

“Heightened World.”

The conversation
with Robert Macfarlane
about mountains, nature
and literature, conducted
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in Emmanuel College
in Cambridge*

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Introduction¹

Robert Macfarlane is a professor of Environmental Humanities at Emmanuel College, Cambridge. He is also a traveller and a world-famous author of best-selling books about nature, relations between “landscapes and the human heart” (as he says), places and imagination: *Mountains of the Mind: A History of a Fascination* (2003); *The Wild Places* (2007); *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot* (2012); *Holloway* (2013 with Dan Richards and Stanley Donwood); *Landmarks* (2015); *The Lost Words: A Spell Book* (2017 illustrated by Jackie

¹ I would like to thank Katarzyna Strębska-Liszewska for her help in preparing the transcription of the recording of the interview.

Morris), *Underland: A Deep Time Journey* (2019); *Ness* (2019 illustrated by Stanley Donwood); *The Lost Spells* (2020 illustrated by Jackie Morris). His literary works have been published in thirty languages, also in Polish: *Góry. Stan umysłu* (2018); *Szlaki; Opowieści o wędrówkach* (2018) *Podziemia: W głąb czasu* (2020). Macfarlane's books won many awards (e.g., Guardian First Book Award, the Boardman-Tasker Prize for Mountain Literature), were adapted for films (*Mountain*, 2017 and *River*, 2021, both films were directed by Jennifer Peedom). As far as publishing announcements are concerned, his next book is entitled *Is a River Alive?*², which will explore the rights of nature. Macfarlane's literary works are usually categorised as nature writing, mountain literature, travelling and others.

The conversation took place in the inside courtyard of the Emmanuel College in Cambridge. Before talking, Robert Macfarlane drew my attention to some interesting specimens of trees and flowers on the green college grounds. There is an amazing old willow – in traditional imaginary – considered a tree of sorrow. However, what was most incredible was a plane tree, more than 250 years old, which looks like a whole forest, because its branches take roots and form new trees. There was a site of bee orchids (*Ophrys apifera* L.) – an extremely rare small flower that had just started blooming then. The writer spoke with great commitment about the jays flying by and the carps in the college pond. His stories about the nearest college settings clearly show how close he is to nature, not only the unique type of nature, which can only be found in the remote wilderness but also the seemingly ordinary nature that surrounds us every day.

Conversation

Elżbieta Dutka: Please tell me something more about your new book *Is a River Alive?* At what stage is the work, and when can we expect its publication?

Robert Macfarlane: I still need to finish this book. *Is a River Alive?* will be published definitely in 2025, probably in English and in Polish in the same year. I must admit that I am delighted with the cooperation with the Polish editor (Wydawnictwo Poznańskie), which is so supportive and so inventive, active on social media to attract young readers. I am pleased they will plan to publish my next book as well. My plan is to finish *Is a River Alive?* in 2024. The editor will have a year to work on and translate it.

E. D.: Simultaneously with the work on this book, you wrote the screenplay for the movie *River*. When I was watching this film at the cinema, I noticed many similarities with the previous movie with your script entitled *Mountain* (the same director, your screenplay, nature-related issues, Willem Defoe as narrator and the participation of the symphony orchestra in both productions). These common elements create the impression of an inevitable continuation, perhaps even a series, a pair. Will there be such clear connections between the books *Mountains of the Mind* and *Is a River Alive* either?

² <https://www.davidhigham.co.uk/books-dh/is-a-river-alive/> (access 30.06.2023)

R. M.: No, not exactly. I think they will be connected only to some degree – as all of my books – it also grows from previous works. *Mountains of the Mind* existed in strong relations with *Underland*, because they depict two poles on a vertical axis: top and down. But *Is a River Alive?* will be quite different from all my books. It will be much more political and legal than my previous books. In this work, I wonder what can be done for nature in terms of law, but I also raise big, key philosophical questions: what is alive, and what are its rights? To the question: is a river alive, I answer: yes. To the question: has a river got the rights, I also answer: yes, it should have rights. To summarise, it will be another book about how we imagine the world around us.

E. D.: When I was watching *River*, I also thought that *Mountains of the Mind* and your new book could be a kind of frame in your oeuvre. The first book proposes a reflection on a specific element of nature (a specific kind of landscape). The latest maybe will depict nature in a more holistic way (in movie screenplay you wrote about river, but you also notice that springs are usually located in the mountains, you mention issues connected with glaciers, forests, human impact on them, etc.).

R. M.: Yes, to some degree, it is true. Rivers make mountains, and the mountains are the beginning of the rivers... It is difficult to separate the individual parts of the natural world because they are closely interrelated. Regarding my books, I would rather suggest the following framework. Each of them has a main idea and key question that continually returns on its pages. *Mountains of the Mind* was a book about mountain and human imagination, about deep thinking of time in historical and economic senses. I ask why we love the mountains and don't respect them. The main question in *Underland* is: what does darkness mean, why do we hide underground things that are the most valuable or things we want to hide? The *Landmarks* shows how words and literature shape our perception of the world. *The Old Way* is about how we use paths to think with. And now, *Is a River Alive* – what is life and what is death, what is a being and what are its rights? Of course, all these questions can't be answered... but attempting to answer them generates my books. They all add up to one fundamental question; what does it mean to be a human in a world which is also alive?

E. D.: Man's life and the living world around him have a time dimension. Is a mountain, like a river, alive? Or maybe the question should be: is a mountain still alive?

R.M.: Of course, yes! I add the next question: does the mountain remember, and does it tell, and the answer is also: yes. Nan Shephard's book *The Living Mountain*³, which is very important to me, is about this. This novel is the key text in mountain tradition, actually not about mountaineering but about the relationship with the living mountain. The title of Shephard's book is meaningful. The life of the mountain is not only itself part of life, but it also contains a lot of individual lives. The mountain is living. It raises life. It gives life in more senses than just the individual biological life it contains. It is one of the oldest ideas. For many ancient cultures (certainly for the Chinese culture), it was obvious that a river or a forest are alive

³ Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, introduced by Robert Macfarlane, afterword by Jeanette Winterson (Canongate Books, 2019).

and that they could, for example, speak, sing, and communicate with themselves and with humans. And so I am also writing about it in that complex way in which Shephard was writing about them. The idea that nature is alive needn't be named until we had fallen from perception [until we have lost this type of perception]. It happened when the Post-Enlightenment worldview (which is rationalist, which is arithmetic, and which has systematically reduced the living world to resource, to object) won. And now, when we try to subjectify the living world, it is not to colonise it and make it a subject, but it involves a great output range of the mind and imagination [crossing our ordinary thinking frames]. Shephard in *Living Mountain*, and I hope that I also in *Is a River Alive?* try to campaign for/ argue for mind and imagination, which recognise life there, where philosophers and historians said there is no life.

E. D.: However, the belief that the mountains are alive requires more work in mind and imagination than the idea of living rivers or forests. I agree that mountains are alive, but on the other hand, peaks for a long time (and today also quite often) have been perceived as heaps of dead stones, something lifeless, unmoving, unchanging, and static. The mountain in culture usually symbolises constancy and immutability.

R. M.: You are right. As river flow moves and the forest changes with the seasons, it is easier to think about life and the passage of time regarding them. But of course, mountains do that too. The peaks change, but the scale of that process is different than the scale our human perception is used to. We easily agree other humans are alive, and we agree that animals and other creatures, like birds, for example, are alive – no problem. The trees are alive too but they are a little bit more complicated. When we move into non-organic there is more work involved in mind and imagination. The river is the easiest to think of as alive, the forest, as the whole, too, but the mountains and stones are harder, definitely. A lot of legal, primary legal cases in the rights of nature movement have been around the rivers. Like the Whanganui river in New Zealand (the river revered by the Māori) was recognised by the Parliament Act in this country as a legal entity in 2017. The Whanganui will be treated as a minor in court.

E. D.: It will be interesting to see if the same legal personality will ever be granted to the mountains. Treating a river as a juvenile legal personality makes me return to the time of individual life and the idea of deep thinking about time. There is a whole part in *Mountains of the Mind* about the beginning of geology and researching the origin of the mountains. As you wrote, people started to call mountains "the great stone volume" in the XVIII and XIX century⁴. You also mentioned recognising the different types of rocks, fossil collecting and stones ("each stone had a story attached to it: a biography which stretched backwards in time for epochs")⁵. These aspects are related to "deep thinking on past time". The mountains are an archive of Earth. However, how should we understand "deep thinking on future time" in the context of mountains? To what extent are the contemporary real mountains (or mountains of the mind) a project of the future world?

⁴ Robert Macfarlane, *Mountains of the Mind. A History of a Fascination* (London: Granta Books, 2017), 22–65.

⁵ Robert Macfarlane, *Mountains of the Mind, Mountains of the Mind. A History of the Fascination* (London: Granta Books, 2003), 50.

R. M.: When I wrote *Mountains of the Mind*, which was more than twenty years ago, I was thinking only about the past and the present time. In the *Underland*, where I returned to the subject of deep thinking on time, I became much more interested in deep time future. For me in the underground world, deep time is effectively activated. When I wrote about the mountains, I focused on the aesthetic side of human perception of them. My main question was how it happened that for three hundred years, people stopped seeing mountains only as obstacles and began to see beauty in them, sublimate them. The mountain gives us a kind of vertigo, interesting fear, but first and foremost, the mountain allows us to look deep into the past. But looking at the future through the lens of deep thinking of time becomes more ethical. In *Underland*, the question is, what will we leave the next generations, and will we be good ancestors? Looking underground leads to ethical issues. One of the things that happened in my oeuvre over more than twenty years is moving from a kind of historical aesthetics (*Mountains of the Mind*) to more contemporary ethics (*Underland*) and finally to political issues in *Is a River Alive?*

E. D.: So you are now more a campaigner and an ecological activist than earlier when you wrote *Mountains of the Mind*?

R. M.: Yes, definitely. It is partly because climate change, ecological crises, the poly-crises⁶, and environmental disasters have just accelerated in my writing life in twenty-two years. Environmental catastrophe and biodiversity collapse were not talked about so loudly at the beginning of my literary work. Now practically everyone who writes about nature and places must raise this issue, must mention ecology.

E. D.: What do you think, what will the mountains of the future be like, and what will the mountains of the mind be like in the future? Is it now possible to say something about the specificity of the mountains of the Anthropocene?

R. M.: In the mountainous culture there are so many fragile frontlines connected with ecology and human and nonhuman life. One example is enough – the glaciers are just disappearing. There is no “the ocean of the ice” that some of the first tourists in Chamonix saw. They just went away. The mountains have changed so quickly. Mountaineering is transforming very fast, too. It is now so resource-intensive activity, just look at what is happening on Everest...

E. D.: It is very telling that the highest peak in the world is now often called Mount Trash, instead of Mount Everest. Do we need a new imagery of the mountains, a new symbolism?

R. M.: Yes, there are two ways of thinking about mountains, which I learned from Nan Shepherd (but I read her *Living Mountain* only after I had written *Mountains of the Mind*). One of them is resignation from reaching the top. Summiting is no longer the only form of being in the mountains or the only aim of being in the mountains. My book is

⁶ According to economist Adam Tooze, a poly-crisis means overlapping various crises (economic, social, political, etc.). The poly-crisis became widely known after the Covid 2019 pandemic.

about summit fever, about people who repeatedly try to reach the top, like George Leigh Mallory. But reading Shephard's book convinced me that you can go to the mountains for friendship, to be with a living mountain. So you can be the "local mountaineer" instead of a summit conqueror. The second way involves a kind of Anthropocene responsibility. It is seeing mountain rather as deep than wide, to get to know this area, to enter it, be inside it, and protect it. I've said that the *Mountains of the Mind* is my resignation from high-altitude, extreme, dangerous climbing, partly for the sake of my family, wife and children and for fear of death, but also for the abovementioned reasons. The end of extreme climbing and summit fever is the beginning of the wonder, responsibility and another mountain passion.

E. D.: You highlighted the differences between real peaks and mountains of the mind in your book. Paradoxically, the latter (mountains of the mind) seem more durable and immovable than real mountains. The crowds at the Mount Everest base camp and on its slopes prove that the dreams/ideas about the highest mountain in the world are still attractive to many people. But at the same time, this peak no longer looks like it did in the days of George Mallory. Do you agree with this interpretation that mountains of the mind are also immovable mountains?

R. M.: No. Both are changing. The mountains of the mind are not the same as earlier. The people who want to climb Mount Everest may have a different imagined mountain than Mallory. The real peaks, in particular Everest, are now under huge pressure, connected with mass tourism, climate change, etc., so they may look more movable, but mountains of the mind are also dynamic. I suppose it depends on whose mind and imagined mountains we talk about. The mental relations with Mount Everest and other mountains are historically specific. Of course, there are some similarities, but there are so many changes at different times...

In the mountainous literary tradition, the way of seeing peaks was often frozen, a kind of cliché. For example, in the eighteenth century, it was sublime. Everything the spectators saw in the mountains was sublime, magnificent, splendid, and wonderful. There was a language of perception. When it comes to modern tourism, there are also very fixed, controlled ways of seeing the mountains. Any literary tradition develops its habits and agreements, according to which it must be written. The job of the next writers' generation is to break them. When I wrote *Landmarks*, it became clear that every hour spent on reading is also spent on learning how to write. Reading is a way of knowing how others see and how habits and traditions of language influence them. So now, when I start to write a new book, I think about how to skip these frozen ways of seeing and what I can change. In this sense, imagination in nature or mountain writing is rebellious.

E. D.: In the mentioned book, entitled *Landmarks*, you created a kind of dictionary collecting various words that denote and mark the mountains, our way of seeing this form of landscape. Metaphors also play an essential role in your writing. What are your favourite mountainous landmarks and metaphor or comparison/parallel? What mountainous imagery is the most important in contemporary culture, in your opinion?

R. M.: Aristotle defined metaphor as “likeness and unlikeness”. For me, it is the best definition of metaphor that has ever been coined. The critical question is how to recognise the strangeness of the mountains in language because the peaks exceeded us in so many ways: in time, scale, form, and matter. Hence the urge to domesticate the mountains in language. It was what the sublime discourse in the eighteenth century was doing. For me, the interesting metaphors regarding the strangeness of the mountains, recognise their strangeness. The mountain is like this..., but also unlike this... Nan Shepherd wrote that when she was on the plateau, she visited mountains like a friend⁷. The “friend” means she was familiarised with the mountain, like with another person. She also wrote that on the plateau, she acts like a dog⁸. The dog is a metaphor for her presence in the mountains. But when you read the mountaineering literature, you must discover that it is always about the siege or battle. The military metaphors dominate, and the metaphor of rape is also present– the mountain is like a virgin, and the climbers want to possess them. These female metaphors are so oppressive and aggressive. They are the worst but the most popular mountain metaphor.

E.D.: There are sometimes metaphors connected with love too.

R.M.: Yes, people fall in love with mountains, but for many years in the Western tradition, the most important was battles and fights with mountains.

E. D.: What do you think about personification of the mountains? Do you like these kind of tropes?

R. M.: I am interested more in mountainifications than in personifications. Aldo Leopold said we should “think like a mountain”.⁹ So maybe, let’s personify mountains less, and try to mountainify more.

E. D.: But is it possible for us to have a common language with the mountains?

R. M.: I have just returned from Cuillin Mountains in Scotland. The most famous peak there is Cuillin Skye; wonderful is The Inaccessible Pinnacle. I mention it because we climbed for two days, and it was such an intense time in the mountains, the most engaging mountain trip for me the last time, and I felt changed by it. It was like an encounter which was very consequential for me. There may be no conversation with a mountain, but as Nan Shepherd said, it is something moving between the mountain and me.¹⁰ It is a very complicated influence acting in two directions.

⁷ “Yet often the mountain gives itself most completely when I have no destination, when I reach nowhere in particular, but have gone out merely to be with the mountain as one visits a friend with no intention but to be with him”. Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, 15.

⁸ “So I am on the plateau again, having gone round like a dog in circles to see if it is a good place”. N. Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, 22.

⁹ Aldo Leopold, *Think Like a Mountain. Essays from A Sand County Almanac* (Penguin Books – Green Ideas 2020).

¹⁰ “No, there is more in the lust for a mountain top than a perfect physiological adjustment. What more there is lies within the mountain. Something moves between me and it. Place and mind may interpenetrate till the nature of both is altered. I cannot tell what this movement is except by recounting it.” N. Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, 8.

E. D.: In your writing, encounters with mountains are often melancholic in nature. You say goodbye to high-mountain, extreme climbing, you write about losses related to this passion, and you evoke many melancholics. Why so much melancholy in dealing with the mountains?

R. M.: I write about melancholics like Edward Thomas, George L. Mallory and Eric Ravilious. They all died at almost the same time (in the first half of twenty century), they all left their families, and each of them fell in love with the different kind of landscape (Thomas – with the paths, Mallory – with the mountains, Ravilious – with the Arctic)¹¹. They are all melancholics. I am interested in melancholy and depression; however, I am a very happy person. But we live in such a depressive time, a time of loss in so many aspects. I am always interested in the relationship between landscape and the human heart, a kind of passion. Melancholy marked this passion and obsession too.

E. D.: You talked about Scottish mountains and mentioned the names of specific peaks. In your literary works, you usually locate the place you write about. How vital is topography to you?

R. M.: Once again, I cite Aristotle. He said that the particular is a way to general, which leads to the universal. I am an Aristotelian because, for me, it is essential to speak precisely. It is a form of comprehension and respect, so I write about a particular hill and the specific aspects of this hill, for example. I always write specificity first before I make some generalisations.

E. D.: How do you categorise *Mountains of the Mind* in terms of literary studies or literary genology?

R. M.: I think it is rather a mountain than mountaineering literature. Partly it also can be accounted to mountain studies because I write about the cultural history of the mountain and mountaineering. This book is hybrid, partly a reportage, essay, autobiography, and memoir.

E. D.: You wrote in the introduction to *Living Mountain*:

Most works of mountaineering literature have been written by men, and most male mountaineers are focussed on the summit: a mountain expedition being qualified by the success or failure of ascent. But to aim for the highest point is not the only way to climb a mountain, nor is a narrative of siege and assault the only way to write about one. Shepherd's book is best thought of, perhaps, not as a work of mountaineering literature but one of mountain literature.¹²

¹¹ Edward Philip Thomas (1878–1917) was a British writer of poetry, and prose. Macfarlane wrote about him in *The Old Ways*. George Herbert Leigh Mallory (1886–1924) was an English climber, he participated in the first expedition into Mount Everest. Macfarlane wrote about him in *Mountain of the Mind*. Eric Ravilious (1903–1942) was a British painter, illustrator, lithographer, war-artist. Macfarlane wrote about him in *The Old Ways*.

¹²Robert Macfarlane, "Introduction", in Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, XVI.

In this preface, you point out the difference between mountain literature and mountaineering literature. You place Shepherd's book in the first of these categories. Please explain in more detail how you understand mountain and mountaineering literature; what is the difference between them?

R. M.: For me, mountain literature is much more interesting than mountaineering writing. There are so many repetitions in mountaineering literature; the relations from high mountain expeditions are very similar to each other. Quite often, they are boring. However, according to the etymology, the word "mountaineer" originally meant "somebody who lives in the mountains", no like today, "somebody who climbs in the mountains for sport, for achievement etc." Mountaineering literature has a clear purpose – always the plot is: "how we reach the top or not". However, when it comes to mountain literature when you read it, you lose that plot of the top, but you gain the depth and height, the width, and... breath of everything that is mountain. There are natural history, ecology, human relations... Mountain literature is probably more decolonising than mountaineering literature. As we know – many classical British mountaineering books were written by men who went to Himalayas, and their expeditions had an imperial character – they were part of national, imperial project. In contrast, mountain literature represents rather a decolonisation movement. In England, we have Boardman Tasker Award for Mountain Literature, which has been given for forty years, since 1983.¹³ When you check the list of awarded books in subsequent years, you will see that at first, they were typical mountaineering books, and recently more and more books that can be classified as mountain literature are awarded. It is a tendency we can look at for maybe the last fifteen years that the winners are books, which are very different from classical mountaineering accounts. There are even some discussions whether the awarded books can be considered as mountain books at all.

E. D.: What role do the emotions and sensory experiences play in writing about the mountains? Are these essential elements in mountain literature and mountain studies?

R. M.: They all are very important in mountain literature. These are books about living in a heightened world, not only because of the height above sea level but also because of the high level of emotions and experiences. Everything is more intense in the mountains, the body is active, and there is exposition, fear, pain... I was in the Cuillin Mountains for two days, and it seems to me that it was two weeks. It was such an intense time, saturated with so many experiences. I was so focused on the next step, next move... The question for the writer is how to write about it. When you are climbing, you can't write or read. I wrote *Mountains of the Mind* here, in Cambridge, in the little, dark cellar room below the sea level. So, usually, we write and read about the mountains far away from the mountains, but the language must carry these intense emotions, feelings and sensory experiences. It is a great challenge – language is so important in mountain literature...

¹³<http://www.boardmantasker.com/> (access 01.07.2023).

E. D.: Could you tell me more about contemporary British mountain writers? Who can be included in this group? Who creates this part of literature?

R. M.: Particularly interesting are works written by women because before that, mostly men wrote about the mountains. Interesting is Helen Mort book *A Line Above the Sky*,¹⁴ Jessica J. Lee *Two Trees Make a Forest*.¹⁵

E. D.: Thank you very much for the conversation.

¹⁴Helen Mort, *A Line Above the Sky. On Mountains and Motherhood* (Ebury Publishing, 2022).

¹⁵Jessica J. Lee, *Two Trees Make a Forest, Travels Among Taiwan's Mountains & Coasts in Search of My Family's Past* (Canada: Penguin, 2020).

KEYWORDS

Robert Macfarlane

NATURE WRITING

ABSTRACT:

This is an interview with Robert Macfarlane – a professor of Environmental Humanities at Emmanuel College, Cambridge. He is also a traveller and a world-famous author of best-selling books about nature, relations between “landscapes and the human heart” (as he says), places and imagination. Macfarlane’s literary works are usually categorised as nature writing, mountain literature, travelling and others.

mountain literature

TRAVELLING

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

Elżbieta Dutka – prof. dr hab., works at the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Silesia in Katowice. Her primary field of study is contemporary Polish literature. Her research interests center around the issues of space (mythical lands, cities, regions, landscapes, mountains) in different perspectives – geopoetics, new regionalism, and mountain studies. She is the author of: *Ukraina w twórczości Włodzimierza Odojewskiego i Włodzimierza Paźniewskiego* [Ukraine in the works of Włodzimierz Odojewski and Włodzimierz Paźniewski] (Katowice 2000), *Okolice nie tylko geograficzne. O twórczości Andrzeja Kuśniewicza* [Not only geographical spaces. The works of Andrzej Kuśniewicz] (Katowice 2008), *Zapisywanie miejsca. Szkice o Śląsku w literaturze przełomu wieków XX i XXI* [Recording place. Sketches about Silesia in literature at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries] (Katowice 2011), *Próby topograficzne. Miejsca i krajobrazy w literaturze polskiej XX i XXI wieku* [Topographical sketches. Places and landscapes in Polish Literature of the 20th and 21st Centuries] (Katowice 2014), *Centra, prowincje, zaułki. Twórczość Julii Hartwig jako auto/bio/geo/grafia* [Centers, provinces, alleys. Julia Hartwig's works as auto/bio/geo/graphy] (Kraków 2016), *Pytania o miejsce. Sondowanie topografii literackich XX i XXI wieku* [A question of place. Probing literary topographies of the 20th and 21st centuries] (Kraków, 2019). She is also the co-editor of collective volumes, including *Proza polska XX wieku. Przeglądy i interpretacje* [20th-century Polish prose. Reviews and interpretations] (Volume 2, Katowice 2012; Volume 3, Katowice 2014). She published, among others, in collective volumes as part of the *Nowy Regionalizm w Badaniach Literackich* [New Regionalism in Literary Studies] series (Universitas).