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## **Review of *Landmarks* (Hamish Hamilton: London, 2015), by Robert Macfarlane**

*Patrick Armstrong (Edith Cowan University)*

T. Robert Macfarlane, a Cambridge academic who achieved success with a series of books ‘about landscape and the human heart’, also recognizes the vital connection between language and landscape. With a quirky, affectionate understanding of the relationship, he commences his most recent book as follows:

This is a book about the power of language – strong style, single words – to shape our sense of place. It is a field guide to literature I love, and it is a word-hoard of the astonishing lexis of landscape in the comparison of islands, rivers, strands, fells, lochs, cities, towns, corries, hedgerows, fields and edgeland uneasily known as Britain and Ireland.

The author points out that words, when properly used, are not just tools for describing landscapes, but also a way to know and love them. If the rich vernacular vocabulary that has developed over centuries is lost, there is a risk that our relationship with nature and with place is impoverished.

In his first chapter, Macfarlane explains the nature of the subtle language-landscape link in an essay entitled, ‘The Word-hoard’, extending the themes in the next chapter, ‘A Counter-Desecration Phrasebook’. In nine subsequent chapters, he takes different landscape types and discusses them in the context the landscape-language link; for example: Flatlands, Uplands, Waterlands, Coastlands, Edgelands and Woodlands. Macfarlane introduces each chapter with a glossary giving landscape words from different parts of the British Isles. Thus, we learn that *feadan* is a small stream running from a moorland loch in Scotland; *wham* is swamp in Cumbria; *yarf* a swamp in the Shetland Islands; *towan* is a word sometimes used for a dune, or a coastal sandhill, in Cornwall; *bagginblock* is a Northern Ireland word for an area of woodland.

Following each glossary is an expansion relating the vocabulary to the specific landscape. Here are personal recollections, and, also, sometimes quite extensive literary digressions. There are references to T H White (*The Book of Merlyn*), Henry Williamson (*Tarka the Otter*), the writings of John Constable - landscape artist - the

*Goon Show*, Gilbert White (*Selborne*), Aristotle, and several mediaeval authors. Chapter 11, entitled 'Childish', discusses the perception of landscapes by children. Charmingly, pages 329-332 are 'Left blank for future place-words and the reader's own terms'.

In the slightly quirkily 'Postscript', and occasionally elsewhere in the book, the author looks outside the British Isles. John Muir was Scottish in origin, although most of his 'landscape writing' was about North America: Robert Macfarlane seems rather fond of him.

Although an emotional book, and one filled with love – almost devotion – the text is supported by a very full scholarly apparatus. A 'Guide to the Glossaries' gives the sources for much of his 'word hoard'. Over twenty pages of endnotes, a 'Select Bibliography', a detailed list of 'Acknowledgements', and a satisfactory 'Index' complete this work.

This is a most unusual book, occasionally a little difficult, but endearingly rewarding.