Mind Mountain

When it comes to writing about mountains, one name stands above them all: **Robert Macfarlane**. Sarah Stirling talks to this Boardman-Tasker Award winner, Fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge and member (of course) of the BMC.

One night, unable to sleep, a 12-year-old Robert Macfarlane pulled an old clothbound book from a shelf at his grandparents' house and began to read. His grandfather was Edward Peck, a mountaineer of note, who lived in the Cairngorms, and the book was *The Fight For Everest*. Over and over, he read the passage about George Mallory and Andrew Irvine disappearing near the summit of Everest in 1924 – and wanted nothing more than to be one of those two tiny dots, fighting for survival in the thin air.

Out of that moment developed a lifetime's passion for high places, and the idea for his first book, *Mountains of the Mind*: a history of how western culture fell in love with mountains, entwined with the story of Robert's own obsession. It sought to explain why so many of us are willing to risk our lives for the sake of a summit.

The mix of epic storytelling, intelligent exploration of a challenging subject, and intriguing cultural history set Robert on his journey towards becoming one of Britain's most celebrated writers on landscape, mountains, wilderness and language. His five books have all become bestsellers and won prizes worldwide.

After mountaineering his way through the Alps, Rockies and Scotland into his early 20s, Robert took a deliberate step away from danger when he became a father at 27. Instead, he turned his attention to discovering what 'wildernesses' might survive in the British Isles and Ireland, and to finding a way of writing about landscapes that could acknowledge both their complex human histories and their thrilling elemental presents. That journey was distilled in his second book: *The Wild Places*. Its sequel, *The Old Ways*, led him to walk more than 1,000 miles along ancient paths in England and Scotland, to follow the pilgrim ways of Spain and Tibet, and through the conflicted territories of the Middle East, trying to understand how paths and walking run through people as well as through places.

In *Landmarks*, Robert gathered more than 2,000 words for aspects of landscape, nature and weather, taken from dozens of languages and dialects of the British Isles. The book argued for a need to 're-wild' our language for place, and to celebrate subtlety and precision in the ways we speak about our landscapes.

As his children have got older, Robert has returned to more committing mountaineering, including recent trips to East Greenland and Arctic Norway. He has also been exploring – through caving and mining – the worlds beneath our feet, for his latest book: *Underland*.

A Fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge and member (of course) of the BMC, Robert is passionate about conservation, mountains, and bringing children and nature together. His film *Mountain*, narrated by Willem Dafoe, premiered at the Sydney Opera House in June 2017, and is now on international release.

Summit is one of the three magazines he reads cover to cover. The others, for contrast, are Private Eye and The New Yorker.

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Robert Macfarlane in Greenland.

PHOTO: MACFARLANE COLLECTION.

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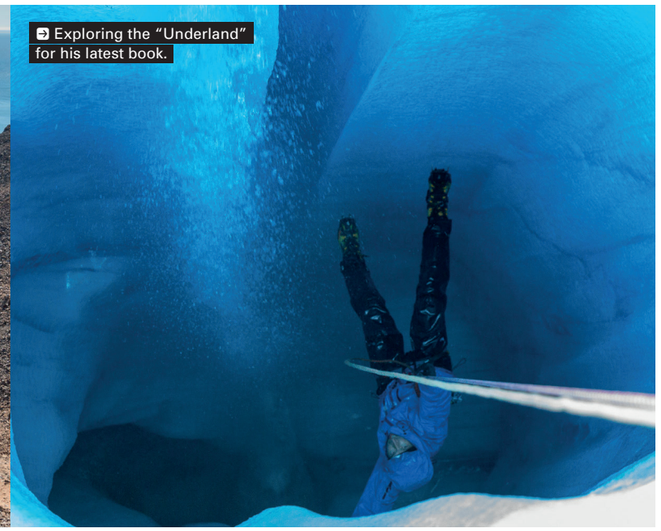

Exploring the "Underland" for his latest book.

PHOTO: MACFARLANE COLLECTION.

"NATURE DOESN'T NAME ITSELF; GRANITE HAS NO GRAMMAR."

Why do you think mountains engender primal feelings in us? They remind us of 'a bigness outside ourselves', to use Wallace Stegner's memorable phrase. God knows we need that humility now, more than ever before. I'd like to take Trump up the Matterhorn...

Tell us about your childhood. Did you spend a lot of time outdoors? My mum likes to bring up my reluctance to take the dog for a walk, but mostly yes: it was mountains, mountains, mountains. Climbing and clambering from a young age; family birthdays celebrated on hilltops in Connemara and the Cairngorms, with Mr Kipling Cherry Bakewells as birthday cakes.

You've explored a lot of Britain's wilderness. What's the grid reference of your favourite wild place? 57 degrees 04' 59 N, 3 degrees 44'44 W.

Do you have a lost landscape or nature term that you enjoy most? No hesitation. "*rionnach maoim*": the cloud-shadows cast on hill and moor on a sunny, windy day. Hebridean Gaelic. A two-word epic poem.

Do you know what you will write before you begin? Even after five books, it's still mostly painstaking assemblage or mosaic-work. There are sentences I'll re-write 30 or 40 times. And then, occasionally, paragraphs or pages that will torrent out. I'm interested in making language veer and glint in strange ways, and that usually takes labour.

You are adept at finding the right word to describe something… Thanks. I've always been attracted to what the poet Robert Lowell called "the grace of accuracy", and I try to bring what I can of that grace to my own sentences. But of course sometimes language crumbles and fails in the face of the natural world. Nature doesn't name itself; granite has no grammar. Speech always arrives late for its subject. Sometimes on the top of a mountain I say "Wow", or something more Anglo-Saxon, or just nothing at all.

You've been heralded as the nature writer of our generation, does that come with responsibilities? Ach, a nonsense title! I'm highly sceptical about the phrase 'nature writer', for a start. As for responsibilities, well, I care about changing the world for the good as much as I can, in my work as a teacher and a writer and a human being (which is to say, changing it just a little, here and there). And I care about laying sentences end to end as best I can. Without doubt the most rewarding thing about being a writer is the hundreds of letters I get each year from readers: a glimpse into how one's words can live unexpected lives in the minds of others.

What could people do to save brilliant landscape words from dying out? Twitter has been a revelation for me in terms of getting such words circulating again, and 're-wilding', if you like, our language for landscape. Every morning at 7am I post a landscape or nature 'word of the day'. The response has amazed me. Nearly 50,000 followers in less than half a year, and the language tweets alone have gained more than 40 million impressions. Some have hit 15,000 retweets. Beautiful threads of photographs, memories and references build up around each word. It's clear there's a huge hunger out there for knowing, using and relishing a rich, bio-diverse language for nature and place. Politics follows closely behind: I'm working with numerous charities, campaigners, teachers and educators on various projects where this language plays an important part.

What are your thoughts on bringing up children in our age of internet addiction? Nature and tech get too simplistically opposed, as Twitter shows. Magic can be worked by means of screens. But I still believe that if nature isn't woven into the everyday life of childhood as a primary experience, in all its surprises and asperities and beauties, something vital is under threat for both child and planet. We will not fight for what we do not love, and we fall in love with the living world most deeply as children. The skills of summer and winter mountaineering I slowly learned as a child and young adult are with me still (and indeed came to my rescue on the Lofoten Wall a few months ago!)

What happened? I was on a four-day trip on my own across to the uninhabited north-west side of Moskenes in the Lofoten archipelago. Two days before I crossed the Wall from the east, the conditions deteriorated badly and avalanche risk spiked. I had to solo a tricky, loaded gully and get through a cornice at the top. It got sketchy for a while. Then I had three days' hostile weather on the coast and peaks of the other side. A cake-walk for serious climbers, but challenging for me. One always feels more ex-posed, but also exhilarated, when alone. No mobile reception either. A family of otters and a score of sea-eagles kept me good company on the far side, though — and I got out safely.

You were educated at both Cambridge and Oxford. Which town is surrounded by the best wild places? I wrote *Mountains of the Mind in Cambridge*, in a basement room below sea-level in the Fens: an oddly stimulating place to write about height and light. When I needed relief, I went out buildering. Gothic architecture makes for good climbing. So I'd have to say Cambridge; it's kept me landscape-happy for twenty years now, one way or another.

Living in the Fens, what drives you to climb mountains? Yes, Cambridgeshire is mostly a landscape so flat that, as the old joke goes, you could fax it. So I've had to learn to love the lateral, as it were, living here for 20 years, but that only sharpens my need for height, wildness, nature, remoteness: the same things that buzz so many of our brains. If I stay in Cambridge too long, I get horizontigo.

What can you tell us about your current projects? I've spent two years working on *Mountain*, in collaboration with the Australian Chamber Orchestra and Jennifer Peedom, who directed Sherpa (2015) It's just premiered in Australia. Willem Dafoe voiced my words; the man is a genius. I've also finished work on *The Lost Words: A Spell Book*, with the artist Jackie Morris, a book for children of all ages celebrating the language of nature. And I'm just completing Underland, after five years' work, about underworlds real and imagined. It's by some distance the strangest, darkest – and possibly deepest – book I've written.

Is music important to you? It's vital. The acknowledgements of *The Old Ways* are crammed with the names of musicians: tracks for making tracks. The Pixies. PJ Harvey. Nick Cave. I love it when my work gets adapted or responded to by musicians. I collaborated recently with Johnny Flynn – that was a rush.

Follow Robert Macfarlane on Twitter @RobGMacfarlane

Describe the strangest place *Underland* has led you to? Abseiling through the roof of a cathedral-sized flood-chamber filled with soft black sand, with 1,000 vertical feet of limestone above us, in north-east Italy. It was like being on the dark side of the moon.

Do you ever get writer's block? No, I don't. I think this comes from only ever having an hour a day to write in, when I'm not teaching or working or in the mountains or with my children. For that hour, I'm just greedy to get at the page.