

# Wychwood Magazine



Summer 2021

# Writing the Wychwood

*Our Writer in Residence Maeve Bruce shares her love of nature writing, folklore and the Wychwood.*



## **Tell us a bit about your writing...**

Like many writers, I wear a lot of different hats: freelance journalist, content creator, creative writer, academic. My main area of focus is nature, culture and place. I am particularly interested in the ways that our native mythology and folk tales can speak to our relationship with the natural world today.

As part of a PhD in Creative Writing and Environmental Humanities, I am researching how we can use that old wisdom, those old stories, to strengthen our connection to place and encourage a greater ecological awareness. Alongside a critical thesis, I also have to produce a book to demonstrate this approach. It is a blend of memoir, storytelling, history and nature writing using the royal hunting forest of Wychwood as a focus for discovery.

## **What interests you about the Wychwood?**

I've lived in Oxfordshire now for more than 25 years. I never expected to live here for so long, in probably the most land-locked place in the country! I always thought I'd return to the West Country where I started life, or the west coast of Scotland where I have family roots, but certainly to a place in the west and close to the sea!

The Cotswolds is not a landscape that I feel naturally at home in - but I knew I needed to embrace, to honour, the land that my feet walk on right now, rather than always looking to move on to the next place, never fully belonging anywhere. I wanted to forge a connection with where I live, so I researched its history, geography and culture. Discovering the Wychwood gave me something deeper to identify with and I when I started an MA in Nature and Travel Writing a few years ago, I found the Wychwood

creeping in to my writing more and more.

The Wychwood is full of stories. This land is imprinted with the past, with the lives of the people who have gone before, who shaped, and were shaped by, the Wychwood - and we've largely lost sight of those stories, those memories.

## **What does 'the Wychwood' mean to you?**

When we talk about the ancient royal hunting forest of Wychwood, people imagine a vast woodland, densely covered in trees. However, in its original Medieval sense, a royal 'forest' was an area of land set aside for the King's hunting and comprised different land types and habitats that supported deer, boar and other game and their management. The forest was subject to its own laws which extended to the towns, settlements and agricultural land that lay within its boundaries.

The Wychwood is still very much alive to me as a liminal place - not just as an old name for the area where I live, but in its forest nature. I see it as a kind of ghost forest, the grey outlines of long-felled trees are there if you look hard enough. The Wychwood Forest Trust has done much to colour those outlines in - by protecting and restoring places once part of the historic Wychwood and by promoting its unique cultural identity.

***"I see it as a kind of ghost forest, the grey outlines of long-felled trees are there if you look hard enough."***

In folk and fairy tales, the forest was seen as a place out of the ordinary, where normal rules didn't apply and anything could happen. It was a place of enchantment but also of danger, full of mysterious creatures that might help or hurt you. A place of secrets where you might get lost or find what you were looking for. The forest was a place of trial where you had to figure out who you were and what was important.

That's what the Wychwood has come to mean to me in my own personal mythology. It's been the backdrop to a time in my life when I've had to learn to put down roots, stop drifting and face some trials.

## **What's your favourite piece of folklore about the Wychwood?**

Its hard to pick just one! There's the story of the Dunsdon brothers - Tom, Dick and Harry - poachers and highwaymen in the 18th century, who hid out in the forest. Tom and Harry were eventually caught and hung from the gibbet tree at Fulbrook, which is still there. And the story of poor old Amy Robsart, wife of Robert Dudley who was found dead at the bottom of a flight of stairs in 1560. She is said to have appeared to her husband some years later in the grounds of Cornbury Park, warning him of his imminent death.

There are a lot of stories surrounding the holy wells and standing stones that pepper the area. Local people would visit Bridewell at Wilcote and the Chalybeate Well at

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Cornbury on Palm Sunday every year to make 'Spanish Water' out of liquorice, which was supposed to have healing powers. The Neolithic dolmen at Enstone, known as the Hoar Stone, is said to be the burial chamber of an ancient king who lived thousands of years before the Romans. When he died, his body was borne from Ditchley, a couple of miles due south, to the hill over the village, along a trail known thereafter as Dead King's Rise.

Wherever I walk, I can't help but wonder about the people who have trod these well-worn paths before me.

## **Do you think our relationship with place and nature is changing, and if so why?**

We are living in the Age of the Anthropocene, an epoch marked by the impact of human beings on our planet. We have caused significant, and potentially irreversible, damage to Earth's climate and ecosystems. Our actions have resulted in the mass extinction of animal and plant species and the wholesale pollution of our oceans and atmosphere.

We have become disconnected from the land, from the sea, from the rhythm of the seasons, from where our food comes from.

Our relationship with the natural world has to change

fundamentally if we are to effect change. It has been interesting during the pandemic that people started to reconnect with their local area and find solace in nature. In the silence of lockdown, Mother Nature offered us something transcendental. Suddenly, we were able to hear the birds sing more clearly. But did we learn any lessons about how we live and the interconnectedness of all living things?

I think the boom in nature writing, the popularity of it, speaks to a yearning in us to reconnect with the more-than-human world. We urgently need to figure out our place in all of this.

## **When you're writing, what's your process?**

I usually start by writing in the field - going out with a notebook and just observing. I note down not just what I see, but what I hear and smell, how things feel. I like to sit quietly somewhere and see what comes up, what comes into my mind. It isn't just about observation, but also intuition and imagination. You have to let them in too. I also use a camera as an aide-mémoire to remind me of details, colours and textures.

I also do a lot of research about the places I write about, using all sorts of sources from history, newspapers, fiction, art and maps. It helps me to get under the skin of a place. However, if I'm travelling to a new place, I try not to do too much before I go as it can sometimes detract from initial impressions - you have to leave room for your own responses. It's a balancing act though, because if you only have limited time in a place, you have to do enough research first to make the most out of being there.

Back at my desk, I then try to bring all these elements together. Usually, one or two strong images or significant moments will have occurred to me, so that's where I start when I begin writing. I may not know how they will fit in at this stage, but you have to start somewhere. It's a bit like cooking, adding ingredients into the pot until you get the flavour right.

## **What tips would you give to any Wychwood locals interested in creative writing?**

First and foremost, read, read, read!

Secondly, I would say notice everything, before you write. Observe, use all your senses. Keep a notebook. As a tool for the non-fiction writer, your notebook offers the information of observation, those moments of detail that may seem irrelevant or unimportant at the time of

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writing, like the weather, the smell on the breeze, the look on somebody's face, snippets of conversations overheard on the bus. It is those details that can bring a richness to your writing and a veracity to your recounted experience.

Another great tip is to pick a favourite spot, or patch, and then observe it in all weathers, at all hours, in different seasons - get to know it and watch it change - get your eye in.

And when you are writing, don't be afraid to use your intuition, your feelings, your imagination. Be open to an emotional, even a spiritual response. It all goes in the cooking pot.

Let it brew for a while. Put it in a drawer and come back to it a while later. Lastly, read what you have written aloud to yourself. How does it sound and how does it make you feel?

**You've recommended reading... What books would you suggest for learning more about our relationship with nature and sense of place?**

I've always been drawn to works with a strong sense of place - Hardy's Wessex, Yeats' Innisfree, Emily Bronte's Yorkshire moors, Laurie Lee's Slad Valley, the list goes on ...

D H Lawrence has some interesting things to say in his essay "The Spirit of Place" which touches upon the symbiotic relationship between culture and place; how the identity of a community is shaped by the spirit of place.

Robert Macfarlane's books are all about landscape, language and our relationship with place. Kathleen Jamie's essays and poetry are also rooted in the landscape and consider how we attune ourselves to nature and culture.

The eco-memoir speaks to a belief in the power of the natural world to heal us. Amy Liptrot's 'The Outrun' is set in Orkney, and deals with the author's recovery from alcoholism. Raynor Winn's 'The Salt Path' is an account of walking the South West coastal path while homeless. Kerri ní Dochartaigh's 'Thin Places' is concerned with belonging and borders and is set against the background of the Troubles.

In terms of fiction, Melissa Harrison's 'All Among the Barley' and Max Porter's 'Lanny' are set about 80 years apart and completely different in style, but both are set in fictional rural communities, both are touched by ancient folklore, and both question what our relationship with nature means in a changing Britain.

Lastly, I would recommend anything at all by Dr. Martin Shaw, the Dartmoor-based storyteller. He speaks my language.

Find out more about Maeve's writing:

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## ***Maeve's top five reads for learning more about the Wychwood:***

- 1** 'Wychwood: The Secret Cotswold Forest', Mollie Harris
- 2** 'Wychwood: The Evolution of a Wooded Landscape', Beryl Schumer
- 3** 'Wychwood Forest and its Border Places', John Kibble
- 4** 'Discovering Wychwood', Charles Keighley
- 5** 'The Oxfordshire series of the Victoria County History vol. XIX: Wychwood Forest and Environs', Simon Townley (editor)