

Institution: Lancaster University
Unit of Assessment: 29 English Language and Literature
Title of case study: <i>Edgelands</i>: Transforming Contemporary Understandings of Landscape
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Paul Farley's book <i>Edgelands</i>, co-authored with Michael Symmons Roberts, has changed attitudes to landscape in both cultural and utilitarian senses. Winner of the 'Foyles Best Book of Ideas' Prize for 2012, <i>Edgelands</i> was extensively reviewed upon publication and its capacity for changing perceptions was widely remarked upon. Beyond its print and digital dissemination, it became a broadcast topic, both as an adaptation for BBC Radio 4's <i>Book of the Week</i> and also as a news feature on programmes such as BBC Radio 4's <i>The Today Programme</i>. As well as becoming a set text on many academic reading lists, <i>Edgelands</i> has influenced curatorial practice in the visual arts, opinion and policymaking bodies, practical approaches to engagement with landscape and also promoted widespread debate and active awareness at the grass roots level of weblogs and online journals. The book is part of a much wider body of research and writing on cognate subjects by Farley that includes award-winning collections of poetry and high-profile radio broadcasts. However, <i>Edgelands</i> is focused upon here as a concrete example of how a single publication can have a significant and wide-ranging impact.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p><i>Edgelands</i> is a non-fiction book first published in 2011, co-authored by Paul Farley (Professor of Poetry, Department of English and Creative Writing, Lancaster University) and Michael Symmons Roberts. In its concern with landscape, place and culture, it represents a further exploration and investigation of Farley's longstanding interests in these subject areas, evidenced by his writing as a poet, essayist and broadcaster (in which such themes have recurred since the publication of his first collection of poetry in 1998). <i>Edgelands</i> can claim originality and experimentalism in its methodology and approach, for example in the way it was born out of a kind of collaboration – between two poets whose interests converged – acting as formal analogue to the book's topics: a concern with overlapping, in-between places, co-written and co-edited by writers working in tandem, rather than a collection of discrete passages of individual writings fused together, or written from the perspective of a solitary 'explorer'. Once discrete – but interpenetrating – subject areas had been identified, both writers worked on them concurrently, exchanging work in progress and redrafting each other's writing in order to shape the materials gathered during research. Research involved a combination of more traditional recourse to scholarly materials with the examination of materials from a wide range of archival sources: local council minutes, Forestry Commission reports, art gallery collections, Environment Agency reports, ornithological records. But it also – crucially – involved many site visits: a power station, a breaker's yard, a meteorological station, waste management and landfill facilities, retail parks, travel hotels and conference sites, allotment societies, coastal ruins. The combination of orthodox textual research with many physical site visits, ranging across a wide range of subject areas, helped create the book's eventual interdisciplinary character, which has been remarked upon.</p> <p><i>Edgelands</i> is part of a tradition of 'nature writing', but also a critique of such a tradition. It takes as its points of departure the work of radical naturalists such as Richard Mabey and environmentalist Marion Shoard, creating a discourse pitched between lyricism and polemic, that tests the boundaries between longstanding oppositions (such as pastoral and urban), encouraging and stimulating debate, both in a literary sense – the limits and province of 'nature writing' and the Romantic tradition – and also a social, political sense in its proposal of a new category of overlooked landscape and its value. It draws on artistic, literary, ecological and scientific sources to develop a clear, wide-ranging and accessible argument offering insights into our imaginative experience of a new kind of landscape that has previously been difficult to conceive of or name. The word 'edgelands' has encapsulated the book's ideas and entered the language, becoming a</p>

feature of the discourse surrounding writing on nature, landscape, ecology and planning. *Edgelands* specifically offers new ways of thinking about and viewing English landscape.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

Paul Farley and Michael Symmons-Roberts, *Edgelands* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011), pp. 272.

Research quality attested to by: Winner of the 2012 Foyles 'Best Book of Ideas', criteria for which included presentation of 'new, important and challenging ideas' and 'rigour'; nomination for the Royal Society of Literature Ondaatje Prize which 'is awarded annually to a book of the highest literary merit – fiction, non-fiction, poetry – evoking the spirit of a place'; positive reviews and citations.

4. Details of the impact

Edgelands has transformed contemporary understandings of landscape for a diverse range of readers, listeners, practitioners and organisations. Its impact is illustrated by its choice as winner of the 2012 Foyles 'Best Book of Ideas', a prize given 'to the book published in 2011 which presents new, important and challenging ideas, which is rigorously argued, and which is engaging and accessible'. In his public statement on the award, Foyles' Jonathan Ruppin described *Edgelands* as 'an ideal winner' because it 'exposes the startling wonder and resonant history of the landscapes we usually traverse so unthinkingly [...] surprises readers with insights into worlds that they might not even have known existed.'

A wide range of commentators have repeated this testimony to *Edgelands'* power to transform the ways in which its readers experience the world around them. *The Church Times* commented 'Few writers teach us to see the world afresh as Farley and Roberts do. They have imparted an original vision and blessed us with a beautiful book.' In choosing *Edgelands* as its 'Book of the Week', *The Sunday Telegraph* described it as 'eye-opening and hugely enjoyable ... An original, surprising and rather wonderful addition to our literature of place', while in *The Telegraph* Wendy Cope commented that 'this book has opened my eyes to all kinds of things I might not have noticed before'. Frances Spalding wrote in *The Independent* that Farley and Symmons-Roberts 'shake up our lazy perceptions of an aspect of England' and added 'Edgelands will gain imaginative significance as a result of this gem of a book.' *Edgelands* was included in several of the annual 'Books of the Year' lists in the media for 2011, including those of *The Observer*, *The Spectator* and blogs such as the *Intelligent Economist*, and it was featured in several of *The Guardian* readers' lists of Best Books of 2011. The book was one of 6 nominees for the Royal Society of Literature Ondaatje Prize which 'is awarded annually to a book of the highest literary merit – fiction, non-fiction, poetry – evoking the spirit of a place' and Farley was nominated for the 'Writer of the Year' award in the 2012 BBC *Countryfile Magazine* Awards.

Edgelands has been widely disseminated through national media. Its significance and reach are illustrated by the wide coverage it has generated. The book was serialised as a BBC Radio 4 *Book of the Week* in April 2011, gaining an audience of 3 million listeners, while it was the cited inspiration for an episode of BBC Radio 4's *Open Country* devoted to the idea of 'edgelands' in our landscape. *Edgelands* has been the subject of extended reviews (*New Statesman* and *Guardian*), features (*Independent* and *Time Out*) and interviews on BBC Radio 4's *The Today Programme* and BBC Radio 3's *Night Waves*. It was reviewed in *The Times*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Guardian*, *The Financial Times*, *The Sunday Telegraph*, *The Independent*, *The Sunday Times*, *Observer*, *Scotland on Sunday*, *New Statesman*, *The Economist*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The Church Times*, *The Spectator*, *Evening Standard*, *Prospect Magazine*, *Metro* and *Condé Nast Traveller Magazine*. Farley has further heightened the impact of his research through several high-profile and prestigious public readings and discussions of *Edgelands* including the Roscoe Lecture (St George's Hall, Liverpool 2013), Writing on the Wall Festival (Liverpool, 6th November 2012), Manchester Literature Festival (Manchester, 15th October 2012), Oxford Literary Festival (Oxford, 28th March 2012), Wordsworth Trust (Grasmere, 21st January 2012), Bristol Festival of Ideas (Bristol, December 2011), Durham Book Festival (Durham, 19th October 2011) and Cheltenham

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Literature Festival (Cheltenham, 12th October 2011).

Edgelands' influential re-evaluation of landscape is seen in the way in which it has informed major recent assessments of place. For example, reviewing the British Library's 'Writing Britain: Wastelands to Wonderlands' exhibition (May to September 2012) in *The Guardian*, Blake Morrison commented that 'The out-of-the-way and overlooked are the subject of Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts's book of last year ... The notion of edgelands has left its mark on the British Library exhibition.' Similarly, The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge mounted an exhibition of contemporary prints entitled 'Edgelands' from March to September 2012 that sought 'to inspire ideas about "edgelands" - the forgotten, overlooked places neither city nor countryside, on the urban edge'. The global reach of Farley's research is illustrated by the exhibition 'Edgelands' staged at the POP Gallery, Brisbane, Australia (October to November 2012), which was directly 'inspired' by reading Farley's and Symmons-Roberts' book.

The book *Edgelands* and the landscape concept it defines have now become regular reference points in contemporary discussions of landscape. For example, *Edgelands* was heavily cited in an article in *The Guardian* (3rd February 2012) by Xan Brooks, on the strange allure of broken-down deserted places, and in an essay by Brian Dillon in *The Guardian* (18th February 2012) on the cultural fascination with ruins. The increasing use of the term edgelands is demonstrated by Andy Beckett's review of Jonathan Meades' *Museum Without Walls*, in which he talks of 'English authors examining their country's once-ignored "edgelands", as they are now fashionably known.'

Edgelands' impact has been across a range of areas and fields. It is now included on several academic reading lists for courses on Architecture and Landscape Planning as well as Literature and Geography. Its value for practitioners is indicated by the comments of the *Architects Journal* (which describes itself as the 'voice of architecture in Britain') that the book is 'generously interdisciplinary, and beckons, not least, towards the spatial arts and professions'. The research is also influencing the policies and work of major organisations, such as the 'Campaign to Protect Rural England' who invited Farley to participate in a seminar on 'Edgelands: Unofficial Countryside' in November 2012. The book has been widely discussed from a range of the perspectives on the blogosphere, with one blogger, for example, writing that 'As a waste-management professional, I was particularly struck by the essay on landfill. I have never come across such an accurate evocation of "the end of the road" for our consumerist society'. *Edgelands* has informed the establishment and ethos of an organisational development practitioner, 'Edgelands Consultancy', with the book providing the company's name and the inspiration for a 'new and fresh slant' on organisational development, 'finding new possibilities, success and opportunity through understanding and working with their edgelands'.

Edgelands is clearly influencing the way in which people understand and experience landscape; for example, it has inspired a range of guided and individual walks, including an 'Edgelands' walk organised as part of the Hay Festival, and cycle rides such as the Sheffield Friday Night Ride. The overall impact of Farley's research is summed up by the following website comment: 'In short, a book which I treasure to the point that it has changed the way I assess and judge the "edgelands" of my town.'

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

All comments quoted above can be found at the following websites

<http://www.ideasfestival.co.uk/2012/news/bristol-festival-of-ideas-prize-evening-2012-winners-announced/>

<http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2011/18-march/reviews/book-reviews/theophany-under-the-flyover>

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/8313764/Edgelands-by-Michael-Symmons-Roberts-and->

[Paul-Farley-review.html](#)

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/8579638/Summer-Reading.html>

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/edgelands-journeys-into-englands-true-wilderness-by-paul-farley-and-michael-symmons-2224516.html>

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/dec/29/readers-books-of-the-year>

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/may/04/writing-britain-blake-morrison>

Edgelands: Press Release by Fitzwilliam Museum for exhibition by G. Shaw and M. Landy (2012)

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2012/feb/02/bombay-beach-ghost-town>

Architects Journal (Robin Wilson, 5/5/2011, Vol 233, Issue 16, p. p43-45)

<http://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/critics/edgelands-journeys-into-englands-true-wilderness/8614482.article>

<http://martin-stott.com/2012/11/edgelands-urban-agriculture-and-climate-camps-towards-a-future-of-prosperity-without-growth/>

<http://edgelandsconsultancy.com/>

<http://www.sfnr.org.uk/past-sheffield-fridaynightrides/20130315-edgelands-and-ghost-streets/>

<http://www.amazon.co.uk/product-reviews/0224089021>