

Foreword by
Dame Fiona Reynolds

*'Sensational.
An extraordinary
biography of a truly
extraordinary woman.'*

Maxine Peake

The biography
of countryside pioneer
Ethel Haythornthwaite

Ethel

Helen Mort



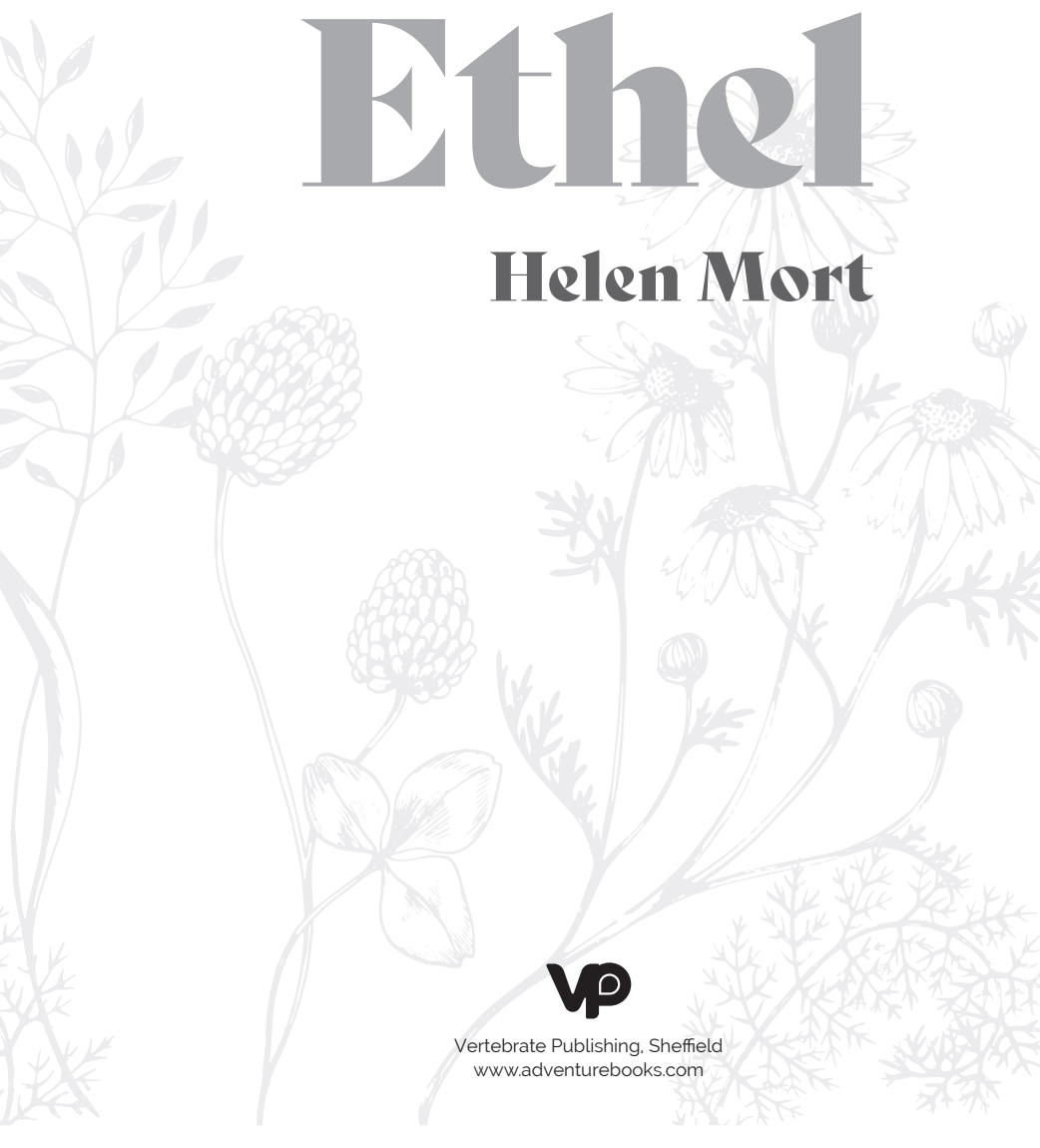
The biography
of countryside pioneer
Ethel Haythornthwaite

Ethel

Helen Mort



Vertebrate Publishing, Sheffield
www.adventurebooks.com



Ethel Helen Mort

First published in 2024 by Vertebrate Publishing.



VERTEBRATE PUBLISHING

Omega Court, 352 Cemetery Road, Sheffield S11 8FT, United Kingdom.

www.adventurebooks.com



Published in partnership with

CPRE Peak District and South Yorkshire.

www.cprepsy.org.uk

This biography was made possible by a generous legacy to CPRE Peak District and South Yorkshire from the estate of the late David Wilson – a supporter of the charity for over seventy years.

Copyright © Helen Mort 2024.

Foreword copyright © Fiona Reynolds 2024.

The Pride of the Peak by Ethel Bassett Gallimore was first published in 1926 by Jonathan Cape. It is reproduced here by permission of the trustees of CPRE Peak District and South Yorkshire, on behalf of the Haythornthwaite estate.

Extracts from *Thinking with Trees* by Jason Allen-Paisant (© Jason Allen-Paisant 2021, published by Carcanet Press) and *The Poems of Norman MacCaig* by Norman MacCaig (© the estate of Norman MacCaig 2009, published by Polygon, an imprint of Birlinn Ltd) are reproduced with permission of the Licensors through PLSclear.

Front cover: Ethel in her beloved Peak District.

Back cover: Ethel addressing a 1930s Ramblers' rally for access in Winnats Pass.

Photography and images © CPRE PDSY unless otherwise credited. All of the photographs credited to CPRE PDSY were sourced from their archives; in most cases the photographer cannot be readily identified.

Helen Mort has asserted her rights under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as author of this work.

This book is a work of non-fiction. The author has stated to the publishers that, except in such minor respects not affecting the substantial accuracy of the work, the contents of the book are true.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-85981-229-5 (Paperback)

ISBN: 978-1-85981-230-9 (Ebook)

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

All rights reserved. No part of this work covered by the copyright herein may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means – graphic, electronic, or mechanised, including photocopying, recording, taping or information storage and retrieval systems – without the written permission of the publisher.

Every effort has been made to obtain the necessary permissions with reference to copyright material, both illustrative and quoted. We apologise for any omissions in this respect and will be pleased to make the appropriate acknowledgements in any future edition.

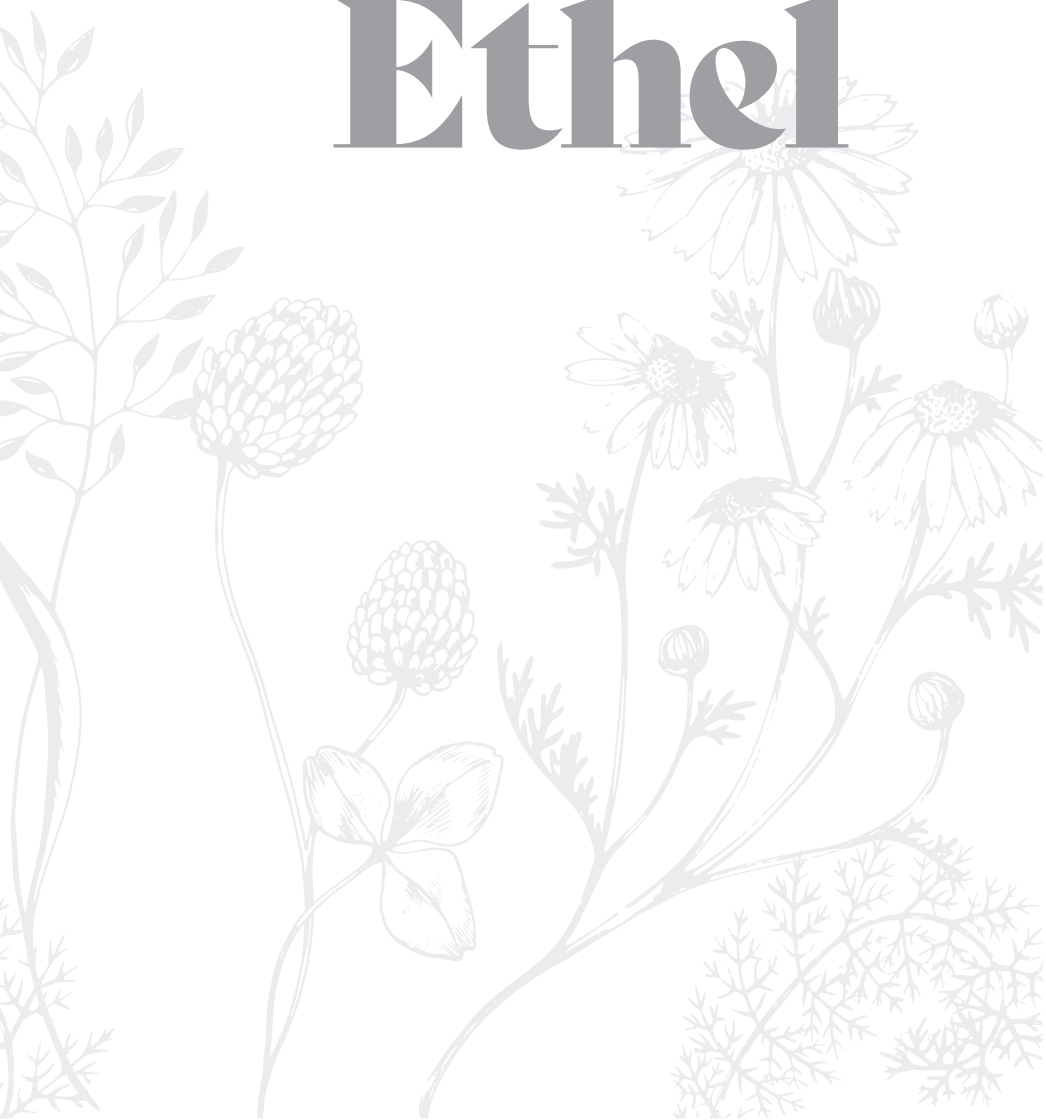
Vertebrate Publishing is committed to printing on paper from sustainable sources.

Printed and bound in the UK by TJ Books Limited, Padstow, Cornwall.

Contents

I <i>Ethel</i>	vii
Foreword by Dame Fiona Reynolds	xi
Prologue	1
An Opening	5
Endcliffe Vale	15
Aching Delight	27
Longshaw and Blacka Moor	37
The Threat to the Peak	51
Vast Architecture	61
The Belt	75
A National Park	87
Peace and Amber Light	103
Key Sources and Further Reading	109
Acknowledgements	111
II <i>The Pride of the Peak</i> by Ethel Bassett Gallimore	113

I Ethel



Foreword

There are tensions running cleverly, intriguingly, throughout this book. Tensions that evoke the gritty reality, complexity and sheer effort of the conservation task; a task that never stands still. In this frank, open and generous biography, Helen Mort gives us new insights into Ethel Haythornthwaite's remarkable life and work and poses some piercing questions for those inheriting her mantle.

First, there's Ethel herself. Born into wealth but possessing a deep sense of public purpose, thrift and unwavering commitment, she was a wondrous, spirited young woman who, widowed at twenty-two, found a redemptive mission in saving the countryside from the horrors of thoughtless suburbanisation. Not for Ethel loud protests: she was a letter writer, not a street fighter. But she was effective. First in stopping litter, then persuading city leaders not to allow houses to be built on Sheffield's beautiful fringes, then buying land (as at Longshaw, which she gave to the National Trust) to safeguard it forever. What she achieved was done through love: of place and of beauty, but also done *with* love. Having lost her beloved husband Henry Gallimore in the First World War tragically soon after their marriage, she threw herself into protecting the places that meant so much to her. Twenty years later she found her new helpmeet: architect and fellow campaigner Gerald Haythornthwaite, whom she married and with whom she thereafter fought her cause.

Then there are the tensions between Sheffield, the dark, industry-stained city, and Ethel's beloved Peak District: sometimes wild, sometimes friendly; always moody and glorious; and beautifully evoked here by Helen Mort. It's an inspiring landscape that refuses to be categorised, that is always changing yet exemplifies the continuity we yearn for. The turmoil of urban Sheffield versus the calm, aesthetic beauty of the Peak District runs like a continuous stream throughout this narrative, posing a burning set of contrasts, though Ethel forces us to connect them. Above all it raises questions

... what, in fact, is conservation? For whom and why do we care about beauty? Does beauty matter if there is no one left to enjoy it? Ethel's cause required the separation of town from country, to stop sprawl and protect the countryside, and her far-sighted campaign for the Sheffield green belt exemplifies her success. Today, it's clear we need the green belt more than ever, though it needs to work harder and achieve more in itself in the face of continuing pressures.

And third, the future. Ethel's cause was primarily and uncompromisingly aesthetic, stopping bad things from happening and persuading, through design guides and education, better standards among architects and builders. But today we know about deeper problems: the catastrophic decline in nature and public health, and the looming crisis of climate change. So, what lies ahead for Ethel's legacy and the continuing task of conservation when people's priorities seem ever more short-term, yet the long-term need for more sustainable solutions is ever more urgent? Once again, we find that she has laid the best possible foundations. The Peak District National Park for which she fought so hard now has a bigger role to play than she could possibly have imagined, as we look to our protected landscapes to find answers to complex interrelated problems like how to live and manage land sustainably, enable nature to recover, and enhance people's mental and physical well-being.

For organisations like CPRE who continue Ethel's 'genteel' fight, the judgemental language she and Gerald used to criticise poor development (*vulgar, shoddy, deplorable*) is no longer appropriate or acceptable. And we've certainly moved on from concerns about aesthetics to recognising a deeper definition of beauty as sustainability within a broader environmental framework. But in a world driven by instant gratification and materialism, I long for the clarity of Ethel's principled, clear and far-sighted approach. Notwithstanding her many successes, I think she'd be pretty horrified by the short distance we have travelled as a society in embracing her high and unremitting standards.

This warm, affectionate biography strikes a new note. Not reverence, not blind admiration, but curiosity explored, humanity contemplated, and all underpinned by love. A love shared between the author and Ethel for the beauty of the countryside around Sheffield but which now needs expanding to embrace an even deeper love for Sheffield itself, wherein we now know lie the solutions as well as many of the problems.

These people – Ethel and her many allies, some conscious, some

FOREWORD

unconscious – have made it possible for us to face the future with more confidence. We stand on her slender shoulders and derive strength from her ideals, but we must exert our own courage and imagination to respond to the greater challenges we face today. I salute Helen Mort for her original, honest and remarkable story of a woman whose legacy enables us all to seek a better future.

Dame Fiona Reynolds
Coates, Gloucestershire
December 2023

Ethel

What is this life that's stirring in my veins?

Just Stannage. Evening. What remains
is sky with the light burned out of it,
or rock with our touch gone from it.

Listen: a half-remembered story,
rooted like heather in the memory,
words said by the dead to the living,
repeated by the living to the dead.

(the wind through grass sounds like
instead instead instead instead)

What is this life... ?

If I find out, Ethel, I'll let you know.
My guesses move the way a paraglider
sews currents of air above Mam Tor.
Your voice. My voice. Nothing more

(the wind above the nothing, sweetest
nothing of the moors)

'... only earth's high beauties held me sane.'

Ethel Bassett Gallimore, 1926



Ethel, later in life, walking into Ecclesall Woods, part of the green belt she helped to create.

Prologue

*What is this life that's stirring in my veins?
The fire of morn, the firth to roam outdoors.
Nothing can hold me, nought my freedom reins,
I am mounting like a bird unto the moors ...*

(from *The Pride of the Peak* by Ethel Bassett Gallimore)

These words are climbing words. They are written to a heartbeat, the breath and footsteps of a young woman with winter-bark-coloured hair and sturdy boots. She goes lightly from rock to rock, sometimes almost skipping. We are watching her from a distance. We might not exist without her.

She is not alone: her sister Gertie is nearby, the chauffeur waiting in the family car back on the road. But she is making a path towards the lip of Stanage with her body. Leaning into the wind, she is italicised. All of her is a question: *what is this life? What is this life? What is this life?* She is unmoored in hers, a widow at the age of twenty-two. Grief has whittled her thin. But out here on the moor, even in harsh weather, she is grounded, a sapling with its roots in the earth. She puts one foot in front of the other. Her body is writing new sentences. All she must do is find the next word. Her name is Ethel. She is making her steady progress through the world.

Sheffield, summer 2023

Dear Guardian of the Peak –

Dear Ethel –

Dear Mrs Haythornthwaite –

You were a woman who understood the power of a letter: one heart to another, transmitted on paper. Something that could be held in the hand, the ink traced, the places where the pen left its grooves still visible. Letters come from the body, not just from the mind. You wrote them religiously, you answered them faithfully.

You wrote to persuade and to preserve, but you also wrote to tell people that they were held in your mind. It is there in the letters you received, watermarked with each kindness. From your niece, saying, 'thank you very much for the coat hangers, they are very, very beautiful and I am always short at school'. From Luisa, who wrote, 'thank you for the calendar with the fine view of the Langdale Pikes. We actually saw them from Lingmoor and also from the summit of Bow Fell ... How many lovely valleys owe their very existence to your gallant Fight For Beauty?' And it is there in a letter from the Lord Mayor of Sheffield, thanking you on behalf of the townspeople for your tireless work.

Summer in Sheffield, decades after your death. What am I supposed to do with these complicated riches? Hay fever and your legacy. A deadline, an empty screen and somebody butchering a tree streets away with a chainsaw, the air protesting loudly. I'm surrounded by paper. Minutes from your meetings. Posters and poetry. Summer drought, dry eyes, the grass on the suburban lawns bleaching outside.

I'm no biographer. But I am obsessed with the story of your life. I don't believe in nothing-but-the-truth, but I do believe in the whole truth, and that's something different. The whole truth is my feet under the desk, blistered from running skylines you knew like the ridges of your own knuckles. It's my tabby cat, leaping down from the shed roof and landing

awkwardly, righting itself with its tail, lemur-like – that way cats have of styling every movement out, making it seem intentional. Writing is like that. I think you know: your poetry is earnest and haunting, and its veins are full of place names, route maps, a litany of Derbyshire hills. I love that. I love how you are not afraid of unbridled praise; sometimes I think it isn't fashionable now.

The whole truth is that, as I type this, fires have been raging across Burbage Moor. The photographs were apocalyptic. Bloody skies, blackened ground. The truth is that much of what I can see if I run uphill from my house and don't stop until I'm at the edge of Houndkirk or Stanage is as wild and valued and exhilarating as it ever was, but the planet it lodges on, the planet I lodge on, is ailing, and we're all stupefied by complicity. I'm glad you didn't live to see that.

The whole truth is that we talk about 'unspoiled' places as if they exist, as if it's possible for us to be near them and not ruin them with our own needs. The truth is that even this way of writing is part of the problem, positioning us all as separate, distanced. The truth, I think, is that you always put yourself second, thought yourself less valuable than the Peak District. The truth is that nobody really knows how to do that any more; we wouldn't know even if our lives depended on it. And they do.

You wrote so many letters. You wrote to people, and you wrote to the landscape you loved. All your life, you addressed yourself to the Peak District. It only seems fair that we should write back to you now.

Yours faithfully –
Yours thankfully –
Yours for now –
Helen



Ethel in the grounds of Endcliffe Vale House, most likely in the war years.

An Opening

*Come climb, come wander, come and view a thing
More vast, unclenchable than aught before ...
(The Pride of the Peak)*

Ethel Haythornthwaite was a pioneer: an activist, a leader and a poet. But you can walk around her home town asking people if they've heard of her and be greeted by puzzled silence. 'Ethel who?'

We begin in the landscape Ethel grew up in: the centre of England, on the gritstone lip of Sheffield, home to over 580,000 people and countless more stories. It is a city whose place in the public imagination has been shaped by steelworks, by buffer girls, by cutlery and by *The Full Monty*; known for its proximity to moors and rock-climbing destinations, hills and dales, neat villages, the extraordinary variety of neighbouring Derbyshire. A green city, a city of direct action, fights to defend street trees. Half the preserve of Arctic Monkeys' first album and half the wildness fought for in the Kinder mass trespass of 1932.

'My God, how does one write a Biography?' Virginia Woolf once asked, words that would haunt those who tried, like her acclaimed biographer Hermione Lee. How does anyone begin? Is it audacious to even try? If this is to be an account of Ethel Haythornthwaite, it is also an account of the Peak District, the landscape she saw herself utterly entwined with. Then where does the Peak District begin? Addressing each question only reveals another. In *The Threat to the Peak*, published in 1931, Ethel would write:

It is perhaps best to approach the Peak District from the south. We can thus observe, as we traverse it to its northern limit, the increasing wildness of the landscape. Nature gradually reasserts herself and man's dominance declines until we reach the high moors where she is still in undisputed possession, and where the struggle for life is waged on a scene and greater scale and among elemental conditions

of greater intensity than those that prevail in the warmer and more sheltered parts.

There is a sense here of the Derbyshire landscape intensifying, growing into itself almost. As a child in Chesterfield, I would have first approached that landscape from the south-east side of what is now the national park, noticing how the undulations became rocky waves. The journey north-west across to the Snake Pass when we travelled to my grandparents' house in Oldham certainly felt imbued with a sense of growing drama, from sheep-grazed fields to misty tops beyond the reservoir at Ladybower. I always longed to get out of the car and run into the ominous, hammered-silver sky.

As an adult, as someone who has written about Derbyshire obsessively in fiction and poetry, who has climbed and walked and run marathons across the breadth of it, I no longer see the Peak District as something which 'begins'. If I try to think of it, I see the road between grit-encircled Hathersage and Sheffield. As you leave the Hope Valley and the road flattens near Surprise View, there's a *Welcome to Sheffield* sign. Soon after, another that says, *Welcome to Derbyshire*. A little further down the road and you pass *Welcome to Sheffield* again. You are weaving in and out of a defined landscape, one whose definition has acquired almost sacred significance, passing through these hallowed borders in an almost nonchalant way.

John Ruskin's famous caricature of Sheffield city as 'a dirty picture in a golden frame' is a beguiling one, but it no longer rings true either, however apt it may have been in South Yorkshire's industrial heyday. My objection is not just to the 'dirty picture' (Sheffield in 2024 is a map of green space as well as a hive of industries). This 'frame' is not golden and fixed. It is the spreading bruise of purple autumn heather and the mottled greys of wet limestone. It is light touching the early morning water at Redmires; how the whole scene changes in an instant, from thick mist to sudden, clarifying sun. It might 'surround' Sheffield, but it is permeable. The city and the moors bleed into one another, mixed watercolours. There is a constant exchange between them, osmosis. The city returns the glance of the countryside and vice versa. They are porous. It is a dynamic which requires compassion, responsibility and a degree of regulation – an understanding that urban and rural spaces influence each other.

The extraordinary life of Ethel Haythornthwaite is emblematic of that complex porosity. She drew on an industrial family fortune and the social networks of the city to protect and preserve the 'wild' places of Derbyshire.

The 'dirty picture' reinforcing the 'golden frame'. In turn, she was partially motivated by wanting to maintain the rich natural resources and unique spaces of the Peak District for city people, for the returning heroes of the Second World War. In a sense, there was no separation. The binary of rural and urban can be unhelpful. Our fates are intertwined: an idea which is returning to popular discourse as we contemplate the bleak effects of our current climate emergency.

This book is not a straight line. Its edges are permeable too. It is an account of one restless woman looking for another, in the imprints under Burbage Edge, in the flow of the river at Froggatt, under the thin veil of night that falls in winter over the Longshaw Estate, when the stars make moorland frost glitter with spectral promise. It is something like the flexible boundary between the crucible of Sheffield, forged by hot metal, and the land around it. To return to Ruskin's dirty picture, it is the places where the gold rubs off on the canvas, casting it in a different light, at least for a second.

Who was Ethel Haythornthwaite and why do I owe my whole life as I know it to her? She was, as all interesting people are, myriad. She was a poet and a philanthropist, gentle and fierce, a quiet revolutionary who has been overlooked by history. She was motivated by grief and by hope. She was a Methodist who attended seances. She was an advocate and a diplomat, a sister and a friend, a woman who kept an orderly house but hated domestic work. She came from wealth, but she was frugal. She was interested in legacy, but lived for the immediacy of walking on Stanage, lines of poetry swarming in her head. She was restless and infinitely patient. Perhaps I should not think of myself as answering my question but hers: *what is this life that's stirring in my veins?*

In Matthew Kelly's book *The Women Who Saved the English Countryside*, he identifies four key figures in the protection of landscape: Sylvia Sayer, Octavia Hill, Beatrix Potter and Pauline Dower. Everything that Kelly says of his four pioneers was also true of Ethel:

Without their work, more land would be enclosed, more land would be built on, more footpaths and access to open spaces would have been lost.

Like Ethel, 'the four were convinced that the experience of urbanisation and industrialisation alienated humanity from nature, having a terrible effect on human well-being, diminishing our capacity to even recognise our

unhappiness'. As such, they 'advocated forms of environmental citizenship that identified land as public goods from which flow collective rights'.

It's here that I imagine Ethel Haythornthwaite leaning over my shoulder and muttering, 'and responsibilities. Don't forget those.' Like Ethel, they all came from privileged economic backgrounds. Like Ethel, they were all artists; this doesn't surprise me, since art connects us to the embodied self, the non-abstracted body and therefore to the land, what Nan Shepherd recognised in her prose as:

Walking thus, hour after hour, the senses keyed, one walks the flesh transparent. But no metaphor, transparent, or light as air, is adequate. The body is not made negligible, but paramount. Flesh is not annihilated but fulfilled. One is not bodiless, but essential body.

Essential body, essential breath. Ethel was a woman who 'saved' the British countryside too. But she is difficult to categorise, difficult to capture, mysterious to us. Perhaps this makes her even more compelling. That she achieved what she achieved with a female body, subject to regulation and comment and constraint, is even more remarkable. Ethel lived between 1894 and 1986 and was doing some of her most vital work between the 1930s and 1960s. In her account of the life of poet Sylvia Plath, Heather Clark contextualises the hill that a woman with public aspirations had to climb even in the 1950s. She describes a speech given by Democratic candidate Adlai Stevenson at Plath's 1955 Smith commencement, titled 'A Purpose for Modern Woman'. The best way that female arts graduates could contribute to society, Stevenson argued, was to embrace 'the humble role of housewife, which, statistically is what most of you are going to be whether you like it or not'. Stevenson (considered a liberal in his day) went on to elaborate:

This assignment for you as wives and mothers has great advantages. In the first place, it is home work – you can do it in the living room with a baby in your lap or a can opener in your hand. If you're really clever, maybe you can even practice your saving arts on that unsuspecting man while he's watching television.

He acknowledged that the women might feel a sense of 'lost horizons' in this vocation: 'once they wrote poetry ... now it's the laundry list ... They had hoped to play a part in the crisis of the age. But what they do is

wash diapers.’ He concluded archly, hoping that his view was not ‘too depressing’ and adding that ‘women never had it so good as you do.’

This was 1955. There are many statistics, many quotes that could be used to illustrate the social position of women at the time and the expectations for their role in public life, but this one seems the starkest because it was a message delivered to new female graduates. Plath, as Clark puts it, ‘took herself and her desires seriously in a world that often refused to do so.’ The same could be said of Ethel Haythornthwaite, across the Atlantic. This is not to say that Ethel would have regarded herself as particularly pioneering: this is the privilege of the passage of time, the gift of overview and hindsight; we recognise her impact on our age. Ethel was a woman of remarkable foresight, her focus on preserving the future, in laying solid foundations. She was elegiac in her prose, but she was never backward-looking. Like all of us, she was mostly consumed by the day-to-day process of living, of staying alive.

In writing a spoof biography of a friend of hers, Virginia Woolf described herself as a ‘bio-or-mytho-grapher’. We are all mythographers, even when the subject is ourselves: we are shrouded in stories, in claims and counter-claims. Since ‘a self that goes on changing is a self that goes on living’, a good biography ‘is the record of things that change rather than of the things that happen’. Any life-writer must navigate the gap between the public self and the secret self. Somewhat playfully, Woolf instructed:

Facts have their importance – but that is where the biography comes to grief. The biographer cannot extract the atom. He gives us the husk. Therefore as things are, the best method would be to separate the two kinds of truth. Let the biographer print fully, completely, accurately, the known facts without comment; Then let him write the life as fiction.

We all become somewhat fictionalised after we die. The condolence letters sent to Ethel’s partner after her passing become part of her mythology. A friend observed that she was ‘like Emily, in Branwell’s portrait of the three Brontë sisters’. Pauline Dower, herself a national parks champion, praised her ‘keen and intelligent eye’ and her ‘steady and unremitting work’. Sylvia Sayer, of Dartmoor fame, said that Ethel was ‘an example to us all’. Cath Mac-Kay from the Sheffield branch of the Ramblers’ Association wrote: ‘those who never had the pleasure of meeting her felt an acute sense of missed opportunity’. In his letter of April 1986, Maurice Kay praised her eloquence,

wherein she could express any feeling to anyone so very exactly that no shadow of doubt remained ... couched in such carefully chosen, benign terms that even the most out and out miscreant couldn't fail to warm to her chiding.

Perhaps the most plaintive tribute comes from a letter from Mrs Mary Moss, who simply lamented:

why don't we have more people like Ethel to bring order, beauty and love to life?

What would Ethel Haythornthwaite have thought of the notion of a book about her life and love of the Peak District? From my fleeting glimpse into her way of being in the world, I think she'd urge, 'don't write about me, write about the ever-present threats to the land'. She was willing to be in the background, doing vital legacy work that looked to the future of the organisation that would become the Sheffield branch of the Campaign to Protect Rural England. Maybe she would be standing on Devonshire Green with my teenage stepdaughter and all the other activists on the climate strike. Or perhaps she'd urge me to step away from my laptop and set off through Endcliffe Park and Bingham Park and out past Forge Dam, pass through the trees at Lady Canning's Plantation and find a remarkable stone on the exposed moorland, to contemplate its vantage point, its relationship to the things around it, the shadows it casts and the brief shadow I cast on it, human imposter, passing through and finding myself improved by the slant of things.

AN OPENING



An early portrait of the young Ethel Ward.