



ART / THINKING / NATURE / WRITING

BY [CAROLINE HARRIS](#) / [ART: RADICAL LANDSCAPES](#) / 19 MARCH, 2019

SCRUB



Beyond the chain-link fence of my primary school, across the alleyway into town, was a land of fascination. We called it the ‘waste ground’ and I’d wander there looking for treasures among the broken fireplaces and scuffed concrete. Garden survivors rose from the cracks and dust: snapdragons, evening primrose, mullein. This was suburban south-west London. Not quite city, not countryside. What would now be called an edgeland.

In later childhood I kept a nature notebook and went wildflower-spotting with my mother. I explored the banks of the Hogsmill River – a fenced-in, neglected strip between road and water. As an adult, I

peer at motorway embankments and railway tracksides as I travel by, trying to make out their plant life.

Most recently, my interest in scrub and plants on the human borders has brought the urge to make poems with them. 'Scrub' is defined as a habitat dominated by shrubs or bushes, either forming the margin between grassland or heath and woodland, or in coastal locations. It is now recognised as ecologically valuable, but is also viewed as a threat: scrub encroaches, and its species can be invasive. Scrub is temporary and transitional; it does not stay put. In built environments, scrub marks the ever-moving edge between the human-made and the other-than-human.

All of this intrigued me. Who is encroaching? Who is invasive? Why do we value some plants over others, and whose choices become the accepted norm and how? Why do we feel the need to impose an idea of neatness or rightness on to plants? In my riverside explorations, I was always particularly taken with the pink slipper flowers of Himalayan balsam, but it has been vilified as an invasive species: an enemy to be expunged. Esther Woolfson writes with clarity on some of these questions in *Field Notes From a Hidden City* – in which she notes there is evidence that Himalayan balsam is a plant misjudged, and a boon to bumblebees.



I had read and enjoyed Alice Oswald's *Weeds and Wild Flowers* – a collaboration with illustrator Jessica Greenman, where the poet has written character sketches of each plant. I was also intrigued by Derek Jarman's garden at Dungeness – a place I have seen in the photographs by Howard Sooley, but not yet visited. It was the idea of plants in hard places: up against shingle, asphalt, brick edge. I had been thinking, too, about relationships between the human and non-human, or other-than-human, and

studying the work of critics and philosophers from Timothy Morton to Jane Bennett and Donna Haraway.

My research for this project brought me to *The Scrub Management Handbook*, produced by English Nature as a conservation guide – and, I have since been told, something of a classic in its field. The book identifies four approaches to scrub ‘management’: Enhancing, Maintaining, Reducing and Eradicating. My own *SCRUB Management Handbook* is a series of poetic and language art works, with the first series undertaken during a five-day residency at Camilla Nelson’s Singing Apple Press in Mere, Wiltshire.

The works involve and mirror the processes described in the guide, and the poetry pamphlet is arranged according to the handbook sections. I made the poems directly and indirectly with plants at the Singing Apple Press garden – which has been deliberately left relatively uncultivated. The works include video, cyanotype prints, letterpressed text (using the SAP press in Mere) and text poems – some of them taking words and phrases from the English Nature guide, others written in response to the videos. As a publisher, I am interested not only in the words, but in the variety of material and media forms that convey them; in this project I have also begun to experiment with language art.



I chose cyanotype printing because it allows direct contact with the plants, which can be laid on the paper to produce photograms. It is also possible to create more mediated prints, from negatives or positives produced from digital photographs. Cyanotype is the earliest photographic technique and the first photo book was a series of prints of British algae by botanist Anna Atkins (1843). It works with the elements of sun and water, alongside the chemical solution that when exposed to UV light produces the distinctive Prussian blue. I was struck by how plants work with the sun and a different

compound: chlorophyll. The depth effects in the *SCRUB* prints and bookwork covers were achieved by placing the plants and seeds that I had severed and collected on to the paper at different time intervals during the exposure.

I do think of the plants as severed – because by the end of the printing at Mere, it felt as though I was doing some sort of violence to these living beings I was supposed to be ‘listening’ to. There is an intended tension in the cyanotypes, between the human-defined space of chemically treated paper and the plants that do not recognise this space, extending beyond its edges. But there is also the tension I did not realise until I caught myself: between my aims of paying close attention to these plants – and my cutting them up, pressing them, shredding them, boiling them (to make dyes) in order to fit my aesthetic notion. This was the impulse for the poem ‘prussian blue’. The poems too have been ‘reduced’ (a number ‘eradicated’) during the editing process. In making the bookworks I have been cutting, ordering, trimming – to make them fit a particular human cultural form: the pamphlet.

These are all questions and tensions I hope to explore in other locations, for future *SCRUB Management Handbook* volumes.

*is scrub [extract]*²

boundaries frequently unclear
can be overlooked

marginal robust
exceeds accepted limits

contributes to the natural beauty
leading to colonisation

² Words and phrases taken from the introductory chapters of
The Scrub Management Handbook

prussian blue

I have severed plants.
I have pressed them;
 bruised and used them
 for my own purpose.
I have tossed their remains
 on dusty concrete.
I have preserved only ghosts
 on paper.

Biography

Caroline Harris is a writer, publisher and lecturer. Harris + Wilson, the book creation business she co-founded, works with global publishers, authors and brands, and she is Course Leader for the BA Publishing (Combined) at Bath Spa University. She is the author of *Ms Harris's Book of Green Household Management* (John Murray) and in 2017 completed the MA Creative Writing (Poetry) at Royal Holloway. *SCRUB Management Handbook No.1 Mere* is her first pamphlet.

Caroline Harris is taking part in *Radical Landscapes: Innovation in Landscape and Language Art* at The Plough Arts Centre, Great Torrington, Devon from 23rd March to 22nd April 2019.

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In support of the exhibition, The Learned Pig's Spring 2019 editorial season is devoted to **Radical Landscapes**.

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