

'MEMORY IS THE DIARY WE ALL CARRY ROUND WITH US'

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*'And if a child's vision of nature can already be loaded with complicating memories, myths, and meanings, how much more elaborately is the frame through which our adult eyes survey the landscape. For although we are accustomed to separate nature and human perception into two realms, they are, in fact, indivisible. Before it can ever be a repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock.'*

Simon Schama (1)

I'm from these parts. As I write this, however, I'm over 130 miles away as the crow flies and many more by road from the Sefton Coast. I now live and work in South Wales, having left Liverpool nearly forty years ago to follow a career in photography.

It's a place that holds many memories and has very much shaped who I am. With family ties close to the coast in Crosby I've continued a distant yet powerful relationship with the twenty or so miles that take you from Gormley's *Another Place* at Waterloo to the wild open reaches of the salt marshes of Southport. Each time I visit family, I find myself drawn to the coast, always preferring winter when the vast horizons seem endless and you can spend all day without coming across a soul.

Behind these expansive tracts of sand lie the largest dune system in England; a great playground for a young family. Together mum and dad and my two brothers spent many afternoons walking along Fisherman's Path, following the pinewoods through Massam's Slack and onto the shore between Freshfield and Ainsdale. Mum would have her *Illustrations of the British Flora* by W. H. Fitch and W. G. Smith in tandem with the *Handbook of the British Flora* by George Bentham and Sir J. D. Hooker (she would hand-colour the illustrations and date them in the book) and dad, his 35mm Ilford Sportsman camera. Mike, Phil and I would have open spaces and places to explore as well as things to collect, Mike with his frogs and toads (Natterjacks among them, it was OK fifty years ago!), Phil and I anything that might compete with an older brother.

Memories are created out of such experiences and shaped by time. They are reinforced, embellished, never quite forgotten and always building, one upon another; layers of memories.

I was about ten, adventurous, a little headstrong and far too sure of myself. More dangerously, I was old enough to believe I could explore, yet be safe. In that dune system, paths are everywhere and to a raw ten-year-old the landscape was huge and identical whichever way you looked; at ten who wants a path anyway? Even today finding a spot you earmarked for revisiting at a later date is unusually difficult. So I got lost, really lost, hopelessly lost, lost for a full day—and at ten that's an eternity.

Exploring takes you beyond safety and is a close relative to being lost. Henry David Thoreau in *Walden* states,

*'It is surprising and memorable as well as valuable to be lost in the woods anytime.'* (2)

There are physical reactions to memories and mine of that day, some forty-seven years ago, is deeply articulated in my response to the dunes and pinewoods today. It shapes my sense of the present and I feel a deep sense of unease as I try to navigate alone through the lowland dune heath, woodland and shrub that make up this wild, expansive landscape. It is real and palpable and any

present relationship with a place that you have known before cannot and does not exist without memories.

Layered memories of the Sefton Coast have built up from each of my visits over the period of my life, often lately separated by prolonged periods of real time, yet stacked up together to produce a seamless continuity of imagined time.

Taking home an oiled Guillemot from the Alt Estuary, attempting to clean it up with soft detergent and feeding it fish of various types; stroking a windblown and exhausted Little Stint by the boat yard at Hightown; ringing that sage of birding in the north-west, Eric Hardy, on coming across a Black Tern and Spoonbill, then seeing them reported in his column in the Liverpool Daily Post; being shat upon by over 5,000 Pink-footed Geese whilst on my bike birdwatching around the Flea Moss lanes; more recently seeing my first Great-white Egret coming into roost at the marina in Southport along with over forty Little Egrets on a cold February evening. These are more than memories and, like being lost in the dunes, they are perceptible in who I am today.

From my studio in South Wales I can taste the salt in the sea air of the Sefton Coast; pick up the aroma of the sweetness of the pinewoods and feel the change underfoot as I move across the bomb rubble (tipped to act as erosion protection), onto firmer sand and then sinking mud and out towards the incoming tide at Burbo Bank; hear the 'wink wink' of individual Pink-feet on a still, frozen early morning and the undercurrent of low drumming conversation as they amass in the feeding fields behind the sand banks that provide a safe haven for their nightly roosts; the lower pitched 'knut' of tightly packed feeding Knot which flock together with Black and Bar-tailed Godwits, Dunlin, Sanderling, Grey and Ringed Plover and the odd migratory surprise; wind-rush through Marram; gun fire from the firing range at Great Altcar; the baleful 'clink clink' of the folded mainsail against the mast supports of the boats anchored in the River Alt.

Yet further strata accrue through more meditative moments. Simply sitting quietly as the day unfolds, alone, watching and waiting for whatever might present itself; standing next to prehistoric footprints of deer and more astonishingly our own ancestry, revealed momentarily as the shifting sands give glimpses of a landscape inhabited by hunter-gatherers some 7,000 years ago wondering how so many wrecks have gone to ground on a seemingly benign coast, no jagged rocks here; walking gingerly through stumps of ancient forests at lowtide, lying low with them to get a new sense of perspective as they rise, mountain-like, from the silt banks.

The visual recollection for me as a photographer and artist is perhaps a little more complex. As with all the other senses, the visual is with me all the time, not as single images (of which I have thousands of this part of the coast), but rather as a visual symphony born of all the encounters with the coast over the years, some with a camera and others without.

Storms, fog, wind, rain, baking hot uncomfortable days, days when even the sea at Southport froze; spring and neap tides, birds photographed or just seen, lists made, sunrises, sunsets, night forays, subtle shifts of light over short stretches of time and profound changes of the shape of the restless shore over longer periods of time.

All these come together to form a fragmented yet still coherent memory that remains tangible and as Miss Prism in Oscar Wilde's 'The Importance of Being Earnest' says, in replying to Cecily on keeping a diary,

*'Memory, my Dear Cecily, is the diary that we all carry round with us.'* (3)

My 'diary' includes both written pages, physical images (contacts, both analogue and digital) along

with layers of memories. The images themselves are approximations of moments but are mute without this layered context and to anyone other than myself and perhaps my closest family, mean very little. They are only 'aide memoires' and nothing more.

There is, however, a curious relationship that exists between the photograph and memory. They are often linked too closely together and must be understood within the broader context that one, photography, has a definable history, a beginning so to speak and the other, memory, is intrinsically something of what makes us human, cognitive beings. I have a visual diary of contacts (small thumbnail images of every photograph I've ever taken) going back forty years and can chart my life from seventeen to the present day through images. They spark memories but never supplant them. Memories are private, born of so much more than an image.

Any photograph that I've ever taken is an encounter and experience committed to film or the digital file, but without me, it is as nothing; context is so important to understanding. John Berger, in his seminal essay *Uses of Photography—For Susan Sontag*, says:

*'Yet, unlike memory, photographs do not in themselves preserve meaning. They offer appearances—with all the credibility and gravity we normally lend to appearances—prised away from their meaning. Meaning is the result of understanding functions. "And functioning takes place in time, and must be explained in time. Only that which narrates can make us understand." Photographs in themselves do not narrate.'* (4)

Later in the same essay he goes on to state that,

*'...a photograph remains surrounded by the meaning from which it was severed. A mechanical device, the camera has been used as an instrument to contribute to a living memory. The photograph is a memento from a life being lived.'* (5)

Memento in this sense is to be taken as meaning a keepsake or souvenir and nothing more. In its earliest use in language the word memento actually meant 'something that serves to warn' and it may be better to see the photograph in this way rather than as something that defines to us the moment recorded.

I remember without photographs too; we all do, and did so before the invention of photography. The oiled Guillemot, the exhausted Little Stint and 5,000 geese just above me were not committed to film, but remain deeply etched on my memory. I'm currently working on a series of recordings with my mum, who has just turned ninety this year. We lost a box of old family photographs during a house move in the early 80s. It hurt mum then and continues to do so now, and I would have loved to have seen a photograph or two of my great-grandparents. Yet in talking with mum, we have recalled so much of her early days and of the formative years of my brothers and me growing up in Liverpool; of days out at Freshfield and Formby. We haven't needed images, just time; time that takes you on a trawl through the recesses of the mind. Maybe photographs strip us of this deeper connection with the past. We become lazy—'we have the photographs'.

As a seventeen-year-old my life revolved around watching Liverpool Football Club, playing for the school team and birdwatching. I have the written diaries of the bird outings from those early years; the birdwatching trips were often taken on my bike at weekends or before and after school. I have the football programmes of the matches I went to see at Anfield. These physical artefacts are as strong as any photographs and when, on a recent trip to Liverpool, I passed by my old school playing fields, which border the Lancashire mosses, and saw a sizeable flock of Pink-footed Geese in front of the goal posts I used to stand between (I like to think I was a half-decent goalkeeper in those far off days!), memories flooded back. Teams and school mates I played with; games and

goals remembered between ninety minutes from 3.00pm to 4.45pm on a Saturday (all games kicked off at the same time back then, free of the commercial pressure from television); of days out birdwatching and seeing, for my first time, the many birds encountered along the coast, waders, terns, warblers and many more. The photograph I took on that recent visit back home of the geese and the goalpost remains mute without the additional artefacts and recollections; in short without a layered context it means very little.

Alongside my own unique history of this personal relationship to the coast, memories and photographic contacts, comes a shared heritage and knowledge gained through reading, conversations and guided walks. Phil Smith's definitive *The Sands of Time*, (6) Jean Sprackland's *Strands* (7) and David Bryant's *In the footsteps of Eric Hardy*; (8) conversations with Geraldine Reid, Head of Botany at the World Museum in Liverpool, about diatoms (something I was shamefully unaware of); guided walks and days out with John Dempsey, Project Officer for the Sefton Coast Landscape Partnership, who has a deeply infectious way of sharing his immense knowledge of the natural, cultural and social history of the area; working collaboratively with the other artists involved in *Ghosts of the Restless Shore* and particularly with my brother Mike, with whom I have a unique shared history. All these encounters provide a context of understanding within which I produce my own work.

Time is the determining link between all these layers. It is continuous but also curiously held. The volatile landscape of the dunes and coast are forever changing, daily after huge storms and more slowly over decades as a noticeable creep of erosion and accretion becomes apparent. The sands of the restless shore continue to reveal and conceal. Bird populations change. In the 70s to have glimpsed an Avocet anywhere in Britain would have been a special moment; now they breed in healthy numbers at RSPB Marshside, Southport. The disappearance of natural habitat and the worrying phenomenon of climate change are clear to see and with this comes a real threat to the native flora and fauna. Nothing stays still; layers of time.

This layered framework of context and understanding underpins much of my work in *Ghosts of the Restless Shore* but can seem to suggest that the taking of a photograph is always a purely rational encounter, with little intuition or emotion and built solely upon a dependence beyond itself. It can and does, however, function on another level outside of this relationship.

I photograph because it is a language through which I can best articulate and understand the link between the 'natural' world and myself. It reinforces a deeper connection that exists between 'natural form' and my inner self. I need open spaces, and the vastness of the people-less coastal reaches here afford that link. Landscapes such as those encountered on the Sefton Coast provide me with something called 'equivalents', the term coined by the pioneering American photographer Alfred Stieglitz in the 1920s to express his inner thoughts, emotions and states of mind:

*'In all the photographs he had taken since the war, but most especially in his extended portrait of O'Keeffe, Stieglitz attempted to give form to the emotions he experienced, emotions which, it seemed to him, rebounded from the objects of his rapt attention. The intellect was not involved in this circuit of feeling; what was required was rather intuition and the free play of the unconscious until the artist had perfect focus on the substance of his picture and on the actuality of the moment. "What is of greatest importance," Stieglitz said, "is to hold a moment, to record something so completely that all who see (the picture) will relive an equivalent of what has been expressed.'*(9)

It may be a grand aim, but one with which I've always felt a strong affinity and this idea has been central to much of my work throughout my life and continues to be so. The extension of this natural sense of equivalence has been further explored by a shift in my work about ten years ago from not only photographing the 'natural landscape' but by moving more and more into imaging flora and

fauna. It felt a natural process and working on *Ghosts of the Restless Shore* has brought much of the philosophy of my image-making together.

Working intuitively and away from the intellect also highlights a further problem about how such images are received. There should be no need to explain; the work has, in this context, grown from within you. Yet there is a call for words to justify and describe what you have photographed. It must be understood, however, that photography is a language in its own right. This dilemma is succinctly put by Robert Adams in his book, *Why People Photograph*:

*'The main reason that artists don't willingly describe or explain what they produce is, however, that the minute they do so they've admitted failure. Words are proof that the vision they had is not, in the opinion of some at least, fully there in the picture. Characterising in words what they thought they'd shown is an acknowledgement that the photograph is unclear - that it is not art.'*(10)

Lastly and central to why I use a camera is the fact that without it I see less clearly. There is an argument that runs along the lines that the camera actually gets in the way of experiencing any given moment. It is seen as a filter that stops primary engagement; just experience the moment. For myself, I see the camera more like a filter that clarifies and intensifies. It's a bit like experiencing heightened sound within the landscape (a soundscape) when listening through a good quality set of headphones and a decent recording device. Walking through the dunes with my Zoom H1 recorder and noise-cancelling headphones was a revelation; micro and macro sounds, bird song and the hum of low-lying insects—and always the sea, near and far. The camera does the same visually for me, amplifying and illuminating the moment.

Without it, I simply feel lost.

#### Endnotes

1. Schama, S. (1996) *Landscape and Memory*. London: Fontana Press, p.6.
2. Thoreau, H. D. (1854) *Walden or Life in the Woods*. Boston: Ticknor and Fields.
3. Wilde, O. (1898) *The Importance of Being Earnest*. London: Leonard Smithers.
4. Berger, J. (2013) *Understanding a Photograph*. Edited by Geoff Dyer. New York: Aperture.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Smith, P. H. (2009) *The Sands of Time: An Introduction to the Sand Dunes of the Sefton Coast*. Stroud: Amberley Publishing.
7. Sprackland, J. (2012) *Strands—A year of discoveries on the beach*. London: Jonathan Cape.
8. Bryant, D. (ed). (2008) *In the Footsteps of Eric Hardy*. Southport: Hobby Publications.
9. Hambourg, M. M., Phillips, C. (1989) *The New Vision: Photography Between the World Wars*, Ford Motor Company Collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The Yale University Press.
10. Adams, R. (1994) *Why People Photograph*. New York: Aperture.