

Rules of the Land – Tracing The Landscape: Cumbrian Farm Women

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Patricia MacKinnon-Day has worked in collaboration with five Cumbrian Farm Women to examine the complexities of their lives as women working in agriculture. This blog has been commissioned to respond to her findings and develop a new body of research in response to the exhibition, Tracing the Landscape



Posted on May 3, 2018 by Natalie Hughes

On entering **Tracing The Landscape: Cumbrian Farm Women** you are met by five sheds. Each shed is dedicated to one of the women Patricia MacKinnon-Day collaborated with during the project. Mary Brough, Caroline Grindrod, Joyce Raymond, Maria Benjamin and Janet Wilson all have an area focused on them, their experiences of farming and what agrarian life means to them.

This blog post explores how the role of the female within British rural history has been depicted, dismissed or overlooked. It also looks at the efforts of Maria Benjamin and Caroline Grindrod, who are both working at developing and promoting sustainable techniques within farming and its related products.



When we did not understand something in the past, we would often mythologise the problem and attempt to explain it by invoking superstition or try to solve it by performing a bizarre ritual.

Rural communities were riddled with superstitious beliefs. These superstitions are numerous in the Cumbria region. Swallows nesting in a house were said to protect it from fire, lightning and storm. A 'Dobbie Stone' – a stone about the size of a golf ball with a natural hole through the centre – would be strung up over the hearth to prevent witches from souring milk. The word *dobbie* comes from the Old English term for a type of spirit.



Forms of these hol(e)y stones have also been linked to the Gaelic guardian-goddess of cattle, Gruagach and the benevolent faery Brownies, who loved creamy milk. In this instance, rather than hanging these stones above hearths to ward off imaginary hags, they were larger – more of a rock – and acted as community altars. Named *Clach a'Bhainne*, *Brownie Stones* or *Milking Stones*, they held offerings of milk – poured into the hollow centre – for the goddess or the faeries in return for maintaining the good health and safety of cattle.



On St. Kilda, in the Outer Hebrides, women returning from milking in Glen Mhor would always make a trip to the Brownie Stone at top of the island and leave a treat of thanks; give back a little of what you have took.





Dairy production was traditionally a woman's job. Making butter and cheese to sell were ways to bring in extra income to the farm. Many women working with cows contracted cowpox, which made them immune to smallpox and gave them smoother skin. This gave way to the milkmaid becoming an idealised image and a symbol for beauty and fertility. Evidence of this can be found throughout history in folk songs where ploughmen lust after milkmaids, in paintings such as Vermeer's *The Milkmaid* (1657) and later brands such as Cadbury would utilise this image of the busy dairy worker to sell products with an air of wholesomeness and indulgence.



In this land, old disfigured women lurk in shadows waiting for opportunity to inflict bad luck. Either that, or they sit petrified as a reminder not to deviate from mild, subservient goodness. Near Penrith, is Bronze Age stone circle that local folklore says is a coven of witches – Long Meg and Her Daughters – whom a wizard from Scotland turned to stone long ago. It is said that the stones cannot be counted – but, if anyone is able to count them twice and come to the same total – the spell will be broken or it will bring very bad luck. Another legend states that if you walk round the circles and count the number of stones correctly, then put your ear to Long Meg, you will hear her whisper. The name itself is said to come from a local witch, Meg of Meldon, who was alive in the early 17th century.



The othering of women – conflating the female gender with the mystery of the unknown, superstition, desire etc. – within rural and agricultural communities has a significant history. Its intrigue is perpetuated by local folklore and continues to be

enjoyed in popular culture. Good examples of this can be found in folk-horror films such as *The Wicker Man* (1973), *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971) and, more recently, *The Witch* (2015).

The unifying message in these works is of a landscape ruled by forces we do not understand and a world that is harsh and unforgiving, demanding careful respect. And the reminder that, if we upset its balance, disaster will descend upon us.

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These stories of tradition and ritual may seem like nothing more than funny reminders of a weird and eerie past which we have left behind. Science, technology, and the industrialisation of farming appear to put an end to practicing such strange habits. We understand the earth and we are its masters.

However, farmers now find themselves having to rely on artificially-produced minerals to nourish their cattle and manage land whose quality is depleting fast. It is estimated that we only have **thirty to forty years** of soil fertility left in much of the UK. Commercial farming has left our land in such a poor state not just nationally, but also globally. We are heading at breakneck speed towards unmanageable crisis.



'Balance in nature is key, and a complex and diverse habitat has been shown to be more robust and resilient. When you see 'plagues' or extinctions, it is often because complexity has been reduced.' -Caroline Grindrod

Caroline Grindrod – one of the five women who have taken part in Tracing The Landscape – has been working for a number of years to promote techniques of land management, which focus on restoring the equilibrium we have almost killed. These are methods that reduce the artificial, chemical input of agriculture and return to the land back to itself by placing farming at the heart of a regenerative system.





Caroline has teamed up Zimbabwean biologist Allan Savory, who developed Holistic Management — a type of land management whose original focus was on the restoration of fertility to the dry lands of the Southern Hemisphere. using the philosophies that underpin Savory's work Caroline has helped develop a Holistic Management framework for the moist lands of the Northern Hemisphere. In addition to this she is also working in partnership with Dalmas Tampusi Maasai warrior, to promote Holistic Management techniques in his community, where their way of life is rapidly eroding due to the degradation of land. 3. An error occurred. Try watching this video on v.m.youtube.com, or enable JavaScript if it is disabled in your browser. You can find out more about Caroline's work by visiting her websites: Wilderculture Maasai Action For Development Roots Of Nature What is clear here is that the natural order of things should not be tampered with and when we do, we do so at our peril. Returning to the land and seeing ourselves as humble parts of its diverse ecology rather than conquerers armed with the apparently endless privilege of technology, would serve us well. The stories we devised long ago to explain the mystery of the earth, foretold of disaster in the wake of neglect. Women like Caroline are leading the way in the fight to save our lands and protect them for the future. They are doing this by challenging existing systems and promoting an actively caring approach. It seems increasingly ironic in the most terrible way, particularly when judged against lore and tradition of our ancestors who put women second and confused their efforts with good fortune and ill fate. There are small efforts we can make ourselves that will have positive impact. Where possible we can sacrifice our lazy habits, opting instead for food and other consumables, which are ethically produced and made from sustainable products. For example rather than using a soap full of chemicals that damages the environment we can choose one that is made from natural ingredients. THE SOAP DAIRY e Milk Tea in the Bluebells Maria Benjamin, another of the five women part of the Tracing The Landscape project, has a number of business that prioritise ethical production, one of which is making soap from her cow's milk. It is free from artificial, skin irritating chemicals and naturally moisturises. Gruagach would approve, I am sure of this. You can find more about Maria's work here. Now, perhaps it is time to go and carefully count Long Meg and Her Daughters and set them free. — Natalie Hughes Share this: Twitter Facebook G+ Google

ONE THOUGHT ON "RULES OF THE LAND"

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