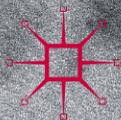
An aerial, black and white photograph of a church with a prominent, tall, dark spire. The church is situated on a grassy area. In the background, a large body of water is visible, with several buildings and structures along the shoreline. The overall scene is captured from a high angle, looking down at the church and the surrounding landscape.

**The Politics of Water  
in Post-War Britain**

Glen O'Hara



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*For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,  
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,  
making it bring forth and sprout,  
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,  
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;  
it shall not return to me empty,  
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,  
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*

–Isaiah 55: 10–11.

*The water understands  
Civilization well;  
It wets my foot, but prettily,  
It chills my life, but wittily,  
It is not disconcerted,  
It is not broken-hearted:  
Well used, it decketh joy,  
Adorneth, doubleth joy:  
Ill used, it will destroy,  
In perfect time and measure  
With a face of golden pleasure  
Elegantly destroy.*

–Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘Water’ (1841).

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## Introduction: Water and History

### WATER, LIFE AND MEANING

Water is life. It makes up about 60% of the human body and is a prerequisite for *homo sapiens*' very existence. Although humans might live for 40 days without food, they are unlikely to survive for more than 3 days without water. H<sub>2</sub>O – this strange combination of two hydrogen atoms with a single oxygen atom – is required to keep bones and joints moving; digestion healthy; the liver and kidneys working well; and to release energy from every cell in the body.<sup>1</sup> On a wider – planetary – scale, we live on a watery planet that would probably not sustain life at all without this precious liquid. Nowhere are living organisms found on Earth without at least some water to nurture them. The structure of hydrogen bonding within each water molecule means that the molecule is lighter when cooler, allowing ice to float on the Earth's oceans rather than sinking and fatally chilling the planet; ice sheets reflect the majority of the sun's radiation, cooling the planet and ensuring – for now – that it does not get hotter than life could bear.<sup>2</sup> Water covers 70% of the Earth's surface; oceanic plankton gives out over half the planet's oxygen; 80% of the planet's human population lives less than 60 miles from a river, lake or ocean shore. It is theoretically possible for life to exist without water. But so important does it seem to any known organism that the presence of H<sub>2</sub>O is the key indicator astronomers look for when searching for habitable environments both within the solar system and – right at the edge of the scientifically possible – even beyond its boundaries.<sup>3</sup>

That status as a prerequisite of life itself means that water has played a key role in shaping human history. Pre-human hominids and early humans alike relied on it: of the 11 sites where *Australopithecus* has been found, 9 contained water of some type. Early humans probably first started to move through the seasonal landscape and adapt their habits as they went in search of water. Many such groups, for instance those living at Trinil in Java, sought out river deltas and swamps as sources of food as well as drinking water – which may explain, in terms laid out by the entomologist Edward O. Wilson, why humans still retain such a preference for watery savannah landscapes that contain many rivers and lakes.<sup>4</sup> The politics of water also possesses its own deep written history, from the regulations embodied in Hammurabi's Code in Babylon around 4000 years ago, to the latest controversies around dam-building that vitiate discourses surrounding economic policy in the developing world today.<sup>5</sup> There is no doubt that water's management, control, direction and use must be one of the central stories of human history.

The British Isles seem – at first sight – a strange place about which to write another account of water's influence on human society. They are, for one thing, a rather wet region where water shortages overall are unknown. As the Liberal Party's Environment Conference was told in 1970, 40,000 million gallons were available from precipitation every year: humans used no more than 4,200 million gallons.<sup>6</sup> Engineering and political progress since the mid-nineteenth century had also made clean running water – if not quite hot and cold running superfluity – almost ubiquitous throughout Britain. In 1969 one geographer could even write that 'perhaps the best tribute to the water supply industry in Britain has been the lack of interest which has been aroused in its activities. For most of us the supply of unlimited water of excellent quality at the turn of a tap has been taken for granted'.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, it will be the contention of this book that this little-understood liquid was actually a critical site of contestation in late twentieth-century Britain, as well as a means by which we might better understand that society. From drought to flood, from river water purity to beach hygiene, from personal safety to the gendered politics of housework using water, and on to the chemicals added to tapwater, this book will highlight a vital but vastly underwritten fact of modern British life. As Greg Bankoff has recently argued, 'the history of much of England is written in water': much the same can be said of Scotland and Wales too, and water's influence requires a consistent and coherent treatment.<sup>8</sup>

Water will, throughout this work, be treated as a locus of understandings and significance – as well as a physical reality – that will allow us to illuminate the recent past.<sup>9</sup> Its very clarity has always allowed humans to write what they want onto its surface and depths, at once alarming, comforting and ever-shifting: as the Aberdonian writer Nan Shepherd noticed in the Cairngorms during the 1940s, ‘water, that strong white stuff, one of the four elemental mysteries . . . is so simple that it frightens me. It wells from the rock, and flows away. For unnumbered years it has welled from the rock, and flowed away. It does nothing, absolutely nothing, but be itself’.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, water’s ever-restless movement has always fascinated observers, as Veronica Strang has pointed out, because ‘it is not constant . . . it is the ultimate “fluid”, filling and containing shape . . . It may be life-giving . . . or it may burn, freeze or drown. Each of these states has its own qualities and is imbued with its own meanings, and all are always there in potential’.<sup>11</sup> Its elemental, powerful, signifying nature is familiar from Europe’s deep, as well as recent, pasts. As Ian Miller has pointed out in his excellent recent short history of water, water is mysterious, but somehow essential to human life. D.H. Lawrence understood very well that water was made up of ‘hydrogen two parts, oxygen one, but there is also a third thing . . . and nobody knows what that is’.<sup>12</sup>

That allusiveness has both allowed, and demonstrates, the processes by which the ideological meaning of water has been freighted with significance. In the early modern period, water was often associated with women’s power over various critical stages of life during which water takes on a special importance – in their roles as midwives and as mothers nursing and washing infants, for instance.<sup>13</sup> During the Reformation, old ‘idols’ were often immersed in water as an act of purification, ritual testing and violence.<sup>14</sup> The battle over Reform was also marked by struggles over baptismal water’s very meaning, in which Catholics, Lutherans and Anglicans continued to believe that holy water could, in and of itself, impart salvation and grace, while the Reformed Churches preferred to think of its quality as simply a sign or symbol of the same redemption.<sup>15</sup>

Water has always haunted the human imagination – as well as providing cathartic and transformative possibilities. Biblical narratives of flood and rain, and of drinking and immersion, are manifold and critical in Christian theology.<sup>16</sup> Early Jewish oral tradition compares the mixing of inert flour with water (the very stuff of dynamic change) to the beginnings of life itself. The very reason Canaan was such a promised land was because the Hebrew God could punish or reward his chosen people there – by giving

or withholding the rains. In one Hindu creation story the primordial man Parusa is born out of the waters; in another, the divine swan Hamsa hatches the very Earth itself as she floats on the waters. Lord Krishna's own name means 'dark as a storm cloud' – the colour of those storms from which he protected his followers by lifting up Mount Govardhana.<sup>17</sup> North America's early British settlers perceived their Atlantic crossing as a new passage of baptism, exposing them again to dangerous but cleansing waters.<sup>18</sup> The era of industrialisation and post-industrialisation has not entirely stripped water of its mystique, elusiveness and importance – as the following chapters will demonstrate. Geographers and social scientists have begun to investigate the role of running and standing water in evoking a 'sense of place', even today – a visceral connection with physicality that boosts individual wellbeing.<sup>19</sup> By the early twenty-first century, indeed, clean water for drinking, cooking or washing had become so ubiquitous across the developed world that it has itself become in some ways an image of normality and the everyday. The 'water cooler moment', in which office staff cluster round their filtered water source to swap news and opinions, is a case in point.<sup>20</sup>

## EMERGENT HISTORIOGRAPHIES OF WATER AND HUMAN SOCIETY

Water itself has long been a locus of historiographical innovation, one renewed in recent years as relations between humankind and the global liquid environment have come once more to the fore. 'Water is now hot', one maritime historian has recently written of that subject's rejuvenation, and other writers have been apt to agree.<sup>21</sup> Water has the power to remake nations through its 'conquest' or through the reshaping of rivers and wetlands, as David Blackbourn's general history of modern Germany has amply demonstrated.<sup>22</sup> What Simon Schama has termed 'fluvial myth' has the power to represent and even reshape our conceptions of power, of movement, and of history itself.<sup>23</sup> Recent historical investigations have explored extremely varied examples: the British Palestine Mandate authorities' attitude to water policy, for instance, which was much more helpful to the 'modern' intensive agriculture of Jewish settlers than to traditional Palestinian farmers, or the researches of Vanessa Taylor and Frank Trentmann on constructed shortages and supplies in nineteenth and twentieth century Britain.<sup>24</sup> The work of John Hassan is pre-eminent

regarding what he has termed the ‘interdependencies which lead to vexed conflicts’ and the ‘policy dilemmas . . . generated by the exploitation of the water environment’ in nineteenth and twentieth century England and Wales. In a series of magisterial studies, Hassan has examined both the course of water supply policy and the experience of seawater bathing in Britain during those years.<sup>25</sup>

Most of these texts do not, however, address the concept of water as a whole – reaching across the range of provincial-to-transnational environmental negotiations evoked by such recent work as Matthew Evenden’s 2004 book on British Columbia’s Fraser River, the watershed of which stretches over the Canadian border into the State of Washington in the United States, and the story of which Evenden has narrated via ‘the local, national and international forces that have shaped the river and have been shaped by it’.<sup>26</sup> Yet such work is vital if we are both to follow water histories, and to understand exactly the roles they have played in wider national and international developments. As Peter Coates has recently argued, ‘rivers symbolize nature’s awesome powers. Yet they are also a sinuous blend, the collective product, not just of geology, ecology and climate, but of economics, technology, politics and human imaginings’, partly because they are at one and the same time both ‘the lifeblood of communities’ and the providers of ‘habitat and sustenance’.<sup>27</sup> No stronger justification could be found for the fusion of environmental, social and political domestic histories of water aimed at in this volume.

*The Politics of Water in Post-War Britain* will therefore seek to address what Terje Tvedt and Richard Coopey have termed the ‘third layer’ of any ‘water system’: ‘the institutional and conceptual dimension’ that interacts, uncertainly and at one remove, with the first two ‘layers’ of analysis: namely, ‘water’s physical form and behaviour’ and ‘the actual human modifications to the physical water landscape’. Our concern will therefore be with what Tvedt and Coopey have dissected as ‘the management practices and “habits of thought” or ideas about water and water control’.<sup>28</sup> Julie Trottier and Sara Fernandez, in their work on south-western French canals and dams, have termed this way in which water was seen as its ‘dominant water management narrative’, and such concepts and discourses will be to the fore in the pages that follow.<sup>29</sup> Alternatively, to use J.R. McNeill’s typology, this book will focus on two of his ‘three-ring circus’ elements of environmental history – the ‘political’ and then the ‘cultural/intellectual’ elements, in contradistinction to previous generations’ more material and technocratic cadences.<sup>30</sup>

Such concepts are familiar, perhaps, in the history of the United States and of the Americas. Between the 1960s and the 1980s American historiography, under the influence of the emergent green movements of that era, rediscovered the relationship between the physical environment and human history that was evident from the Republic's earliest days. The physical power of the modernist state played a critical role in this literature, in which reimagining the work of Norris Hundley on the early twentieth century remaking of the Colorado River was to the fore. But Hundley was soon joined by a crowd of scholars interested, firstly, in the remaking of the physical landscape to bring water to new human settlements, but also in the struggle for water rights in the dry American West and in the history of environmental perceptions and preservation.<sup>31</sup> Such approaches have become influential in other countries where water use and the rights of different racial groups have been a matter of acute concern, for instance in post-Apartheid South Africa.<sup>32</sup> All this served, in Richard White's words when he considered the enormous Columbia River basin irrigation project of the 1930s and 1940s, to demonstrate how the rivers of the American West had become 'an organic machine which human beings manage without fully understanding what they have created... the human and the natural, the mechanical and the organic, had merged so that the two could never be ultimately distinguished. We live with the consequences'.<sup>33</sup> Recurrent drought crises in the American West, and the Federal Government's comprehensive Water Resources Planning Act of 1965, helped to stimulate debate over Native Americans' rights, as well as stimulating long-running struggles surrounding dams and damming.<sup>34</sup> An inter- or multi-disciplinary school of environmental history emerged – for example in the work of the US Army Corps of Engineers historian Martin Reuss – which tried to bring together the insights of sociologists, political scientists and engineers that were all too easily stymied by each subjects' own concerns, as well as by the Water Resources Act's later downgrading in an era of much weaker, more permissive governance.<sup>35</sup>

Environmental histories of British waters have, in contrast, and notwithstanding the contributions of Hassan, Taylor and Trentmann, remained relatively underdeveloped. This is perhaps because of the famous 'two cultures' caesura between scientific and artistic thinking, and in part because of the presumed identity between 'the environment' and 'the countryside' seen in prior studies.<sup>36</sup> Water shortages and planning dilemmas are, of course, also often less acute in Britain than in the American West. But whatever the reason for the relatively sparse environmental histories of British waters, historians of

Britain need to transcend such categories if we are to follow the United States example, where recent explorations of ‘water networks’, such as David Soll’s 2013 study of New York, have recently linked histories of ‘water supply expansion to larger themes of public space and the churning of the built environment’.<sup>37</sup> Such histories must, as they more often do in the United States, address people’s manifold interactions with water across urban and suburban areas – where they are most likely actually to live.<sup>38</sup>

There are rich opportunities for such work throughout British history. Ancient Britons worshipped water deities, and their holy sites were often collected around springs, or lakes such as Llyn Cerrig Bach and Llyn Fawr in Wales. The Romans often took over these sites, holding annual festivals devoted to water nymphs and other deities across southern England.<sup>39</sup> Thereafter water became less familiar and welcome, though no less elemental and meaningful. Early modern Europeans did not believe in bathing, for it was supposed to open the pores to infection and disease. Dry washing, for instance by rubbing with linen, was prescribed instead.<sup>40</sup> It took European aristocrats’ adoption of hot and watery bathing habits during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – at the seaside, but also in spa towns such as Tunbridge Wells and Bath – to make water popular, clean and ‘healthy’ again.<sup>41</sup> The mid-nineteenth century fashion for ‘hydropathy’ – a continental import that emphasised drinking, and bathing in, clean water – encouraged these trends.<sup>42</sup> By the inter-war years of the mid-twentieth century, bathing and water were clearly linked to the strong body and the healthy mind. Urban lidos, the habit of sunbathing in swimwear, and visits to ‘clean’ seaside holiday camps, such as those opened by Billy Butlin at Skegness and Clacton in 1936 and 1938, were marks of sound, ‘scientific’ and ‘modern’ fashion as much as of liminal indulgence.<sup>43</sup> Medically focused spa treatment centres and the practice of hydropathy later went into a sharp decline, undermined by economic crisis and the Ministry of Health’s lack of enthusiasm. Few spa centres were integrated into the National Health Service (NHS) on its creation in 1948, and those that remained (for instance, the local authority-owned baths at Buxton, closed in 1963) gradually declined.<sup>44</sup> Even so, the emphasis on health and wellbeing would re-emerge in the contemporary world from the 1970s onwards in modified and privatised form, embodied in a new generation of commercial private spas, which sold themselves as havens of spiritual peace, relaxation and renewal in an ever-more complex world.<sup>45</sup>

## WATER, CLEANLINESS AND 'EFFICIENCY' IN MODERN BRITISH HISTORY

The concept of water cleanliness, and its link with public policy, is often traced back to the early nineteenth century. This was an era in which the accelerating growth of cities, the increase in closely packed populations, and the lack of regular flowing water and drainage were leading to an increase in diseases such as typhoid.<sup>46</sup> In London, deaths from waterborne cholera south of the Thames were three or four times higher than those north of the river, since water companies in South London were more likely to draw their supplies from the polluted Thames. Perhaps 17,000 homes at mid-century possessed no access to mains water at all; 70,000 more only had access to standpipes (shared with 20 to 30 other households), which might run only for one hour a day, three days a week.<sup>47</sup> The work of specialist administrators, such as Edwin Chadwick in the 1840s, evangelical proponent of sanitation and modern sewerage that he was, has often been seen as the triumph of a bureaucratic, detached and, above all, 'expert' approach to this problem. His Sanitary Report, and the Health of Towns Commission report that, in part, issued from it, clearly 'buried' the idea that poverty on its own, rather than dirt and bad sanitation, caused disease.<sup>48</sup>

Further scientific and public health breakthroughs were also vital in encouraging policymakers to regulate both private water supply and the public management of discharges into water: the efforts of doctors such as John Snow, who reasoned his way by observation to the idea that cholera might be waterborne even before making his famous map of the 1854 London outbreak, were critical here.<sup>49</sup> Chadwick's inspectors – along with William Farr of the General Register Office – also helped to make some of the critical breakthroughs linking cholera to fouled water in the 1840s and 1850s.<sup>50</sup> Even so, only when germ analyses were transformed into fully fledged theories of bacteriology, and with the rise of bureaucratic intervention via publicly funded water analysts and Medical Officers of Health from the 1870s onwards, did concerns over water cleanliness really become a joined-up set of discourses that at once relegated society's outcasts and 'monsters' to ungoverned and dirty spaces below ground, and created a new set of 'clean', technologically adept and improving workers to police the division between between the clean and unclean.<sup>51</sup> As Christopher Hamlin's pioneering work has demonstrated, bitter debates

raged in the meantime as to who was to blame for Britain's 'stygian' rivers – particularly the Thames.<sup>52</sup>

Municipalisation or local public ownership, via which provincial boroughs and rural councils gradually took over Britain's multifarious private water concerns, proceeded alongside and was to some extent perceived as simply another of the increased natural monopolies so important to the mid-Victorian economic boom. These monopolies were aimed at securing higher investment and thus the inevitably better services that prevailing political discourses believed to be the 'natural' end of political as well as economic markets – suitably regulated rivalries, to be sure, but free competition, allowing for local initiative, none the less. Legislation such as the 1847 Gasworks and Waterworks Clauses Acts only guided, rather than directed, councils' efforts; the Act's limits on profit only applied to new companies; and, critically, there was no inspectorate and few means of enforcement.<sup>53</sup> Municipalisation proceeded rapidly only once it was given further legislative encouragement following the Gas and Water Facilities Act of 1870. This Act allowed the creation of municipal water undertakings by administrative decision, rather than by Act of Parliament, enormously simplifying the process. Followed by the Public Health Act of 1875, which allowed councils to take over water companies on the grounds of public health, municipalisation grew apace.<sup>54</sup> This reformist measure provided a good example of what contemporary reformers such as Farr thought of as 'liberal' governance, effecting a delicate balance between the dangers of private consumption and the virtues of a public interest that should avoid outright appropriation.<sup>55</sup> London was granted powers to raise money for capital investment via issuing stock in 1869. Other cities, such as Manchester, Leeds, Birmingham and Liverpool, soon followed: sewerage investment in particular increased markedly thereafter.<sup>56</sup>

These reforms may, however, have made the struggle for water resources more, rather than less, acute, as consumers, cities and their rural hinterlands argued over how much water was required and how to pay.<sup>57</sup> Manchester's decision to flood the Lake District's Thirlmere in the 1870s initiated a passionate controversy about the city's right to destroy a beauty defined as peculiarly rural and English for a mere reservoir.<sup>58</sup> Deep-seated and overtly political conflicts also arose via local authorities' increased insistence on, and surveillance of, higher water standards. John Broich's recent work on London has shown how the London County Council's (LCC's) progressive and radical vision of a municipalised water

industry, focusing on bringing water to the city's poorest areas, was thwarted by a Conservative government's deliberate counter-proposal of a more technocratic Metropolitan Water Board that contained only a few LCC members.<sup>59</sup> In the 1920s and 1930s the Corporation of London and the LCC viciously disputed the siting of the Corporation's huge waste tip at South Hornchurch, which was full of heavily polluted water channels running near the LCC's showcase estate of new public housing at Becontree.<sup>60</sup>

### TOWARDS A LIQUID HISTORY OF MODERN BRITAIN

Such communal action represented the triumph of a collective and even social-physiological view of medicine over individualist-analytical approaches, a conflict which itself emerged from debates about what the new statistics of health and welfare might *mean*.<sup>61</sup> The obvious mechanical and engineering triumphs of the time, increasingly evident as the nineteenth century went on, stood as one type of imperial ideology: standardising, instrumental, efficient and systemic. Water surveyors and engineers were at work even in the midst of the Irish famine in the 1840s, demonstrating to their masters in Dublin and London how vital their 'improvement' works might be.<sup>62</sup> It is the intention of this book firstly to push such approaches forward into the later twentieth century, where they have been less densely deployed, attempting to recover and understand how British governments from the 1940s to the 1980s reacted to flooding, river pollution, oceanic dumping and beach safety – dilemmas that were similar to, and yet even more acute, than those affecting their Victorian forebears.

The flows of meaning and power associated with the movement of water around more intimate domestic spaces will also be analysed. The intention here will be to move beyond deterministic, technologically orientated and instrumentalist approaches to water-bearing technology, and to analyse 'the mutual influence of political and social context' alongside 'infrastructure planning and engineering design'; for, as the engineering theorist Sarah Bell has put it: 'infrastructure systems embody social and political values and shape urban possibilities' as much as they carry *necessary* and *particular* solutions within their own specific models. Cultures of use and re-use in the home are therefore just as important as large-scale planning debates in tracking the reality of water politics in recent British history.<sup>63</sup>

In this analysis, I will attempt to sketch out what T.C. Smout and Mairi Stewart have recently termed ‘the interrelationships between people and biodiversity’, which are shaped as much by the *interactions* between the physical world and human innovation as by the mere interventions of economic change wrought by technology. For as Smout and Stewart show, ‘environmental history shows us a world of conundrums and a morass of unintended consequences. It shows us that whatever we do is not neutral for the innumerable other organisms with which we share our planet’.<sup>64</sup> This is exactly the approach adopted by Sara Pritchard, who, in her work on the Rhône, has analysed those ‘transformations [that] have taken place through the workings of both formal institutions and informal practices, and hydrologic processes beyond humanity’s complete control’, involving a ‘convergence of nonhuman and human factors’, which amounts to a constant ‘reblending of ecological and technological systems’. Pritchard has adopted what she terms an ‘envirotechnical analysis’, which shows how ‘nature, technology and nation were linked *historically*’, and which allows her to open ‘the “black box” of river management technologies to examine the contested process of their design, development and use’.<sup>65</sup>

Not only should such techniques allow us to unpack the relationships between human societies and the world they inhabit: they should also permit a deeper understanding of political and socio-economic history, especially of the varied and multifarious real and imagined landscapes of the twentieth century in Britain. As Stephen Mosley has put it: ‘there is a compelling case for bringing social and environmental history into closer communication, to their mutual benefit. Explicitly incorporating an environmental perspective into social history . . . will provide fresh angles of vision on old staples (such as protest, family, and the working classes) as well as some newer topics (including identities, migration, and consumption)’.<sup>66</sup> The geographer Matthew Gandy has also demonstrated, in his recent book *The Fabric of Space*, the necessity of studying water’s ‘cultural and material significance’, its ‘infrastructure as a technical and organizational domain’, and its place within modernity itself – including the makeup of its spaces, technologies, bodies, designs and collective imaginative and practical life.<sup>67</sup> Broich has drawn attention to urban imaginings, visions and models of water supply as central to understanding the emergence of the modern city, since ‘water . . . existed in a close relationship with political structures, economic systems, human ideals, and . . . millions of human bodies that could not go a day without it’.<sup>68</sup> Steven Moga has recently stressed the use and re-use of inherited concepts and memes in the American context, citing ‘the

political dynamics at work' in water politics, 'calling on differing traditions and ideas about individual and collective, rights and responsibilities, law and society, city and hinterland'.<sup>69</sup> All these emphases – on humans' place in the watery environment; the role of psychological and physical infrastructures in British environmental politics; the shape of the imagined city; the health of Britain's rivers, lakes, shores and oceans; and finally, past and present conventional and radical wisdoms pressed into use in order to understand them all – will be to the fore in the pages that follow.

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## Reconceptualising Water Politics in Post-war Britain

### WATER AND THE RISE OF ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS

Water purity was clearly one of the discourses linked to the rise of ‘ecology’ or the ‘new environmentalism’. The late 1960s and early 1970s were a time of booming membership of, and activity within, a host of pressure groups that were interested in the provision of natural amenities or conservation of ‘the environment’. The National Trust claimed 200,000 members in the 1960s, but one million by the end of the 1970s. The Scottish Wildlife Trust was founded in 1964, and could claim 36,000 members by the early twenty-first century.<sup>1</sup> The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds had 25,000 members in 1964, but 300,000 by 1979. In 1969 it owned 6,500 hectares of land, including a large number of wetlands; by 1979 that figure stood at 32,000 hectares.<sup>2</sup> The semi-official ‘Countryside in 1970’ campaign was led by the Duke of Edinburgh, who indeed thought that ‘the great expansion of the voluntary movement’ has ‘outgrown our capacity to keep them in focus. There may now appear to be too great an overlap between the many voluntary organisations in the conservation movement which may...confuse the public’.<sup>3</sup> Such activism could not but spill over into more traditional national politics. A special Liberal Party Conference on the Environment concluded in 1970 that one of the main drivers behind these concerns was access to water for swimming, fishing, boating and birdwatching, ‘recreational demands for water [which] reflect a growing public awareness of the value of amenity...growing mobility and leisure time’.<sup>4</sup>

Similar voluntary impulses were behind a slew of private initiatives that both protected Britain's inland and maritime waters and created new administrative machinery to safeguard them. Chief among the environmental celebrities associated with this movement was the naturalist and painter Peter Scott, son of the Antarctic explorer Sir Robert Scott, and a tireless campaigner for the rights and habitats of wading birds. He founded the Severn Wildfowl Trust (known as the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust by the early 1950s), just north of Bristol at Slimbridge in Gloucestershire, immediately after the Second World War; its wildfowl population quickly came to be acknowledged as the largest in the world, with geese and swans from across the northern hemisphere arriving annually and becoming familiar on its lakes and waterbeds.<sup>5</sup> A gifted communicator and television personality, his weekly programme, *Look*, helped him to reach a whole new audience, while the BBC moved its Natural History Unit to Bristol partly to be near this most active of personalities.<sup>6</sup> Scott's creed was a simple one: 'something goes wrong with man when he cuts himself off from the natural world . . . he knows it, and this is why he keeps gardens and window-boxes, and dogs and cats and budgerigars. Man does not live by bread alone. I believe he should take just as great pains to look after the natural treasure which inspired him as he does to preserve his man-made treasures in art galleries and museums'.<sup>7</sup> He assembled a prestigious international advisory board for his Slimbridge centre, including the biologist Julian Huxley; Scott's 'Ark Club' included a wide range of friends and colleagues that – following the intervention of Prince Philip and Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands, among others – became the World Wide Fund for Nature.<sup>8</sup>

Between the late 1960s and the 1990s Scott's own Wildfowl Trust became a hub for international wetland studies: as well as taking on national Wildfowl Counts, the Trust served as home for the International Wildfowl Research Bureau (IWRB), which by the 1990s had become Wetlands International.<sup>9</sup> The IWRB pressed, via its membership of a number of global research and pressure groups such as the International Union for Conservation of Nature, for an International Wetlands Conservation Convention, as well as issuing educational leaflets such as *Liquid Assets*, published in 1964 with the financial help of the United Nations Organization for Education, Science and Culture (UNESCO).<sup>10</sup> Its summing-up was simple: 'the conservation of wetlands is a moral, aesthetic, scientific and economic necessity . . . wetlands are a natural asset. Exploit them . . . Don't destroy them'.<sup>11</sup> Scott was asked to campaign on such interconnected issues as electricity-generating barrages

in estuaries, inter-tidal pollution and the creation of wetland habitats in all new or existing national parks, especially after the beginning (at St Andrews, in October 1963) of a series of inter-European meetings on wildfowl conservation.<sup>12</sup>

Such campaigns crossed Cold War boundaries, demonstrating once more the reach of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and charities which could pose as ‘above’ or ‘beyond’ politics: Bulgarian, Czechoslovak and Polish ornithologists; other correspondents; and even state officials provided much of its pan-European evidence and expertise. Further data was collected from Yugoslavia, Romania and even the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).<sup>13</sup> This activism helped lay the groundwork for the 1971 Ramsar Convention, on the Conservation of Wetlands and Waterfowl, in which the signatory nations agreed to maintain a List of Wetlands of International Importance, keep up plans for their conservation and defend them from pollution, and to attend regular Conventions on their management. The World Wildlife Fund and the IWRB both sent observers to the Conference that signed the Convention.<sup>14</sup>

For most of the period between the 1940s and 1960s, however, the concept of ‘the environment’ meant, overwhelmingly, the *urban* environment, or alternatively the preservation or protection of rural ‘green’ areas, both of which had to be managed to facilitate the growth of both the population and the economy.<sup>15</sup> Even in 1971, in remarks to the Socialist International in Vienna, more thoughtful left-wing politicians such as Judith Hart addressed mainly the dangers inherent in standardised and polluted *inner-city* environments. Joan Lester highlighted the ‘pressures and psychological impact of urban life’ in a paper to Labour’s National Executive Committee the following year.<sup>16</sup> The concept of land, sea and people as a totality, related organically one to the other, took much longer to emerge, as inter- and transnational perceptions only gradually began to coalesce around that model. Instrumental here was the 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment, bolstered for instance by the work of unofficial expert panels jointly chaired by the British economist Margaret Ward.<sup>17</sup> From this perspective Ward outlined for the wider public what might be termed a novel conception and a new economics of the sea: that it could never be an infinite resource, despite the prevailing and natural view, ‘standing on the beach gazing towards the horizon’, that ‘all industrial and urban discharge will disappear somehow into blue space beyond [that] horizon’. Its purity and potential needed actively to be protected.<sup>18</sup>