

## The Condition of Cleveland

A cold mist clung to the ground that morning, obstinately chilling the skin. By the city church steps we hesitantly approached each other, three figures incongruous in our hiking boots: a photographer, an artist, a writer. We were waiting for a lift to Redcar, where we would be joining a dozen or more other artists and writers for a tour of the Eston Hills.

The journey south took us along the A19 over Middlesbrough; the bypass arching in cat-stretch above the metal and concrete apparatus of chemical works, just beyond the reach of the gridded industrial plain that stretches to the dull shimmer of the River Tees. Aldous Huxley visited the region in the early 1930s for *Vanity Fair* (he told his well-heeled readers that Middlesbrough resembled the growth of “staphylococcus in a test-tube of chicken broth”). He was awe-struck by the functional aesthetic of ICI, terming it “vast cooperative work of art.” The industrial landscape is currently visibly less industrious; the brutal concrete wears its neglect awkwardly, leering over busy ring-road retail parks.

Hours later, the morning’s mist had burnt off and we stood windswept in coastal sunshine on Redcar’s Eston Nab. In the distance we saw the churned-earth colours of Middlesbrough, careless browns and greys of heavy industry. Before us neat oblong fields in uniform green lay inland from Redcar’s own cooling towers. At this distance there was a certain stolid calmness in the monochrome industrial strip sandwiched between emerald fields and azure sea. The landscape was settled and at rest in its industrially etched skin.

The well-worn patchwork of the region belies the revolutionary transformations of its past. Mystic forces and microwaves, military threats and market opportunities led people to Eston Nab. Iron-age settlers built fortifications, Georgians kept watch for foreign invaders, Victorians thundered mines deep underground and mobile providers networked the town. We huddled against the wind by a ring of beacons – Napoleonic and telephonic – in the ruins of a fort on a hollowed-out hill.

Rain streaked darkly from distant landward clouds, steadily advancing. Weather turns quickly on such exposed land: coming up the hill we had ascended above the morning mist through a dappled wood of leafless winter birch, oak, sycamore and larch. The path had followed the route of the thousands of carts that raced down from the ironstone drift mine from the 1850s onwards.

The path we passed along brought to mind Verdun: all that the hill lacked was trenches stacked with concrete imitation-sandbags. A shower of blast holes were scattered beneath the quiet trees. It is hard to reconcile such violence with this all-too-English idyll, the sort that belongs only to an Orwellian or Lawrentian love-scene. Anxious to keep on schedule, we marched along an old tram track embankment, not pausing to regard the nests of parasitic mistletoe perched in treetops or the lichen and fungi sprouting from fallen boughs. We stopped instead by ventilation shafts of the ironstone mine, tramping business-like past unprotesting trees to halt by industrial artefacts.

The hill's trees, though bare, softened the landscape. They clothed the mine's ventilation shafts, and demurely shaded the Guibal fanhouse (known locally as the "SS Castle") without getting too close to its sinister concrete slats. The building has "S" shaped steel reinforcing bosses on its face, from which its local name is taken. Helpfully, locals have daubed swastikas on a wall in case anyone is left in doubt about the reference. According to our guide, in the mine's working days, it "was a ventilation shaft to draw foul air from the mine which would naturally be replaced by fresh air at the drift mine entrance." Nowadays, it houses a foul blocked-off hole some twenty-five metres long containing beer cans and rusted mattress springs, waste that is drawn into the fetid mine from the fresh air of the woodland.

Up close, this abandoned industrial fort is a far cry from the brutal towers of Middlesbrough's faded skyline. The thirty-seven foot fan is long gone. All that remains is an exoskeleton that filled with echoes as we stepped inside. Touring the industrial north during the Depression, J. B. Priestley had remarked of Tyneside, "if T. S. Eliot ever wants to write about a real wasteland, instead of a metaphysical one, he should come here..." Inside the concrete sepulchre, it struck me that Priestley was wrong. "Wasteland" designates where we put everything that has no other place, that which fits neither our taxonomies nor our dreams of order. Wasteland cannot be contained within a controlled urban environment, but nor does it belong to the non-human realm of organic nature – that which stands apart from human culture: it is that which is left behind. There is no escaping its metaphysical (not to mention mythic and psychic) properties. In a comprehensively mapped country that bears no wilderness in which humans have not already trodden, wasteland is where we lead our scapegoats, and from whence we therefore return unclean. The ground of the wasteland itself, a ground which has been ruthlessly exploited and can give no more, is itself turned out into the category of unknown wilderness: it is a space which generates its own narratives of intrusion and abandonment, blame and emptiness. Slumped and abandoned factories and fanhouses serve to remind us that wasteland is an organising category of thought.

Striding along muddy embankments we listened to the biography of a landscape and its people. Eston Nab is a graveyard, holding the dried bones of fanhouses and fossilised mineshafths. It is a quiet planted wood, where every step is along a contour line of innumerable histories. Wasteland is where we put everything that cannot find a place in our everyday order. But such ground is neither passive nor inert. Already in early March there were green shoots of growth in the undergrowth by the SS Castle. Returning to the old mining village where our walk began, the rain shower passed and the sun broke out. Spring is on its way.

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