

Peer Review

The Book of Trespass author Nick Hayes, on how environmentalist Roger Deakin taught him to engage with the natural world.



I first came to Roger Deakin's work through the words of his friend and collaborator Rob Macfarlane. In Macfarlane's 2007 book *The Wild Places*, he travels around the British Isles in search of the essence of "wild": what it means, where it is, how we humans connect with it. Inevitably, he ends up at Deakin's door. It was his description of Deakin's Suffolk home—the 16th-century farmhouse he had renovated from a rotten, disused shell purchased in 1969—that instantly turned its owner into something of a legend for me.

Macfarlane's words made Walnut Tree Farm seem alive—its oak beams creaking like a boat in a storm, the bindweed crawling through the plumbing, the foxes that had made a den in the fireplace. The house seemed to be an extension of the writer and environmental filmmaker himself, in a constant process of permeating and being permeated by nature. To me, Deakin was like a real-life version of Rooster Byron—Jez Butterworth's protagonist in the play *Jerusalem*—someone who lives on the edges of what is deemed acceptable society in

order to be closer to what he considers meaningful.

It turned out that Deakin wrote books too. Those books, *Waterlog*, *Wildwood* and his posthumous *Notes from Walnut Tree Farm*, taught me that all I needed to venture beyond the world of electric lighting was a sleeping bag and a sense of curiosity. They pushed me out into the magnificent nights and cold mornings of sleeping rough in nature's cradle. Deakin had died by the time I read his words, but I made a pilgrimage to his house and, at the kindness of its present owners, was able to spend an afternoon walking through the real objects of his descriptions: the moat he swam in every book, the woods he planted, the trees he grafted together in homage to David Nash's *Ash Dome*. There was a distance between the normality of what I saw before me, and the wonder of their descriptions in his book. I wasn't disappointed. Instead, I learned something about how I could relate to the world around me, use my eyes and ears in harmony with my imagination and wonder, side-step science and empiricism, and engage with the world in a more phenomenological manner.

WATERLOG

by Nick Hayes

Roger Deakin's first book, *Waterlog*, is a swimmer's journey around Britain. It takes a "frog's-eye view" of the world, exploring the streams, rivers, lakes and dykes that cut through Britain by immersing the reader, with the writer, into them. In one sense, it is simply a description of one man's fascination with water, but in another sense, it is a manifesto for wild freedom, the pull of nature that is not so much for the scenery, or the health, but as a way of connecting to a wilder, more animal side of us, one that can act, or swim, for the very pleasure of being alive.

Photograph: Douglas Kirkland/Corbis via Getty Images

Photograph: Gustav Alnestrål, Stylist: Andreas Frienholt

A prophetic history of the almanac.

KATIE CALAUTTI

Object Matters

For as long as humans have looked to the sky and soil to predict upcoming events, almanacs have existed to help them. The word "almanac" itself dates so far back that no one can agree on its origin—guesses range from a Spanish Arabic derivation to a play on the Ancient Greek word for "calendar."

With its roots in astronomy, early iterations of the almanac were calendars that charted moon phases and the rising and setting times of the sun. The Ancient Greeks and Egyptians included festival dates in their almanacs, while Romans pinpointed lucky and unlucky days to do business and Medieval versions added holy days.

Once the first printed version was distributed in Europe in 1457, their popularity became widespread. Starting in the 1600s, almanacs emphasized scientific developments and researched data over unfounded prophecies, and they eventually evolved throughout Europe and America to include weather predictions, tide tables, proverbs, jokes, short stories, and health and gardening advice. By the 1700s, almanacs were as popular as the Bible—everyone from farmers to fishermen to domestic workers relied on their compelling mixture of scientific and folkloric alchemy.

Benjamin Franklin authored

one of colonial America's bestselling publications, *Poor Richard's Almanack*, from 1732 to 1758; his singular wordplay and witticisms helped sell upwards of 10,000 copies a year. And in 1792, the *Old Farmer's Almanac* was founded—it remains America's oldest continuously published periodical. In his days as a lawyer, Abraham Lincoln famously used an 1857 copy of the publication to win a murder trial by debunking witness testimony with the almanac's lunar chart. Long before the National Weather Service was established, the *Old Farmer's Almanac* utilized a top-secret mathematical formula to create its long-range weather forecasts, which farmers still routinely plant and harvest by. To this day, it claims an 80% accuracy rate and distributes about three million copies a year.

To maintain relevance, modern publications like the UK's *Whitaker's Almanack* and the US *Almanac of American Politics* have broadened their scope to cover subjects including government, education, history, geography and transportation. Almanac archives live on as detailed time capsules of social and environmental trends, and though technology has mastered many of their elements, the almanac's appeal is rooted in wisdom ancient enough to outlive even the smartest phone or GPS satellite.

