

I see winter
everywhere. The sadness has spread
and my shadow is what remains.
Unspeaking beauty, these mountains,
etched upon my broken heart.

It will be another day of adjusting.

The distant mountain path does not beckon.
There is this impulse in us for harshness,
discord that is the human condition.
Even on her surface
the lines scry
and lead nowhere
or a place I cannot go.

Singing alone is difficult work.

The mountainside ripples
as if she shuddered with ecstasy.
This icy winter
might require more than gods;
and my place in it
might not see her thaw
into that unspeakable beauty
we so long for.

Pumamarca, Peru, 2008 🐾

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The hills drew me to lay down roots here almost twenty years ago. Some walking and camping trips in my teen years and a few weeks here and there in remote cottages were enough to entice me. I had thought I'd stay for a couple of years, maybe, before travelling again or relocating, but it didn't work out like that. I'm still in Cumbria; it has become home. And, over the last two decades I have encountered many of the summits, woodlands and valleys. I have developed some familiarity with them but I cannot claim to know them; I have only glimpsed patches and a handful of their moods, which change with every season, every day, every squall, every cloud movement. I am passing through. I may, in my lifetime, walk up Conistone Old Man or Kentmere Pike four or five times, maybe a few more. But what is it like to be a farmer who gathers sheep from these hills a dozen times a year, for forty years or more, treading in the footsteps of their fathers and grandfathers?

Until recently I had barely thought about this, so immersed was I in my own experience. When we are walking, I think most of us tend to revel in the moment, and sometimes this means we miss out on an awareness of the bigger picture of the land and its use. So when I had the chance to walk alongside some shepherds, it seemed like too good an opportunity to turn down. Together with my partner Rob, in mid-2012 I embarked on a year-long documentary of upland farming in Cumbria. We began by talking to a few farmers, and some people whose work entails landscape care and the administration of farming policies. It was a gentle introduction to farming concepts and history. But the real insight for me didn't come until I went gathering.

The hardy Herdwick sheep of the Lake District love being up high, where they nibble pale grass two or three thousand feet above sea level, and where they are frequently battered by wind, rain, hail and snow. Several times a year the farmers need to bring them to the lower, walled fields ('intakes' or 'in-bye' land) for shearing, dipping, tagging and lambing, and prior to sales. Unlike lowland farms where sheep graze within the confines of a fence on richer, gently undulating land, here in the Lakes grazing land can spread for hundreds of acres. Flocks may wander over a number of fell tops and gullies and even skirt a few tarns or lakes. In this unwall'd land a flock sticks to its 'heft' – an area undefined by walls, with boundaries guarded in the memories of sheep and shepherds. The sheep know which area is 'theirs', and they know where to shelter, where to find water, and where the best grazing is. Lambs learn the heft from their mothers, and shepherds reinforce hefting by gathering in the same way generation after generation. Herdwick sheep are 'hefted to the land'. You could say the same about many of the farmers here.

Some of the larger farms in the Lake District may need to gather two or three separate hefts to bring in the entire flock. On some farms, it might be possible to use a quad bike to gain the first thousand or so feet; on others, the whole thing is done on foot. Gathering a single heft can take nine hours, with up to twelve people and ten or more dogs rounding up three or four hundred reluctant sheep. It's a day out on the fells that is far removed from an average hill walk based on OS maps or Wainwright sketches.

Rewind to September, when I go gathering with Hannah Dickinson, whose sheep graze high on Kentmere Common.



Gathering with Gavin Bland on Helvellyn above Striding Edge

HARRIET FRASER

images by Rob Fraser

LAND KEEPERS

I begin walking with her father Ivan. Even at more than 70 years old, he sets a pace that tests me. Our ascent from the farmstead is fast: heads down, thighs burning, our feet finding holds in mud, bog, scree and rock. We stop for a breather after a climb of about 1000 feet and I turn to the expansive view to the south, which opens up to reveal the dog-leg shape of Windermere and the haze of Morecambe Bay beyond. From here, I'm treated to a quick spell on a quad bike. We bump and skid along the whale-back ridge of Kentmere Pike, wind in our faces. The grass is blown sideways and its tan-yellow hue throws sunlight back into the air, a trick of warmth amid the cool wind. It's not long, though, before the terrain becomes testing again, and we're back on our feet. We're following sheep, not paths, and for much of the time we walk at speed and at sharp angles, across rock falls, beneath crags, and over becks.

Occasionally I stop, and with Hannah I survey the land for grey-white sheep (which often at first look like boulders). We can see for miles in every direction. The sky is pale and wide and a soft light teases shadows across ridges, treacherous crags and high tarns. I become entranced, not just by the land, but by the art of shepherding. Bringing in the sheep from this vast area has a gentle simplicity, even though the task is demanding and complex. There is grace and speed, precision and looseness, and success depends on the close relationship between shepherd, sheep and the land.

Hannah, her partner Steve, and her father have joined with a few other farmers whose sheep also graze on this common land, and their dogs form part of the gathering pack. We split up and spread out, a scattering of lone figures on fell tops, enclosing a space of over 700 acres. It's almost as if we're standing on giant motionless waves, like fishermen at the edge points of a net, drawing together slowly, bringing the catch in.

As Hannah and I walk along we spot sheep in groups of three or four. The dogs cajole them and drive them downwards, and we follow. It's a gradual process. As I stride high above lakes and forests, with green-yellow fell tops rippling into the distance, I feel a sense of the timelessness of this work. Here we are, a simple collection of men and women with sticks and dogs, gathering sheep: this is the way it has been done for centuries. The melodic sound of whistles, whoops and shepherds' calls drift up to me on a light wind, overlaid with bleats of sheep. This scene, these sounds, the touch of the wind, the chase of the dogs and a neat cooperation between shepherds – all of it could have been exactly the same hundreds of years ago.

The farmers take bold, confident strides. Richard Clegg, whose heft borders Hannah's, almost skips downhill, seemingly oblivious to loose rocks, with a red crook in his hand and several dogs zig-zagging around him. He's heading to a dip in the land that cradles a tarn, pushing the sheep out



Hands of shepherd Joe Richardson of Ennerdale

of clefts and back over a steep rocky lip and towards the valley, while Hannah and I stay high. Hannah squints in the sun as she scans the hillside, we chat, and occasionally she calls to her dogs or lets out a high yell to encourage the sheep to move. The pace is fast but also it has a tenderness, a sense of calm that I feel comes from the heart of this landscape, from its immutability and its solid presence. Our quick steps and our small selves are mere dots against the vast sweep of these fells, specks in the shifting light. The sky is big, the view is wide open, the sound of the beck tumbling over stone echoes through the land, and I'm moving with it.

We work with the other farmers so that the sheep are gathered from crevices and summits into the valley bottom. It takes us a little over two hours to get down and the gentleness of the gather is replaced by high energy, speed, noise, rough outcrops and high-high bracken. Everyone works together, we're all shouting at dogs and sheep, using our arms, sticks and crooks to persuade sheep to turn and move, and scurrying occasionally to catch any that have broken free of the flock. The sheep much prefer to be high, and they make a dash for it when they see the opportunity. But we work on, and at last more than three hundred sheep are butting up against a gate, on the final stretch towards the farm.

At the end of the gather my thighs are hurting and my mouth is dry but inside I feel as bright as the sky and utterly alive. While the sheep are sorted so that each farmer can take his

back to his own farm, Hannah's mother turns up with cups of tea, sandwiches and cake. Hannah's children clamber around the rocks beside the path and hang on the gate. The whole family is involved: Hannah is the fourth generation of her family to live and work here, and her children will probably follow in her footsteps.

At another farm, on another day, I find a similar sense of tradition. Joe Relph, whose sheep graze above the austere crags of Borrowdale, south of Derwent Water, thinks gathering is one of the best parts of fell farming, despite its challenges. 'I've always said that the one thing that would make a major difference to my life would be if they brought a helicopter out that was the price of a car. But we have to gather on foot, because there's no way you'll gather with a quad bike. There is nothing that will change - in five hundred years time, if it is all surviving, it won't be any different.'

So what will happen in the future? In five hundred years time? Or in five? Farmers have always carried on traditions and adapted when necessary. But the pressures today seem greater than in the past, and some people are concerned. 'Don't get me wrong,' says Joe, 'life changes and things change, so you have to change. But it's massive change that they want.'

By 'they', Joe means the government bodies who dictate farming policies; he is concerned that some policies are demanding the wrong sort of change. Almost all fell farmers here receive payments under stewardship schemes. The schemes, which are delivered by Natural England, allow them to continue as shepherds and, literally, steward the land; bar one, the farmers we have spoken to say that without these payments, sheep farming here would not be viable. But the schemes are devised with the objective of improving water quality, biodiversity and carbon storage. The figures are calculated according to estimated environmental benefits of farming. Often, signing up to a scheme means significantly reducing the number of sheep on the fells (which disrupts hefts and makes gathering much harder) and taking the sheep off the fells altogether over winter (which can weaken the sheep). These demands are causing consternation, because they often have a negative impact on the sheep and could even tip the balance to threaten the long-term sustainability of sheep and shepherding in the uplands.

'Nobody knows the area as well as we do,' says Joe. 'We're here every day. You get people coming in on a two- or three-year contract and they introduce changes that will have effects for hundreds of years, but three years down the line they've got a chance of a better job and they've jiggered off. That really frustrates you. We know that their decision's wrong - long-term wrong - but we have to take it.'

Joe's wife, Hazel, is more forthright in her pessimism: 'People won't take any notice until we're in crisis. The practicalities are, what we do is the cheapest way both to look after the environment and produce food. But the only people that truly care are the people who are passionate about it. The people who are making the decisions, they're not passionate, and when they've



Hannah Dickinson holding a Herdwick ram

made those decisions, they'll go away. We'll have to live with the consequences of their actions. It will never work.'

It is important to recognise that not everyone shares the Relphs' anxiety. In Ennerdale, a group of younger men in their twenties are carrying on their families' traditions - like their fathers and their fathers before them, they're keenly attuned to the land and constantly weighing up changes in weather, economics and livestock as they adapt, with optimism about their future. And it's true: sheep numbers, like lamb and wool prices and government payments, have changed a lot in the past decades, and will no doubt continue to fluctuate; but so far the majority of farmers we have met are wary.

It's something that is driven home by Rory Stewart, MP for Penrith and the Borders. Rory may not be your 'average' politician - he spends the five weeks of parliamentary recess walking across the hills and fields of his constituency, just as he spent months walking across Afghanistan before entering politics - but his connection with the land clearly fires him up. 'What I'm worried about,' he says when we meet him on the eastern edge of the Lake District, 'is a series of government legislations that, if not challenged, will mean that in thirty, forty years time, we will not have farmers living on our fells. Or very, very few. It's not a level playing field,' he continues. 'The money is with the state. They have every advantage: prestige, authority, degrees, cash; they're up on the latest targets, plans and "strategic visions". If you talk to the agencies they say they are consultative and talk to farmers, but the reality remains: these consultations and conversations are at their worst pseudo-colonial. The farmers, by their very nature, don't have access to the same money, power or information, are not in the centre of those discussions, and

are split into a thousand independent units.'

Listening to Rory, and pondering on the more than thirty interviews we've had, has set me thinking. Despite the single common aim of caring for the land, there are many demands on this very special landscape. A visiting walker might want clear paths, and freedom, perhaps, for a dog to run unfettered. We've heard from United Utilities, who own vast areas of fell surrounding reservoirs, that their primary goal is to use the land to provide clean water. Natural England is driven by European biodiversity targets that emphasise the need to protect flora and fauna. Other demands come from the National Trust, the National Park, RSPB, Friends of the Lake District, ramblers. While everyone seems to acknowledge farmers as stakeholders in this landscape, serious questions remain about the place of farming and its culture of shepherding within the bigger picture. Practices such as clouting, smit marks and shepherds meets, gathering on foot, walling and haymaking are part of the farming year; and the walls, farmhouses and barns that so many visitors love are part of this too. The land is as it is because of - not in spite of - farming.

Should fell farmers be at the centre of the picture? Theirs is a guardianship of the land that extends way beyond the surface, the economics, the 'environment'. It is part of the spiritual heart of this landscape. The shepherds' day, the rhythms of their year, are part of the pulse of the land that quickens into spring, bows its grassy head beneath roaring winds, lies content under a blazing summer sun, or silent under winter snows. There are tracks that farmers have used for centuries; they have watched heather grow and then die back, turning hillsides purple; they have locked eyes with deer, witnessed the growth of woodland, the flooding



Boundary fence on Ullscarf between Thirlmere and Borrowdale

and emptying of rivers, and the passing on of prime genes in their stock. All these are part of the symphony of the land, along with shepherds' calls and the language they use in summoning dogs or counting sheep, naming each field, copse and height.

James Rebanks, who farms in Matteredale, not far from Keswick, spoke to us as we sheltered from the rain: 'This is the best example in the world of an upland farming system that's survived, with its commons, and its intakes, and its meadows, with its own unique farming features.' James is involved in a campaign to establish the Lake District as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. 'Since 1949, when this region became a national park, it has had an ethos of *playground* that many confuse with *wilderness*. A place for the rest of the country, for urban visitors. I don't think that's what the place that I love is. It's a dangerous misunderstanding. My hope is for it to have a higher designation, which is to explicitly recognise that it's special and has a unique indigenous farming culture.'

I understand James' point of view. I might not have understood it quite so clearly two years ago, but now that I have spent time with farmers gathering, at the sales, while shearing, at meetings and events, something has fallen into place. Many years ago, a love for the Lake District became lodged in my heart; now my insights into farming have deepened this. For me, the land here is not complete

without its human element – and it irks me when I see this being overlooked in the quest for 'biodiversity'.

'It's a way of life, farming, it's not a job,' say so many farmers. 'You've got to love what you do, love where you are. It's in your blood.' And there lies the distinction between farmers and the policy makers and environmentalists whose work brings them into more sporadic contact with the land. The farmers' love for stock and land, and their affinity with their environment, are as much a driver for their lives as the need to earn money. Here in the Lake District farming is, in the literal sense, *agri-culture*; it's far removed from lowland farming where the term *agri-business* might seem more fitting.

One of the most respected academic figures specialising in uplands management, agricultural historian Dr Andrew Humphries (MBE), who is also chairman of The Foundation for Common Land, speaks about farmers having 'wisdom of the hands'. This humble phrase sums up so much about the knowledge that farmers carry down from one generation to the next, and their role in nurturing livestock and landscape.

In the past, when I thought of agriculture, visions of tractors, wheat fields and dairy farms sprang to my mind. Now I have glimpsed the power of culture that lies beneath the farming practices in the Lakeland fells and beneath the land itself. And now that I've had a taste, I won't stop gathering – I'll be out there at the next opportunity, walking a heft, calling to the sheep. I have forged a new connection with the spirit of the land. 🌿

HARRIET FRASER is currently researching upland farming as part of The Landkeepers project, with photographer Rob Fraser, in partnership with The Farmer Network Cumbria. The project explores the value of farming in the Lake District fells, and the wider context of land management and care. Regular blogs and an expanding website of photographs, interviews and musings is at www.landkeepers.co.uk. Harriet and Rob work collaboratively as 'somewhere-nowhere' recording their encounters with the land through photography and writing (www.somewhere-nowhere.com).

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El Morado

EIDOLON

KENNETH ARAYA

Buenas noticias:
La tierra se recupera en un millón de años
Somos nosotros los que desaparecemos.
– Nicanor Parra

10.00 pm

Holed up in a refuge four thousand meters up in the cordillera, we were lucky enough to find the place before the sun went down. The light's gone now and with the darkness comes the cold, a fierce mountain cold that knows no mercy; a cold that creeps up on you slowly, first freezing the tiny particles of moisture in your clothes before penetrating to the very marrow of your bones. There's nothing to do but wait. There's a chimney in the corner where John has lit a small fire with some of the wood we managed to scavenge from the surrounding plains before the sun went down. I say wood, but it's more like the gnarled roots of some hardy tuber, burying for survival, doing what little it can to cheat the inhospitability of its environment. At this altitude there's not much air and the fire burns lean, in gaunt, pallid-looking flames; there's not much wood either, so we'll need to ration it carefully. The three of us sit huddled round the fire; we're in for a long night. We sit in silence, the only sounds to be heard are the wind's shrill whistle and the sporadic pops and crackles from the fire. There's a storm setting in: we could see it forming in the clouds as the sun went down. John says it'll bring the white wind but I hope not, we're in enough trouble as it is. It'll snow though, that's for sure: it must be nearly minus ten outside. John hands me the hipflask and I take a mouthful of whisky before passing it back. It's not the best way to fend off the cold, especially at this altitude, but it does help. Clara

takes a swig and forces a smile; she's tired. I think we all are; it's been a long day.

We first realised we had become lost at around four o'clock. Last night we pitched camp along the banks of the river, just before the place where the trail we were following breaks from its course. In the morning we set off on what was to have been a one-day hike, nothing too complicated. The idea had been to scale one of the nearby summits and return back down to our campsite before nightfall; tomorrow we had planned to pick up the trail again and follow it up over the Piuquenes, leaving Chile behind and descending into Argentina. We set off early in the morning, leaving most of our gear back at the campsite. We made good time and it was about one o'clock when we reached the summit. We stopped for lunch and afterwards sat chatting for a while. John suggested we could descend by a different route, down the north-east face and into the gully behind; from there we could pick up the river again and follow it back up to our campsite. The idea seemed reasonable enough and we set off at around half-past two, beginning to wind our way back down from the top. It was about four o'clock when we stopped to check the map, partly because of Clara's hunch that we had lost our way. She turned out to be right: instead of coming down the north-east face as we'd planned, we found ourselves somewhere on the other side of the mountain. We held council and agreed it was too late to turn back; we decided to continue our descent in the hope that we'd make it down in enough time to return to the campsite before nightfall. It was slow going, laborious and technically difficult, and as we descended we began to notice the first signs of the weather closing in: clouds had begun to form in the previously cerulean sky. I think it was then that we realised we could be in trouble. By the time we reached the bottom it was late. We held council once again: