Entangled in the Forest of Brexit

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Over many years, photography was for me fundamentally an urban matter: a flaneurish wandering and gleaning in the intricate historical, social and political palimpsest of the city. So a move to suburbia was a difficult adjustment: to the tamer, quieter environment, less crowded with people, features and incidents; with a briefer history, less subject to violent disruptions and juxtapositions. But then—over years of a different wandering—I also explored the forest that bordered this suburbia, Epping Forest—that odd, much used yet often deserted, urban and suburban and in places even rural wood which stretches twelve miles through parts of northeast London into Essex. It is no uninterrupted wild fastness; lying under the Stansted flight paths, it also contains a police helicopter base; it is bisected and bordered by major roads so that traffic can mostly be heard, even when it is far from being seen. But at the same time, it is various, complex and disorienting, with numerous paths (human and more often animal) that circle back on each other or trail off into an impassable tangle. In spite of the best efforts of Victorian improvement—the draining of dangerous swamps, the linked creation of picturesque lakes and ponds, the laying out of a few broad paths—in a few places it remains unwelcoming to human intrusion. Will Ashon's book on the forest is well named: *Strange Labyrinth*.[1]

[1] Will Ashon, *Strange Labyrinth: Outlaws, Poets, Mystics, Murderers and a Coward in London's Great Forest*, Granta, London 2017.

I became fascinated by its edges, and by the many uses made of it, more or less legitimate or legal: alongside the dog-walkers, hikers, cyclists and horse-riders, one may come across the remnants of crimes (stolen bags flung into hedges or a pried-open safe), fly-tipping, sex and even arson. So when I was commissioned by the curator, Firat Arapoglu, to make a work on the theme of borders for the Mardin Biennial in the Spring of 2018, my thoughts turned to the woods, especially in the light of an event which was and remains as disorienting as, in some places and seasons, is the Forest.[2]

The basic idea was to trace Brexit and the Forest together, photographically. My explanatory text for the work read:

> Epping Forest, once a royal hunting ground, known for its ancient oaks (symbols of England) lies on the outskirts of London. Now given over to the public, divided by roads and hemmed in by private property, it is a suburban woodland. Brexit—the vote to leave the European Union—sharply divided remainer London from the neighbouring county of Essex, which voted strongly to leave.
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> The border between the two runs through the forest, sometimes following tracks and streams, and sometimes straying into dense thickets. I followed it as best I could using map and compass, on a meandering and doubtless erratic path, looking for signs of social disaffection on the hinge of English county and global city.

[2] 4th International Mardin Biennial, *Beyond Words*, Mardin, Turkey, May-June 2018.

Cuckoo Brook

Some of the divides of Brexit—urban and suburban, cosmopolitan and English, common goods and private property—bear on the Forest itself, so the association is not incidental. For example, Cuckoo Brook, along which the border runs for a distance, followed upstream leaves the forest at its boundary with a golf course, and downstream flows into one of those Victorian lakes and then into the Ching, another border marker and one of London's 'lost' rivers, as it makes its way to join the River Lea amid a landscape of pylons, megastores, car parks and the North Circular Road.[3]

Brexit was predominantly supported by English people who lived outside the big urban centres, and especially by the elderly.[4] Over decades since the 1970s, white folk fled the dangerous, dilapidated and darkening East End into the suburbs around the Forest, in flight not just from dire conditions but from non-English cultures and the globalising world.[5] Yet, while for a time the area felt, or wanted to feel, as if it were fixed in aspic, social change did not stop there. New incomers—younger, more diverse, many with mixed-race families, and more socially liberal—overlaid the older emigrants. The divide was dramatised for me by canvassing in the area during the 2019 election, and meeting many people on both sides of the party and Brexit divides who felt unmoored by current politics—confused, alienated, and some of them deeply angry. This was especially because in their disorientation in the face of fearful complexity and crisis, the

[3] See Nicholas Barton, *The Lost Rivers of London: A Study of Their Effects Upon London and Londoners, and the Effects of London and Londoners on Them*, Phoenix House, London, 1962.
[4] Danny Dorling, *Rule Britannia: Brexit and the End of Empire*, Biteback Publishing, London 2019, pp. 24, 28-33.
[5] It is difficult now to recapture the terrible state of inner city London in the 1970s and beyond. See, for example, Paul Harrison, *Inside the Inner City: Life Under the Cutting Edge*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex 1983. This book focuses on the now safer and far more expensive Borough of Hackney.

political class appeared helpless—both deluded and clueless. In all this, there was a sense of deeper changes at work, as capitalism and especially its 'shotgun marriage' with democracy faltered.[6]

Brexit and the forest boundary, then, shared for me a sense of entanglement, of disorientation and complexity against a backdrop of ruination (in the forest of entropic waste and environmental depredation, in austerity Britain of the collapse of many state services once taken for granted). And—not to give too many clues as to the various metaphors and allusions that run through the piece—of fallen and abused oaks as signs of a national sickness.[7]

To reads old books about the forest is sometimes to discover intimations of how dead and denuded the place has become. To take a single example, James Brimble in a photographic appreciation of the forest written in the 1950s, tells of caterpillars hanging by their threads from the trees with such profusion that on certain spring days it was impossible to make one's way through them.[8] I have occasionally brushed past a few strands of these—all that remain. Evidently, the insecticides from the surrounding farmlands and gardens have made their way into the wood's waters, while ever-increasing light pollution also does its deadly work.

The Forest is rich in history, from its origins as a Royal hunting ground in which those who had the temerity to assuage their hunger by poaching could be blinded, castrated or executed for their

[6] On this marriage, see Wolfgang Streeck, *How Will Capitalism End?: Essays on a Failing System*, Verso, London 2016, p. 20.
[7] National associations with trees are hardly unique to England, or images of forests as melancholic registers of the losses caused by imposed modernisation. See, for example, the remarkable work of Bae Bien-u in his photography of the pine forests of South Korea. *Sacred Wood*, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern-Ruit 2009.
[8] James A. Brimble, *London's Epping Forest*, Country Life, London 1957, p. 16.

transgression against property and power. But I especially think of the romantic 'peasant' poet, John Clare, and his time there, committed to an asylum in 1837, though allowed to wander the area. His mind was in part deranged by the founding land grab of industrial capitalism, the enclosures, in which common land was seized and made private property—and in which Clare, among many others, were expelled from their ramblings across open country, which was hedged, fenced and guarded by law. The Forest itself would have met its end this way but for the agitation of commoners who defended their ancient rights to lop trees and gather wood against enclosure.[9]

This is a loss of orientation is of the most overt kind, as paths are blocked and 'trespass' becomes a crime. As exclusive property, the land becomes the disenchanted thing of use and wage labour. So Clare could write of his once most precious attachments to landscape, flower, tree and bird:

> Strange scenes mere shadows are to me
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> Vague unpersonifying things […]
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> Here every tree is strange to me
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> All foreign things where ere I go[10]

[9] See Sir William Addison, *Portrait of Epping Forest*, Robert Hale, London 1977, chs. II and V. On the ancient association of forests and the commons, see Peter Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2008, especially ch. 2.
[10] 'The Flitting', in John Clare, *Selected Poems*, ed. Geoffrey Summerfield, Penguin Books, London 1990, p. 201.

That curious word, 'unpersonifying', is telling: the enchantment by which trees are read as bodies, characters or even people—woven into legends, old and new—is weakened in the mundane world of property and use. The stolen land is made 'foreign' by changes over which one has no say.[11] Clare eventually escaped the asylum in 1841; lame and starving, he walked ninety miles home to Northamptonshire, but could find no return to his rural paradise, and no escape from madness.

All this may lead into a few broader thoughts about Englishness, the rural ideal, the suburbs, the city and class. In a recent book, Dougie Wallace's photographs the social tensions of the East End of London as it continues to be borne up on the rising wave of asset prices.[12] As many commentators have pointed out, London as a multicultural global city is remote in character and concerns from much of the rest of England. Yet even there some of the traits of an English engagement with history are to be found: the antagonism between young and old, rich and poor, workers and tourists, of ethnic groups and urban types is not merely documented but created photographically as Wallace confronts his subjects to produce an acute if cartoonish vision of alienation and of incommensurate worlds clashing. The ironic and dandyish plays with Victorian and Edwardian fashions and facial hair, which Wallace shows among the hipsters, evoke the solidity and grandeur of the imperial age, but can also be seen as acidic asides on the extreme levels of inequality found in the Belle Époque, revivified in the present. They also feed into an all-too-familiar imperial nostalgia, driven by certain historians (prominently, Niall Ferguson), and of course the current crop of Tory politicians.[13]

The long persistence in England of the country house ideal is one way to make sense of some aspects of the flight to the suburbs, Tory sentiment, and the fate of the forest. In broadcast culture, the ideal is present in a tide of costume dramas, in which the Burkean symbols of hierarchy and tradition find expression in the form and function of the great house.[14] There the material, marital and martial orders abide against the various threats that drama must present to it, just as in this nation the royals were only briefly removed and the aristocracy never overturned.[15] Through these living symbols, a core component of national identity, the principles of the natural order and of a genteel country living are set against the banality and outright ugliness of much of the actually existing land.

The suburbs are in part the yearning of the less privileged for a small slice of country life.[16] Tories, suburban and rural, hold onto the idea that hierarchy, tradition, Empire and the English character still pervade the land of motorways, industrial estates and tower blocks. After all, the

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[11] On Clare, enclosure and the felling of trees, see E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture*, The New Press, New York 1991, pp. 181-4.
[12] Dougie Wallace, *East Ended*, Dewi Lewis Publishing, Stockport 2020. I wrote a review of this book: 'Irony Error', *New Left Review*, no. 123, May/ June 2020, pp. 143-9.
[13] Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World*, Allen Lane, London 2003.
[14] See E.P. Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law*, The New Press, New York 1993, pp. 176-8.
[15] This is a reference to the famed Nairn-Anderson thesis on the unique constitution of the British state. For a recent assessment, see Perry Anderson, 'Ukania Perpetua?', *New Left Review*, no. 125, September-October 2020, pp. 35-107. See also Martin J. Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850-1980*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, second edition, 2004.
[16] For a defence of the romantic and idyllic aspects of the suburban ideal against elite condescension, J.M. Richards, *The Castles on the Ground: The Anatomy of Suburbia*, illus. John Piper, John Murray Publishers, London 1973.

central Tory contradiction has long been that, in the party's abject service to big business, it tears up the Burkean structures, traditions and mores which it purports to defend: the great houses of the Forest area have long since fallen or been converted to other uses; the ideal in which suburbs were supposed to be a minor retreat where the rural and the urban would meet in harmonious synthesis have failed in most places to do more than travesty it. And the forest, neither wilderness nor country estate, was beleaguered, enclosed, reduced, tamed, 'developed' and poisoned, becoming—as we have hinted—a ghost of its former self. After the battle over commoning rights, the place was taken over and managed by the Corporation of London: it is public in access, and private in ownership and power (like a privatised city square).

This 'gift' to the public was sealed in typical English fashion with a pompous military ceremony greeting the Queen. One of the prominent chroniclers of the Forest, Sir William Addison, provides a particularly fawning account of Victoria dedicating the forest (which she did not own) to 'my people', and receiving praise in an address for her 'gracious condescension' in visiting the place, which went on to say that it was only fitting that 'the capital of your Majesty's empire […] should possess the most extensive pleasure ground.' Addison later offers his own description of the Cockneys who subsequently thronged to the forest on trains and wagons each weekend morning:

> Some of the mums were already smelling of gin and my-dearing everybody as they walked out of the station yard, followed by their bairns like proudly clucking hens with their chickens fluttering along behind them. The men of those days tended to be as stunted as the lopped hornbeams of the Forest itself.[17]

You will find plenty of Tories, still, who look upon the poor as barely human, and they have plenty of servants in the press.

Perhaps it is partly the continual power of those rural ideals, in actuality continually mocked and traduced, and in the pallid power that democracy has over money, and thus over what is done to the environment, that produce the resentments that run through the culture wars: as Hermann Broch put it of a similarly fervid and teetering society: 'on intolerance and lack of understanding the security of life is based.'[18]

[17] Sir William Addison, *Portrait of Epping Forest*, Robert Hale, London 1977, pp. 50-3, 102.
[18] Hermann Broch, *The Sleepwalkers: A Trilogy*, trans. Willa Muir/ Edwin Muir, Martin Secker, London 1932, p. 21.

Back in the Forest, I was fortunate in my photographic tracings of the borderline: it took me past the dumping of trash and sometimes fly-tipping; the strange haunts of the homeless that sometimes parody suburban living rooms; entanglement, complexity, and environmental ruination. It also passes by areas of council housing and lavish suburban villas. To my eyes, at least, personification was hard to avoid amid oak, beech, birch and hornbeam, which seem more human than certain neoliberal automata one might mention. In these wanderings, amid many others, the Forest appears as a source of inexhaustible sculptural and compositional creativity, of which the photographer is a mere servant.

The Pulpit Oak

At the end of the route, in an enclave of the forest (Knighton Wood, once the garden of a stately home), there stands an old border marker, the pulpit oak, so called because you can climb into it and address a throng (it was used as a rallying point for the commoners in their defence against enclosures), and a little way beyond the discovery of the final delusion, the words 'Thine is the Kingdom' written on a severed bough.