

Afterword by Robert Macfarlane

To Roger Deakin, water was a miraculous substance. It was curative and restorative, it was beautiful in its flow, it was a lens through which he often viewed the world and it was a medium of imagination and reflection. “All water,” he scribbled in a notebook, “river, sea, pond, lake, holds memory and the space to think.”

Roger lived a watery life. In 1969 he moved into the ruin of an Elizabethan farmhouse which had its own spring-fed moat, the arms of which extended around the house such that it was, in Roger’s phrase, “part-islanded”. The moat was connected to a cattle pond that jutted into the largest grazing common in his home county of Suffolk, in the east of England, and that pond was one of twenty-four set around the common, each linked to each by an ancient labyrinth of tunnels and drains. We think of an archipelago as a scatter of land existing within water, but Roger lived on an inverse archipelago—a scatter of water existing within land. The common itself, when the wind blew in summer, appeared to him like “a great inland sea of rippling grasses”, so that “although the sea itself is twenty-five miles due east at Walberswick”, he could “still enjoy some of the pleasures of living beside it”.

Roger was a writer, environmentalist, filmmaker and many other things besides, who is best known for his trilogy of books about nature and exploration: *Waterlog* (first published in 1999),

Wildwood (2007) and *Notes from Walnut Tree Farm* (2008). Roger travelled widely, but always returned to his farmhouse and the twelve acres of meadow and hedgerow that surrounded it. This was his fixed point, as he imagined it, where one foot of his compass was planted, while the other roved and circled. Walnut Tree Farm was first raised in the late 1500s, was dilapidated when Roger found it, and was then rebuilt by him according to an East Anglian method of timber-framing whereby the frame “sit[s] lightly on the sea of shifting Suffolk clay like an upturned boat”.

At the back of the house was an old claw-footed iron bathtub he had salvaged from an auction yard. On hot summer days, he would snake out metres of water-filled hosepipe onto the ground near the bath, leave the pipe to lounge for hours in the sun like a lazy python, then run that solar-heated water into the outdoor bath for an *al fresco* wallow. The bath was Roger’s tepidarium, and a cooling plunge into the moat usually followed. Out of the bath, across the grass, between the two apple trees, round the big willow to where he had staked a ladder to the moat’s bank, three steps into the water, and then gently down among the weed and the ducks and the ramshorn snails for a few lengths of breast-stroke or crawl...

“It’s extraordinary what you see in an English moat,” wrote Roger once. It was while doing lengths in his moat during a rain-storm that the idea (the brainstorm) came to Roger that he should undertake a swimmer’s journey around Britain—no, not *around* Britain, *through* Britain, via its lakes and rivers—the account of which was subsequently published as *Waterlog*. For a year Roger swam in some of the iconic waters of his country (Dancing Ledge on the Dorset coast; the tidal rips off the Isle of Jura; the clear-running trout streams of Hampshire), as well as less predictable

places (the estuary of the Fowey in Cornwall; the mud-channels that wriggle through the East Anglian salt marshes, the tufa pools of North Yorkshire). That journey gave Roger—and in turn its hundreds of thousands of readers—a magically de-familiarising “frog’s-eye view” of the country: a world seen freshly from water level. It is a funny, lyrical, wise travelogue that sketches a people’s history of open-water swimming in Britain, and it offers both a defence of the open water that remains, and an elegy for that which has gone (culverted, privatized, polluted).

Waterlog has been—and continues to be—an exceptionally influential book. *Influence* is itself a watery word: the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives us as its first definition: “1. The action or fact of flowing in; inflowing, inflow, influx, said of the action of water and other fluids, and of immaterial things conceived of as flowing in.” The affective sense of influence, the notion of being influenced by another person or property, is also aquatic in its connotations: “3. The inflowing, immission, or infusion (*into* a person or thing) of any kind of [...] secret power or principle; that which thus flows in or is infused.” I know of few other writers whose influence has been as strong as Roger’s, in the sense of “infusing” itself into people, of possessing a “secret power” to “flow” into and change them. You finish reading *Waterlog* invigorated, and with a profoundly altered relationship to open water. It is a book which leaves you, as the poet Heathcote Williams nicely punned in an early review of the first edition, with “a spring in your step”. Despite its deep Englishness, it has won admirers internationally, and been translated into languages as various as Italian, Korean and Japanese. Now at last it finds itself published in America, a country with its own splendid and venerable tradition of open-water swimming.

In the two years after *Waterlog's* first publication, Roger would typically receive three or four letters or telephone calls each day from readers seeking to make contact and tell him their own swimming stories or share their swimming spots. He once showed me the files, each containing hundreds of postcards and letters that he'd received from readers who spoke of how their lives had been changed, or deepened, by his book. He wrote back to every one of them, too, making special postcards on which to do so. It is no exaggeration to say that *Waterlog* prompted a revival of the lido culture in Britain, as well as of outdoor swimming more widely. It led, among other things, to the founding of a wild-swimming company, and to the emergence of "wild swimming" as a cliché, appearing in the title of numerous books and the straplines of countless newspaper articles (a trend Roger held in suspicion during its early stages as the corporatization of a dissident and self-willed act). His book still has the status of secular bible in organisations such as The Outdoor Swimming Society, which campaigns for swimmers' rights of access and for improved river health in the UK.



Roger and I first encountered one another in late 2002, and were friends until his death in the summer of 2006. In that short time a friendship grew up between us that was in part paternal-filial in its nature, but more significantly made of shared passions (landscape, literature, nature, exploration) with regard to which the thirty years between us in age usually seemed irrelevant. We visited each other often, corresponded by letter and email, travelled together in Ireland and the south-west of England, and Roger

became unofficial godparent to my daughter Lily, for whose first visit to Walnut Tree Farm he raked into being a circular maze made of yellow mulberry leaves. Roger once wrote that he wanted his friendships to grow “like weeds ... spontaneous and unstoppable”, and for me at least it was a weedy friendship in that sense. But before I even met Roger in person, I had read *Waterlog* and fallen under its spell, to the extent that I began hurling myself into more or less any stream, loch or river I passed, regardless of weather or temperature.

Partway through *Waterlog*, Roger decides to swim up the estuary of the River Erne in Cornwall. He discovers that by catching the incoming tide in the estuary mouth, he will be carried rapidly upstream:

I threw myself in and ... felt the incoming tide lock onto my legs, and thrust me in towards the distant woods along the shore. Each time a frond of sea-lettuce lightly brushed me, or glued itself around my arms, I thought it was a jellyfish, and flinched. But I soon grew used to it; seaweed all around me, sliding down each new wave to drape itself about me. I kept on swimming until I practically dissolved, jostled from behind by the swell. Then, as the tide rose higher, the sandy estuary beach came into focus. The woods reached right over the water, and began accelerating past me. I found I was moving at exhilarating speed, in big striding strokes, like a fell-runner on the downhill lap. It was like dream swimming, going so effortlessly fast, and feeling locked in by the current, with no obvious means of escape. I was borne along faster and faster as the rising tide approached the funnel of the river's

mouth until it shot me into a muddy, steep-sided mooring channel by some old stone limekilns on the beach. I had to strike out with all my strength to escape the flood and reach the eddy in the shallows. I swam back up to the limekilns and crawled out onto the beach like a turtle.

Much of the magic of *Waterlog* is apparent here: the adventure, the unostentatious bravery, the sense of life as a game with joy as its gain, a pleasure at moving with the world and being swept along by its rhythms rather than sweeping it along with ours—and the soft bathos of that final image. He crawls out onto the beach “like a turtle”, which is at once comic and true, for he has been transformed by the water, much as Wart—the hero of T. H. White’s *The Sword in the Stone*—magicked by Merlyn, dives into a river and becomes a trout as soon as he breaks the surface. Roger felt himself at various times in the course of his swimming journeys to have become part otter, part fish, part turtle: a compound being, a merman, some of his humanity “dissolved” away and replaced with the creaturely. Metempsychosis, metamorphosis: these were ideas to which Roger and I found ourselves returning in conversation—talking about Annie Dillard and Gerard Manley Hopkins and J.A. Baker, or the frontiers we perceived to exist within even familiar landscapes (hill-passes, snow-lines, forest thresholds), and the transformations that might occur as you crossed them.

To enter water is, of course, to cross a border. You pass the lake’s edge, the sea’s shore, the river’s brink—and in so doing you arrive at a different realm, in which you are differently minded because differently bodied. Crossing a frontier like this, wrote Roger, you enter “a different world in which we ourselves are

transformed,” he wrote; “it is where you travel to find yourself, often, paradoxically, by getting lost.”



In 2006, and out of the blue, Roger was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumour. Its progress was bitterly swift. He died in the August of that year. At his funeral, the coffin he lay in had a wreath of oak leaves on its lid, and just before it glided through the velvet curtains and into the cremating flames, Loudon Wainwright’s “The Swimming Song” was played, full of hope and loss. The song brought me to shuddering tears that day, and whenever it pops up now and then out of the thousand tracks on my phone, it still stops me short like a punch to the chest.

A life lived as variously as Roger’s, and evoked in writing as powerful as his, means that even after death his influence continues to flow outwards. Green Man-like, he appears in unexpected places, speaking in leaves. Though Roger is gone, many of his readers still feel a need to express their admiration for him, and the connection they felt with his work and world view, and so they still write letters, as if he might somehow read them. As I am Roger’s literary executor, and as our writings have become intertwined, many of these letters find their ways to me. They come from all over the world, and from various kinds of people: a professional surfer from Australia, a Canadian academic, a woman from Exeter confined to her house due to mobility problems, a young man re-swimming the route of *Waterlog*, lake by lake and river by river, in an attempt to recover from depression. Among the letters I have received, one of the most heartfelt came from a Dutch-English reader, and this is how it began:

I am Hansje, born and bred in the north Netherlands where I bathed from age one in lakes, river and cold-water outdoor pools. Here in Warwickshire, where I have lived for some thirty-three years, I am among other things a swimmer, and if you ever wish to swim in the beautiful Avon, then do tell me and I will show you to the best and secret places. I have never experienced the profound sense of loss of someone I have never met as when I learnt that Roger had died. Many sentences in each of his books are as if engraved in me, find a resting place, a recognition, they are magnifying glass, lens and microscope to the natural world, a watery surface through which I look to see the earth clarified.