

Haunted by waters

MADOC CAIRNS

Fen, Bog and Swamp
ANNIE PROULX

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OCEANS CAN be charted; land can be cultivated; forests can be pruned and even cleared; but between humans and wetlands exists, always, a state of undeclared war. Swamps, marshes, fens: they can be subdued or submitted to, but never lived with. Alongside geographic extremes of temperature and altitude, wetlands are solitary inheritors of the pre-human world. The last, lonely outposts of the unconquered earth.

It's unsurprising, therefore, as Annie Proulx describes in *Fen, Bog and Swamp*, that we should hate them. Land that can't be traversed, waters that can't be plumbed, forests without soil. "Wilderness is the spatial correlative of unreason," writes one historian: "of madness, of the unhuman anarchy that informs so many folk tales emphasising the ephemeral stability of Christianity, society and agriculture."

That shadow of madness – the taint of the ambiguous and amphibious – makes wetlands fitting alembics for the compound, circular unmaking of climate change. Sequestered CO2, long hoarded by rainforest and peat bog, escapes under the ungentle ministrations of farmers and ranchers. Three stubborn centuries of constant effort drained the fenlands of England; two years of war dried the storied marshes of Iraq. Triumph to disaster, and worse. Retreating swamplands in prospect spelt prosperity; in hindsight, they presaged doom.

Proulx compasses all this through her own life, thrilled and frightened in turn by the mystery of swamps and waterlands. She is, quoting Norman Maclean's *A River Runs Through It*, "haunted by waters". We all are, she thinks. Looking into the history, and the likely future, of the world's great wetlands, hers is a bleak prognosis: "If your delight is in contemplating landscapes and wild places," she writes, "the sweetness will be laced with

PHOTO: US EMBASSY AND CONSULATES IN CANADA



Annie Proulx

ever-sharpening pain."

Proulx could end there: a vivid, time-honed prose stylist, and an adept storyteller, she's more than capable of adding to, even dominating, the well established microgenre of climate-change-lament, a mix of sentiment and inanition. But where others find a niche, Proulx plants a launchpad. *Fen, Bog and Swamp* tells us what we've done to the natural world and asks, also, why we've done it.

The answer, for Proulx, lies somewhere in the bounds of the human psyche, conditioned by Judaeo-Christian culture to hold the earth as a tool. Indigenous peoples manage some kind of compromise, even a fragile symbiosis, with the wetlands. Spilling out from Europe – itself dammed, drained, farmed into erosion and infertility – the imperial West had no such aspirations. When proposals are raised to restore sections of Ohio's long-dead Great Black Swamp, Ohians respond, a century on from the swamp's demise, with fear, unease, hatred.

The deep feelings stirred in us by wetlands, the sensation of being "haunted by waters" that Proulx repeatedly returns to, are bound up with what they represent: the collapse of definition and categories, the ultimate absence of control over nature. Wetlands are windows to the primeval, time on an inhuman scale. Learning of peat's origins, Proulx experiences "a shiver of recognition of the constant and deep currents of endless change, of distant rainfall becoming maniacal flood, of sucking drought, of call and response in every fibre, grain and atom of every thing."

Those currents continue to flow. As glaciers melt and coasts retreat, new wetlands spile around our changing world. With them they carry love and hatred, baggage from their human histories. And they carry a singular truth. Nature isn't a place but a process; it can be known, but not controlled. Proulx ends, appropriately enough, in ambiguity. One day soon, she writes, "we'll all be haunted by waters".