

## Memories of Land – Tracing The Landscape: Cumbrian Farm Women

Monday, January 28, 2019 6:04 PM

Clipped from: <https://tracingthelandscape.wordpress.com/2018/04/18/memories-of-land/>



Artist Rachel Mackinnon Day has worked in collaboration with five Cumbrian farm women to examine the complexities of their lives as women working in agriculture. This blog has been commissioned to respond to her findings and develop a new body of research in response to the exhibition, Tracing the Landscape



Posted on April 18, 2018 by Natalie Hughes





*Artist Patricia MacKinnon-Day has worked in collaboration with five Cumbrian Farm Women to explore a female experience of agrarian life. You can visit the exhibition at [Abbot Hall Art Gallery](#) until 9 June 2018. The following blog post is in response to the exhibition, which I visited last week.*

In rough fell country many sheep are grazed high up on the fells on common land, under laws which date back to medieval times and which predate modern ownership. To this day farmers continue to exercise their right to put their animals on the fells.

Every flock knows its own territory on the fells, which is called a heaf. Each generation of lambs learns the boundaries from its mother, so when the lambs go back up to the fell after winter, they remember where they should be.

Maria Benjamin mentions this habit of the sheep – how they teach boundaries to their young, much like any other mother would. These are the manners of the land, and something to which Maria is relatively new: she grew up in Scotland and worked outside of farming until she met her husband John, who ran Nibthwaite Grange Farm, a place that has been in his family for generations. She describes how at first she found the local farmers rude – they would only ever really speak to her husband and rarely address her directly. She presumed that this was because she was a woman, but now she has a better understanding of the community, she realises that it was because nobody knew her; she was a stranger to this close local.

Now, Maria is very much a part of this place and its community. For example, when one of her cows suddenly died and left two young calves in need of milk and mothering, she was lent a surrogate within half an hour, no questions asked. This, she says, is how the community is: tough and quiet; it prefers to find out about you through others rather than going to you directly; but it is also incredibly quick to provide support and kindness when you need it.

The harsh realities of the work and the way the land shapes you, is a common theme throughout the conversations MacKinnon-Day has with the women. Maria openly speaks about depression and how she had suffered but has since found solace in the absorption of physical farm work. The routine and momentum, with an agenda that is set by the seasons, gives her a sense of purpose. Mary Brough, another of the farmers, describes how she had two knee replacements. Farming “*is a lifestyle as opposed to a job*” she says and admits that she has “*always been sheep mad*”. Mary comes from a long line of farmers and it is in her blood; a way of life that has been passed on to her. The rhythm of the land.

It is a way of life that cannot be left so easily, or at least this is how Janet Wilson’s daughter, Laura, feels. Laura grew up on her parent’s farm, but now works in Barrow-in-Furness. She describes how she misses the beauty, peace and space of the countryside, remarking on how bizarre and tragic she finds knowing that some people have only ever seen a night sky busy with light-pollution; a sky never quiet enough to see stars properly. Laura does not want to work on the farm – “*it’s too hard*” – but then she is reminded by her mother of how she’s barely left the life: her boyfriend is a farmer and part of a family farm, much like her own.

her boyfriend is a farmer and part of a family farm, much like her own.

There is no denying that the world of farming is dominated by men. Caroline Grindrod admits to acting up as "one of the lads" when she was younger in order to fit and be taken seriously. However, she now feels more comfortable in her own skin "as a woman in a man's world". Adding to this notion that you must prove yourself first, Joyce Dalton, recounts tales of picking out bulls at market: Joyce was found to have a talent for such things and joked how her husband would use her notes as guides for purchase (historically women were not allowed to participate at auction). She also tells us how much better she is at managing the bulls than her husband Raymond, who is "too soft". Recently Raymond had an accident on the farm, leaving it to Joyce lift him into a wheel barrow and push him to the house before he could get to hospital. Joyce is eighty-years-old.

Joyce, like Maria, did not originally come from a farming family; she came to the Cumbrian countryside during the Second World War, after her family were bombed out of their home in Barrow-in-Furnace. She remembers the freedom that the countryside gave her as a child and how she would walk for miles to pick primroses for her mother. These early memories seem like the beginning of a love affair she has had with the land ever since, so it is perhaps little wonder that she became a farmer.

This is a world of routine and tradition, in which knowledge is shaped by – and passed on through – the landscape.

"Farming: you're respected if you know what you're talking about" – Joyce Dalton

You can find out more about these women and their work as farmers by visiting [Tracing The Landscape at Abbot Hall Art Gallery](#)

-Natalie Hughes

Advertisements

REPORT THIS AD

REPORT THIS AD

Share this:

Twitter Facebook Google

### Leave a Reply

Enter your comment here...



**PUBLISHED BY NATALIE HUGHES**

Freelance writer, researcher and arts professional based in Liverpool. [View all posts by Natalie](#)

Based in Liverpool [View all posts by Natalie Hughes](#)

*Previous*  
**TRACING THE LANDSCAPE: CUMBRIAN FARM WOMEN**

*Next*  
**RULES OF THE LAND**

Privacy & Cookies: This site uses cookies. By continuing to use this website, you agree to their use.  
To find out more, including how to control cookies, see here: [Cookie Policy](#)

Close and accept