

Wildflower thoughts . . .

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Wildflower meadow and nature corridor, Wivenhoe Park, University of Essex

OED definitions:

Wildflower. Not listed. A search returns “wilderling” as the nearest approximation, meaning “Leading or driving one astray.”

Wildlife: “The native fauna and flora of a particular region.”

Wildlife Park: “n. a park in which wild animals [and plants?]*] are kept and displayed to the public in conditions as close as possible to their natural ones.” *My insertion.

Wildlifer: “n. a person interested in the study and conservation of wild plants and animals.”

My university recently seeded the wildflower meadow shown above, where there used to be a patch of worn grass. The diversity of plants, insects, animals and birds are such that this contribution to the campus’s wildlife corridors hums with life, putting me in mind of some of the literature that I read with students. This post looks at various extracts from works studied on my *Literature and the Environmental Imagination* MA module and my undergraduate seminar, *Transatlantic Romanticisms*. I couldn’t resist sharing them.

Margaret Fuller begins [Summer on the Lakes in 1843](#) (1844) at Niagara Falls, defining the genre in which she writes through a metaphor of literary rambling: “such foot-notes as may be made on the pages of my life during this summer’s wanderings.” Those wanderings take her to Goat Island, on the U.S. side of the falls. . .

The beautiful wood on Goat Island is full of flowers; many of the fairest love to do homage here. The Wake Robin and May Apple are in bloom now; the former, white, pink, green, purple, copying the rainbow of the fall, and fit to make a garland for its presiding deity when he walks

the land, for they are of imperial size, and shaped like stones for a diadem. Of the May Apple, I did not raise one green tent without finding a flower beneath.

Margaret Fuller, “Niagara, June 10, 1843”, Summer on the Lakes in 1843.

Fuller’s observation on two wildflower species disorientates lovers of spectacle, confounding more conventional expectations about the visual dominance of the Falls. The flowers are exquisite in their smallness, simplicity and profusion; the roar of the water is where the cascade’s real sublimity is found. Websites now encourage visitors to “get in touch with nature on Goat Island” and to “take a hike,” while the park seems to hybridise that most nineteenth-century of optical spectacles, the [phantasmagoria](#), with something like Rem Koolhaas’s giddy account in [Delirious New York](#) of Coney Island as an “incubator” for the architectural mutation of Central Park: “just beyond its waterfall vistas, Niagara is filled with . . . fantastic attractions” ([Niagara State Park homepage](#)).

Eighteen years after Fuller published *Summer on the Lakes*, the wake robin (*Trillium grandiflorum*) to which she refers provided the title for fly-fishing naturalist [John Burroughs](#)’ collection of essays *Wake-Robin* (1871). Burroughs’s book, like Fuller’s, is full of sound and an exquisite awareness of flower power – a lyrical biogeography of the Hudson River valley that records a year in upstate New-York through the birds and the bees, and the plants among which they live. He explains that he chose the title *Wake-Robin* because of the coincidence of the plant’s flowering and the springtime return of “all the birds” (meaning the migratory species, including American Robins):

The dandelion tells me when to look for the swallow, the dogtooth violet when to expect the wood-thrush, and when I have found the wake-robin in bloom I know the season is fairly inaugurated.

“The Return of the Birds,” John Burroughs, Wake-Robin (1871)

Burroughs’s use in *Wake-Robin* of the bio-almanac genre resonates down a further seven-and-a-half decades to another appropriation of that form, this time explicitly acknowledged by [Aldo Leopold](#). Leopold’s posthumously published [A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There](#) (1949) foregrounds the natural history of Wisconsin – specifically the Sauk (Sand) County area near Baraboo – as a case study in support of the need for an extension of our understanding of community and ethics to a land ethic. In his essay for July, under a subheading “Prairie Birthday,” a phenological study of a commonplace wildflower, the [cutleaf Silphium](#) (*Silphium laciniatum*), reinforces his point as effectively as the better-known passage documenting the fate of the last passenger pigeons, in the February conceit of a sawyer reading history through the rings of a tree cut for firewood. The Silphium is a plant that it would be too easy to miss:

It is an ordinary graveyard, bordered by the usual spruces, and studded with the usual pink granite or white marble headstones, each with the usual Sunday bouquet of red or pink geraniums. It is extraordinary only in being triangular instead of square, and in harboring, within the sharp angle of its fence, a pin-point remnant of the native prairie on which the graveyard was established in the 1840s. Heretofore unreachable by scythe or mower, this yard-square relic of original Wisconsin gives birth, each July, to a man-high stalk of compass plant or cutleaf Silphium, spangled with saucer-sized yellow blooms resembling sunflowers. It is the sole remnant of this plant along this highway, and perhaps the sole remnant in the western half of our county. What a thousand acres of Silphiums looked like when they tickled the bellies of the buffalo is a question never again to be answered, and perhaps not even asked.

This year I found the Silphium in first bloom on 24 July, a week later than usual; during the last six years the average date was 15 July. When I passed the graveyard again on 3 August, the fence had been removed by a road crew, and the Silphium cut. It is easy now to predict the future; for a few years my Silphium will try in vain to rise above the mowing machine, and then it will die. With it will die the prairie epoch.

Aldo Leopold, “July,” A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There (1949).

The cutleaf Silphium or turpentine plant isn’t an endangered species, but Leopold’s point is our neglect of the commonplace. The Silphium lives tenuously, in its corner of an unremarkable cemetery. Leopold’s “[Land Ethic](#)” essay (which begins with a literary reference to Homer’s *Odyssey*) comes later in the book, extending what might be understood by “community” and communal responsibility to an entire ecology. It is inclusive and politically resonant: “The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.” Another leap of imagination takes me to William Blake’s [Book of Thel](#), where the heroine is introduced to the beauty of communal sympathy through conversations with a lily, a cloud, a worm, and a clod of clay.

But let’s return to *Summer on the Lakes*. Carl Linnaeus catalogued the May Apple (*Podophyllum peltatum*) in his [Species Plantarum](#) (1753). I love the way that wildflowers tease our compulsion to classify, impelling us by association into allusive, comparative meanders – the May Apple, used in naturopathic medicine and made into delicious jelly, is also called Indian Apple, Hog’s Apple, Devil’s Apple, American Mandrake, Racoonberry, Ground Lemon and Umbrella Plant. It isn’t an apple, a lemon or a mandrake. The umbrellas are the leaves that shade each, single flower. (I’m reminded of Jorge Luis Borges’ essay “[The Analytical Language of John Wilkins](#),” where a “Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge” satirises the arbitrariness of systems of taxonomy and proposes alternative categories: “Beauty belongs to the sixteenth category; it is a living brood fish, an oblong one.”) Most of the May Apple plant is toxic, but then the relationship between beauty, death, and life sits precariously in this book by a woman who would herself die in a shipwreck just five years later, aged 40. Employing forensic botany to read the future narrative of manifest destiny, she wrote:

Everywhere the rattlesnake-weed grows in profusion. The antidote survives the bane. Soon the coarser plantain, the “white man’s footstep,” shall take its place.

We saw also the compass plant, and the western tea plant. Of some of the brightest flowers an Indian girl afterwards told me the medicinal virtues. I doubt not those students of the soil knew a use to every fair emblem, on which we could only look to admire its hues and shape.

After noon we were ferried by a girl, (unfortunately not of the most picturesque appearance) across the Kishwaukie, the most graceful stream, and on whose bosom rested many full-blown water-lilies, twice as large as any of ours. I was told that, en revanche, they were scentless, but I still regret that I could not get at one of them to try.

Rattlesnake-weed could refer to any of several plant species. I think Margaret Fuller was referring to [Hieracium venosum](#), the rattlesnake hawkweed or veiny hawkweed, another small, unshowy plant which has yellow flowers above a delicate basal rosette of blood-red veined leaves. The coarser plantain (“coarser” functions like a pejorative Homeric epithet), or “white man’s footstep,” was brought into North America from Britain and Europe with seed corn. Another plant with naturopathic properties, it was classified by Linnaeus as [Plantago media](#). The plantain is now included in wildflower seed mix. There are some growing in my University’s wildflower meadows and corridors. The compass plant or western tea plant, also mentioned in the above passage, might be a fitting plant with which to end this discussion of literary texts, because its Latin name is

Silphium laciniatum and it is also known as the cutleaf Silphium. Fuller, it seems, looks ahead to Aldo Leopold and the case for a land ethic.

So, how might a university campus that was once a landscaped, nineteenth-century park be managed according to Leopoldian ethics? The wildflower meadow with which I began connects to a network of more established wildlife corridors that extend beyond the University's boundaries, encouraging a spread of life forms and a wider ecological community. Small in scale, it is a change in land use for the better. A threadbare, old mown grass monoculture that wasn't doing well was removed, the soil rotavated, and the mix of flowers and grasses sown. There's a high level of control involved in that process. What would have grown if the soil had just been left to its own devices can only be a matter of informed speculation. Travels in the U.S. western states and in Australia remind me how quickly a fire-raised forest springs from bare earth into new life.

An interesting exercise would be a species count of the wildflower meadow now compared with another next year – I'm sure that someone is working on just such a data set. I'll bet that plants will appear that weren't part of the planting plan and didn't come from the mix. The richness of the mix will increase. In an earlier post, [City of Trees: Boise, Idaho and an Urban Natural Experience](#), I wrote about two cork oaks on campus that date back to the Napoleonic wars, biogeographically connecting Essex with Iberian Europe.

John Constable's [Wivenhoe Park](#) (1816), painted a couple of years after the cork oaks were planted, draws attention to a history seen through trees as well as to a sociology of the landscaped great house and its grounds (see EH. Gombrich's [Art and Illusion: a Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation](#) and Essex Alumnus John Barrell's [The Dark Side of the Landscape](#)). In the distance of the wildflower meadow photograph, over the brow of a hill that dips down to the centre of campus, you can make out a silver building. The Ivor Crewe Lecture Hall, named after one of our former Vice Chancellors, faces the lake and grounds shown in Constable's painting, as if it looks out from the top right of the canvas.

Two hundred years ago, Percy Shelley compared the metaphysical qualities of poetry with the material substance of a flower, through a mix of metaphor and simile that demonstrates the complementarity and mutual interdependence of the humanities and sciences:

Poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge. . . . It is as the odor and the color of the rose to the texture of the elements which compose it, as the form and splendor of unfaded beauty to the secrets of anatomy and corruption.
(*A Defence of Poetry*)

What Shelley writes only works when science and art combine to make one another – along with critique – comprehensible.

Note: [A Short Report for the RSPB](#), written by Rachel Bragg, Carly Wood, Jo Barton and Jules Pretty and published by the University of Essex's School of Biological Sciences and Sustainability Institute, looks at the value to children of connectedness to nature and green exercise. The authors explain that the scientific Connection to Nature Scale, or CNS (devised by Mayer and Frantz) "is based on the principle of the 'Land Ethic' by Leopold, and defines connection to nature as 'an individual's affective, experiential connection to nature.'" [Green Exercise](#) is an area of specialist research at Essex. It's nicely affective that the wildflower meadow in the photo is next to the University's Trim Trail outdoor exercise loop.

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