landings a few years earlier had been confected. Though not even the CIA could invent a character like Jack Hargreaves, from the then long-running TV series *Out of Town*. We loved Jack. Whether he was tying his own flies for trout, lamping for rabbits on moonless nights or dipping a horseshoe into the hissing water of a dark smithy, Jack was all we had to go on, proof positive that the countryside was a real place that still existed. But how did you get there?

*

In *Drosscape*, Alan Berger's study of the vast, uncharted geography of waste landscapes and urban sprawl in the United States, a problem of definition arises. Berger took to the air in a Cessna to explore the horizontal city in an attempt to understand a complex and fast-moving new

terrain. He collected many names for the urbanisation of landscape, and almost as if to keep up with the space and scale of American waste, language had obligingly proliferated:

boomburb
citistate
datascape
dead city
deconcentration
dispersed city
distributive protocols
dual city
dumpspace
edge city
edgeless city
enclaves
ephemeral city
exploding metropolis
Fordist city
galactic metropolis
global city
global-dual city
informal city
informational city
junkspace
landscape urbanism
limitless city
linked city
megalopolis
micropolis
midopolis
minicentre
multicentred metropolitan region
multinucleated metropolitan region
negative space

nerdistan
network urbanism
off worlds
peripheral city
polycentric city
polynucleation
post-city
post-Fordist city
smart growth
splintering urbanism
sprawl
stimdross
suburban sprawl
technoburb
technopolis
transurbanism
urbalism
urban sprawl
vanishing city
world city

We might have come up with the word 'edgelands' ourselves. Anyone who has spent a childhood mooching around the fringes of English towns and cities, where urban and rural negotiate and renegotiate their borders, might have come up with the word. If you know those places where overspill housing estates break into scrubland, wasteland; if you know these underdeveloped, unwatched territories, you know that they have 'edge'. We *might* have come up with it ourselves, but geographer Marion Shoard got there first. Her writing on England's edgelands, her call to arms, for poets and novelists to celebrate them, and above all her *naming* of this ground was the starting point for us. The writer Georges Perec once observed that the Eskimo's famously plenteous vocabulary for types of snow and ice is not repeated in words to describe the spaces

between their igloos, while in English we have an abundance of words to account for the variety of landscapes on our doorstep, in our built environment. Hopefully, we can help introduce one more into circulation.

So much might depend on being able to see the edgelands. Giving them a name might help, because up until now they have been without any signifier, an incomprehensible swathe we pass through without regarding; untranslated landscape. And edgelands, by and large, are not meant to be seen, except perhaps as a blur from a car window, or as a backdrop to our most routine and mundane activities. Edgelands are part of the gravitational field of all our larger urban areas, a texture we build up speed to escape as we hurry towards the countryside, the distant wilderness. The trouble is, if we can't see the edgelands, we can't imagine them, or allow them any kind of imaginative life. And so they don't really exist. The smaller identities of things in the edgelands have remained largely invisible to most of us.

This book's other presiding spirit is Richard Mabey and *The Unofficial Countryside*. First published in 1973, Mabey's wonderful study must have opened many eyes to the vitality and worth of urban edges in England, though his focus was on the resilience of nature in these waste places, rather than a celebration of the places themselves. Mabey didn't necessarily cherish these new habitats in their own right, or seek 'to excuse the dereliction, the shoddiness and the sheer wastefulness of much of our urban landscape'.

Everyone knows - after a sentence or two of explanation - their local version of the territories defined by this word 'edgelands'. But few people know them well, let alone appreciate them. Our book *is* an attempt to celebrate these places, to break out of the duality of rural and urban landscape writing, to explore these unobserved parts of our shared landscape as places of possibility, mystery, beauty.

*

As poets in the English lyric tradition, we are drawn to the idea of praise, of celebration. And we are equally aware of its difficulty. The edgelands are a complex landscape, a debatable zone, constantly reinventing themselves as economic and social tides come in and out. Of course, the idea of edgelands does not just refer to parts of the physical environment. It's a rich term for poetry, too, and can maybe help to break down other dualities. Poets have always been attracted by the overlooked, the telling details, the captured moment. And the moment is important here, too. If parts of remote rural Britain feel timeless (though this feeling is, of course, illusory) then the edgelands feel anything but. Revisit an edgelands site you haven't seen for six months, and likely as not there will be a Victorian factory knocked down, a business park newly built, a section of waste ground cleared and landscaped, a pre-war warehouse abandoned and open to the elements. Such are the constantly shifting sands of edgelands that any writing about these landscapes is a snapshot. There is no definitive description of the edgelands of Swindon, or Wolverhampton, only an attempt to celebrate and evoke them at one particular time.

Time and again, we found a place that is as difficult to pin down and define as poetry, but like poetry, you'd know it when you saw it. It often contained decay and stasis, but could also be dynamic and deeply mysterious. Edgelands are always on the move. In our own lifetimes, we've noticed how they have changed, largely as a result of the big push for the motorways and the rise of out-of-town shopping, as retailers shifted their operations to the huge floor space and parking opportunities available on the margins of our cities. Such developments tend to perpetuate further development, as infrastructure forms its busy threads of connective tissue, and the course of existing roads is

altered, like light bending towards a black hole. The rudely functional big sheds of retail, their battleship greys festooned with the primary colours of brand names and logos, were largely unknown to us thirty-odd years ago, as were the reinvented spaces of the outlet village.

We remembered a kind of Arcadia. The Lancashire edgelands we explored and played in as children were formed in some of the wider spaces of dereliction and waste left behind in the aftermath of industrialisation. Visiting Lancashire a generation earlier in the Thirties, J. B. Priestley had written: 'Between Manchester and Bolton the ugliness is so complete that it is almost exhilarating. It challenges you to live there.' As we grew up, the chimneys came down, the slag and spoil heaps were shifted or landscaped, and the lie of the land had begun to appear less raw than it had done to another Thirties visitor, George Orwell. In this cooling wake, a less apocalyptically ugly landscape was emerging, haphazardly, beyond the edges of our towns and cities, which themselves were growing outwards in the post-war rush to throw up cheap, high-density housing. But it was a new landscape that made no sense, one with no obvious artistic or literary analogue, no rhyme or reason.

At their most unruly and chaotic, edgelands make a great deal of our official wilderness seem like the enshrined, ecologically arrested, controlled garden space it really is. Children and teenagers, as well as lawbreakers, have seemed to feel especially at home in them, the former because they have yet to establish a sense of taste and boundaries, and have instinctively treated their jungle spaces as a vast playground; the latter because nobody is looking.

*

We made many journeys into this landscape, though this isn't a book of walks, rambles, *dérives* or *flâneurisms*.

Although elements of all these things undoubtedly helped us reacquaint ourselves with this no-man's-land, both of us already knew this landscape well, having grown up living close to it. The things to be found and experienced in this zone – indeed, the unkempt and overlooked textures of this zone in its entirety – have already found their various ways into many of the poems, dramas and stories we've both written since. We knew this place intimately, long before we decided to write at length upon it.

There have been many artists and writers who have been drawn to this new landscape, and their work has helped us look again and in different ways. Nevertheless, we felt that the edgelands were being largely ignored or misrepresented in the explosion of landscape writing in the last decade. Sometimes they are written off as part of the urban (or suburban) human landscape that has to be escaped, or transcended, in order to discover true solitude in the wilds of northern Scotland, or on the fringes of our island archipelago. At other times – as in the work of some so-called *psychogeographers* – they are merely a backdrop for bleak observations on the mess we humans have made of our lives, landscapes, politics and each other. In our view, both these 'schools' run the same risk – using the edgelands as a short cut to misanthropy.

We decided to write the book together in the anonymous tradition. Subsuming both of our voices seemed like a good way of getting into this territory. This was a difficult landscape to immerse ourselves in physically – there would be no tree climbing, and swimming in standing water was out of the question – though in the backs of our minds there was a sense of letting the terrain speak for itself, rather than framing ourselves within it as intrepid explorers. We also felt joint authorship might lead us from the well-trodden path of stick-waving or professional outsiderdom. Letting a complacent and hypnotised hoi polloi know how we could see through the mirage didn't interest us, not least because,

the more we travelled through and thought about this landscape, the more we found we admired it.

Geographically, this is a wide picture, reflecting journeys we have made to the north, south, east and west of England. But we were both born and raised in England's north-west, the former industrial heartland stretching from Liverpool to Manchester. And we both - after periods living and working in London and elsewhere in the British Isles - have come home to the north-west in recent years. So, although our travels and observations are wide-ranging, our deepest emotional connection is with the edgelands around those great rival cities of Manchester and Liverpool, and that is reflected in the book.

The book gradually took shape around *things* to be found in this debatable region, although such a discrete organisation should fool no one: on the ground, particularly rich tracts of edgelands can be found containing many, if not all, of our chapter subjects, side by side and often overlapping with each other. But in concentrating our attention upon individual facets and characteristics, pausing to describe, explore and imagine, and taking something akin to a meditative approach, we hope the chapters rhyme enough to suggest correspondences and commonalities, and that their boundaries, at least a little like the real thing, remain porous.

*

Somewhere in the hollows and spaces between our carefully managed wilderness areas and the creeping, flattening effects of global capitalism, there are still places where an overlooked England truly exists, places where ruderals familiar here since the last ice sheets retreated have found a way to live with each successive wave of new arrivals, places where the city's dirty secrets are laid bare, and successive human utilities scar the earth or stand cheek by

jowl with one another; complicated, unexamined places that thrive on disregard, if we could only put aside our nostalgia for places we've never really known and see them afresh.

Cars

The poet and sage Roy Fisher has described a gradual shift in his view of his home city, Birmingham: 'The landscape has come, with the passage of time and changes in my understanding, to moralise itself under my eye, without any nudging from me. I read it as a record of conduct as well as something subjectively transfigured.'

He's right, of course, but cities aren't the only records of our conduct. The remotest Scottish Highlands have our political, economic and social history written all over them, and the edgelands are no different.

Take a walk through any of our edgelands and the landscape paints itself as a *paysage moralisé*. On second thoughts, don't take a walk, take a drive. The edgelands are to drive for, to, through. This is where cars come into their own, and not just executive coupés on their way to business meetings.

*

Cars are a defining characteristic of the edgelands. Here you can have them re-sprayed, re-tyred, re-tuned. But there is another auto-ritual carried out here, a ritual that begins with an empty space on a city street. After rage, panic and complex reordering of the rest of the day, the errant driver has to cadge a lift or hail a taxi to the edgelands, on the trail of a towed-away car. That decision to park for five minutes

on a double yellow line leads to an expensive trip out of the city centre, to a compound ringed by steel fences topped with barbed wire. The driver is dropped off, pays the taxi, and takes the walk of shame and fury. The driver is dressed for a day in the city, not for the clamper's yard. The driver picks a path through rainbow pools of drizzle and petrol. There is usually an argument, but this is pointless. The clamper, behind his metal grille in the bare office, has heard it all a thousand times before, and doesn't even bother to turn the radio down. He simply repeats, calmly as a litany, the nature and location of the sin, and the wages due because of it. Eventually, the driver pays a huge fee in return for a set of directions - three rows down, towards the back of the yard - and is let out of the gate with a thumbs up. Hours late for meetings, hundreds of pounds the poorer, paying the price in blood pressure, the driver speeds away from the edgelands, back to the anonymous city.

*

On summer nights, the edgelands become the domain of boy racers and their newly pimped rides. Some are there to put their souped-up engines through their paces, roaring down the long straight strips, burning rubber in the empty car parks. Others are there to park with doors open, lid lifted on a polished engine, oversized sound system cranked up full. These cars are electric purple, crimson, lurid green. They don't just have lights, they have lights on their lights - massive spots that drain the battery if left on too long, disco lights on the back parcel shelf. Best of all, they have mysterious blue lights underneath the chassis, so at night they seem to float in an electric-blue pool of their own making. These cars are born again. Third- or fourth-hand, they changed owners for hundreds, not thousands. Then one day, a customiser spotted them, the old Capris and Golfs, the former rep cars and hot hatches. Someone saw

their potential, and was willing to sink hours and pounds into giving them another heyday. Mutton dressed as lamb, they stand in resolute defiance of government scrappage schemes, ecological maxims, the laws of suburban driving. These are edgelands chimeras, beautiful, garish freaks.

*

But not all cars are born again. The edgelands are also a graveyard for cars. This is not for the squeamish. Passers-by on trains, avert your eyes. This is the end of the road, and your beloved weekend runabout is destined to breathe its last here. It's a classic scene from thrillers and Seventies cop shows: the chase that ends in a capture in a car-crusher's yard, the huge hydraulic claw picking up the car with driver still inside, the hapless victim unable to jump free as the car is dropped in to the crusher, the screams as the crusher walls close on the car, the magnet on a chain lifting the resultant cube and dropping it on a heap of other cubes. But on a tour of edgelands you don't see many piles of cubed cars. What you see is far more haunting.

These are the automotive equivalents of the Paris catacombs, mass graves in orderly array, but above ground, exposed to the elements. In these yards you find rusting car cadavers piled three, five, eight high, towering columns of ex-cars leaning on each other for support. Stripped of all that's worth taking - alloys, radios, lights - all windows smashed, these are a record of our conduct. Who was taken for a ride in these? Who bought and sold them, thrashed them on the motorways? Who washed and polished them? The life cycle of an executive coupé in Britain begins under spotlights, behind plate glass in an edgelands dealership. Salesmen and saleswomen in business suits hand out brochures complete with engine spec in small print, cutaway diagrams, statistics. Interested customers sit with care on the spotless seats, stroke the steering wheel and dream.

Finance is arranged, and the car leaves the edgelands for the town and suburbs. It may, of course, commute back to the edgelands every day to park outside a glass office, but many don't come back here in the early years except for annual services, tyre changes, out-of-town shopping. A few years on they may return to the dealership, outside in the rain this time, with the other used cars, and a bargain sign slapped on the windscreen. Then, again, they unwind the edgelands roundabouts on their way to town. Eventually, they come back for good, a few streets down the road from where they sat in the showroom.

This time they are stripped, cannibalised, and piled high. No one minds this, no one grieves for them. No one likes to admit they love their cars so much. And seeing them treated this way is good for the soul. Or rather, it's good for the eco-soul. Surely the sight of car cadavers piled high in the rain should gladden the heart. After all, one more car on the teetering columns is one less polluter on the road. But it doesn't quite feel like that. Not to most of us, at least. It has a pathos. New cars are beautiful, and we don't like to see them reduced to this by us, by those who should have taken better care of them. And maybe, because we put so much of ourselves into our cars, maybe we see our own demise foreshadowed in theirs, our own future, cannibalised for parts, broken open, cast aside.

*

It comes as no surprise to discover that this afterlife of the automobile doesn't feature on any maps. Though these places could be factory programmed into every satnav system, with one final rhetorical flourish from the speech synthesiser's female voice, as a rush of endorphins can signal and ease our body's final letting go. *You have reached your destination.* Satnav as memento mori.

But this is to credit satnav with something approaching a mind of its own, and throughout the decade, as satnavs have become affordable and commonplace (and as the word itself entered our everyday language), we have all heard the stories of drivers failing to trust what they could see with their own eyes, marooning their articulated lorries in tiny, impassable minor roads, of drivers being led to the brink of non-existent river crossings or turning right at level crossings on to railway tracks, of drivers damaging fifteenth-century bridges or steering their fifteen-ton trucks into little cottages, even driving the wrong way along dual carriageways. Ambulances carrying human transplant organs got lost. We've heard of tourists turning up in pebble-dashed cul-de-sacs and demanding, 'Where are the waterfalls?' The village of Wedmore in Somerset asked to be wiped off the satnav grid. We have lived through the festival of satnavalia, where subservient technology has mischievously and malevolently tinkered with the demands of its human masters.

'Satnav' as an idea has taken on a life of its own and become a powerful, everyday metaphor, positioned right on a fault line between our mistrust of technology and a desire for magic and unsullied instinct. We've begun to hear satnav used as a pejorative term, way beyond the context of road travel, say, in the way an education think tank described a new generation of 'satnav students' who were incapable of thinking for themselves. We've also begun to hear it used approvingly, often when describing an 'inner satnav', the one that pigeons use to read the earth's magnetic field and plot a course for home, or that vinyl junkies deploy to track down secondhand record shops in unfamiliar towns.

*

Maps are always abstractions. The road map in particular disregards most terrain, giving the greatest visual

bandwidth to blue motorways and green major roads (though train lines, in comparison, run like fine dark threads). They get us from A to B, and in so doing, distort all scale in favour of the public highway. They turn us into vectors. In the A-Zs of major English cities, there are always pages where the circuitry of streets gives way to blank grid squares, peppered with nameless ponds, industrial parks, nurseries and plantations.

Still, maps and cartography have long held a fascination for poets. Elizabeth Bishop wrote an early poem, called 'The Map', absorbed in the delicacies of tone and shading produced by the mapmaker: 'The names of seashore towns run out to sea' and off the edge of the land, the printer experiencing the 'same excitement / as when emotion too far exceeds its cause'. The poet Ciaran Carson has suggested a source for this fascination might be the way a map 'has to use shorthand, or symbols, or metaphor, and in this it resembles poetry'. Writers from Lewis Carroll to Jorge Luis Borges have even imagined maps with a scale of 1:1, a cartography that matches in size the region it is meant to describe: in the case of the former writer, to be found in desert regions lying in tatters like its own ruins; in the latter, too big to ever roll out and practically use. But global positioning and satnav have, in a sense, already ushered in the possibility of the virtual 1:1 map. What might this mean for our blank, in-between spaces?

Satnav is basically a map, or rather, it provides a mobile interface with a digital map, and though global positioning is controlled by the US military, map data is provided globally by two companies: Navteq (US) and Tele Atlas (Belgium). Field data capture teams are used in every country to determine the situation on the ground, and spot discrepancies, and this process of editing and updating map data is known as 'ground-truthing'. In *On Roads*, Joe Moran assigns the ground-truther the role of private eye, sent out to investigate the lie of the land:

Ground-truthers work in pairs, taking it in turns to do the driving while the other person taps on or talks to a laptop connected to a GPS device. These road detectives corroborate street names, count the number of roundabout exits, mark out dead ends and one-way streets and decide which bits of the road count as 'points of interest', from petrol stations to speed cameras. Like real private eyes, they supplement this intrepid tyrework with less glamorous hours in the office. Here they fast-forward through hours of CCTV footage, noting every road sign; cadge addresses and speed-limit listings from local councils and utility companies; scroll through databases of road construction companies to get advance notice of new roads; and zoom in on Google Earth to look for road markings and bits of tyre left on the road at intersections, to work out turn restrictions.

Fancying ourselves as engaged in risky ground-truthing work, we imagine we are developing a system called edgenav, a means of guiding travellers away from the speed and vector of conventional satnav travel, and a handy companion to the book we are writing. Edgenav could feature a facility for identifying the shipping container, deep in the middle of England, via information sharing with shipping companies; drivers could be alerted to long-standing graffiti on bridge overhangs or piers just as easily as to an upcoming speed camera; routes away from the main arterial roads and the floating blue band of the motorway could lead drivers into seldom visited wastelands bypassed by the flows of commerce and leisure, the landfill sites and blank unnamed pools of dark standing water. But far more importantly, edgenav could link travellers with the stories of these unseen places blurring in their peripheral vision, narrating the hidden paths and dens, the allotments and sewage farms, tapping in to the collective

consciousness by using the wiki to gather and make available their human history, criss-crossing the unexamined routes and semi-urban myths and the flight paths of migrating birds.

Who would provide the all-important voice for edgenav? Celebrity sounds utterly wrong. Estuary English? Another synthetic schoolmistress? What we imagine hearing instead are many voices, the voices of den-builders and twitchers and graffiti artists and weather-station keepers. We hear something like the field recordings linguists make in schoolyards and city streets, the anonymous voices of people who still carry the traces of local places in their mouths, on their tongues, fading in and out of reception like local FM stations on a long drive.

*

Although in-car navigation has been around for a long time, perhaps satnav is still in its infancy; its potential to guide and instruct, but also to unlock the textures of the landscape we pass through only yet hinted at. Perhaps we are all early adopters of a technology that could intersect with a myriad of personal accounts and stories. All the abstractions of the Cartesian map could be enlivened, in every cultural sense. As each invisible isogloss is crossed on the long journey northwards up the M6, we could hear a voice alert the traveller: for example, the great 'trap-bath split' that runs from the Wash to the Welsh Borders. We have lost our ability to find our way using the sun, the stars, the moon, the weather, or water, plants and animals. But most of us lost it many generations ago. In some ways, we could attempt to make the world navigable this way again, and many of us fantasise about our lost masteries and resourcefulness; but the world has changed, and most of us live surrounded by mysterious labyrinths of our own making that we seem unable or unwilling to look into.