

## 7 The Sands of Dee

### Estuarine excursions in liminal space

*Les Roberts*

*Come friendly bombs...*  
(John Betjeman)

#### Decoys, oblivion, modern nature

During the Second World War the port city of Liverpool on the Mersey Estuary was the target of frequent bombing raids by the Luftwaffe. The city's strategic importance meant that Liverpool and nearby locations such as Bootle and Birkenhead suffered some of the heaviest bombing in the UK, second only to London in the scale of its devastation and human toll. As part of military efforts to mitigate the impact of the bombing, decoys were established on and around the Wirral peninsula, including several at locations on the Dee Estuary. The most northerly of these was situated on Hilbre, one of the three rocky islands at the mouth of the estuary. Others included Heswall decoy, designed to trick the Luftwaffe pilots into thinking they were bombing the north docklands area of Liverpool, and, further south along the Wirral side of the estuary, Burton Marsh decoy, which was a decoy for Garston Docks in the south of Liverpool. During the hours of darkness this flat expanse of marshland, stretching out towards the mud flats and river on the far side of the estuary in North Wales, was transformed into a littoral space of performance. Rigged up with poles, wires, electric lights and bonfires the marshland terrain, with its tangle of gullies and ponds, reflected the dance of illumination up into the night sky, creating the smoke and mirrors illusion of a populous industrial landscape plunged into incendiary chaos.<sup>1</sup>

If the aerial perspective framed an ostensibly cartographic space of illusion, views of the marshland decoy obtainable at ground level were of a landscape reconstructed (re-staged) as *mise-en-scène*. Indeed, in the absence of photographic evidence it is as a film set that this historical spectacle offers itself up to the imagination: a space of artifice that could just as well have been presided over by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger (of whom more later) as by a military strategist. The allusion to cinema in relation to the bomb decoys is rendered all the more persuasive by the fact that these 'fields of deception' were

developed with the help of technicians from the film industry (Dobinson 2000: 25–8). Decoy sites such as Burton Marsh have attracted the interests of military archaeologists, who, picking over any surviving structures and relics help map a hitherto little known geography of Britain's wartime heritage. Yet it is precisely the performative attributes of these landscapes – their material and symbolic architectures of oblivion and memory; the heterotopic invocation of other worlds: other spaces and times – that makes them so compelling. In this regard the decoy may be looked upon as a metonym for the Dee Estuary more generally. Accordingly, it is as a space of performance – a liminal zone of myth, ritual and practice – that I have set out to navigate this landscape (textually, historically and geographically); selected tracings of which form the basis of this chapter.

The example of the Burton Marsh and other estuary bomb decoys is also instructive insofar as it draws attention to another defining characteristic of the estuarine landscape: its inherent marginality. Perched on the edge of the land, away from populated urban areas and straddling built and natural environments (and sea and land), the impact of bombing raids on the Dee Estuary (unlike the Mersey Estuary) would, of course, have been comparatively minimal. More pointedly, the example brings with it the observation that the capacity of a landscape to invite and *accommodate* oblivion – whether in terms of aerial bombardment, military testing, landfill and waste management sites, or environmentally high-risk industries, such as nuclear and other power generating plants, for example – represents one of the measures by which to gauge its status as *liminal* in the terms elaborated here. The perceived or actual threat of danger, contagion or what Mary Douglas (1966) described as 'matter out of place' powerfully underscores the sense of an unstable and precarious landscape. Navigation or (in an inversion of the transitory properties of liminal spaces) *habitation* carries with it the elemental risk of injury or death. In the case of the Dee Estuary, this zonal uncertainty is further reinforced by the instability of a hazardous 'natural' topography comprised of marshland and intertidal mud and sand flats.

Given that much of the estuarine landscape is the product of human intervention on a grand scale (particularly that of Nathaniel Kinderley's River Dee Company – see below), the extent to which it can indeed be described as natural is a moot point. As a partly reclaimed landscape, a product of industrial engineering, it is more instructive to look upon the Dee Estuary (or at least those elements that are of concern here) as an exemplar of what artist and filmmaker Derek Jarman (after Maggi Hambling) describes as 'modern nature' (1992: 8). Jarman is referring to the quintessential liminal landscape that is Dungeness: a huge shingle bank (the largest in Europe) on the south east coast of England where Jarman lived until his death in 1994. Dominated by the brooding presence of the nuclear power station, with large stretches of the beach and adjoining marshland (marked 'Danger Area' on the map) used for military training, and a vast canvas of sky bearing down on the land, topologically Dungeness bears some resemblance to the sprawling estuarine landscapes of the Dee: the 'empty' spaces in-between the coastlines of Wirral (in England) and Flintshire (in North

Wales). Take a walk around Burton Marsh today and, while it is unlikely that you would be exposing yourself to the threat of aerial bombardment, you might unwittingly find yourself dodging stray bullets from the nearby Ministry of Defence Rifle Range at Sealand (a place that toponymically references its liminal status). Trudge a circuitous path across the marsh in the direction of the river and sooner or later you'll discover the contingent geography that governs this space: linearity has little or no application here; in this environment wayfinding defines a temporality not a geography: routes (such as there are) are as tangible as the footprints (and accompanying squelches) that dissolve into the marshland almost as soon as the next one is made. Look south towards Flintshire Bridge, the vertical landmark that lays totemic claim to the Deeside region, and it is an industrial landscape that dominates: Connah's Quay Power Station on the south side of the River Dee, and Deeside Power Station and Corus Steelworks to the north. If you make it across the marsh to the main road that serves the industrial zone you will find yourself gravitated towards the cable-stayed crossing over the Dee, only to find that this too is something of a non-place as pedestrians are prohibited to cross.

In short, this is a landscape that inhibits dwelling, lingering, or even navigation. If its transformative energies translate to, on the one hand, the abstract mobilities of the river crossing (the bridge was described by one local resident as a 'road to nowhere'<sup>2</sup>), and, on the other, the threat (or allure) of danger, death



*Figure 7.1* 'Wayfinding': Burton Marsh looking south-west towards Connah's Quay Power Station, showing GPS tracks (in white) of walk by the author, November 2010.

and oblivion (the ‘off-road’ excursions through marshland terrain), then to what extent can we meaningfully describe the estuary as a liminal space?

Exploring more closely the social, cultural and historical geography of the Dee Estuary we can see how structures of liminality have remained deeply embedded in the topography of the region. First, it is a borderzone between England and Wales, and politics of identity and territoriality have played a formative role in shaping the landscape, as indeed have the many routes and connections that have defined and *refined* its relational geographies. Second, much of the physical landscape may be described as liminal insofar as it is land reclaimed from the river and marshland by canal engineers in the eighteenth century, some parts of which are under threat of re-reclamation by the Dee as the estuarine ecology changes and the wetlands reassert their authority over the dry. A further liminal characteristic of this landscape, one that interlaces the borderzone and ‘sea-land’ liminalities, is the interstitial zone that marks the limen or threshold between the living and the dead. Oblivion, as Marc Augé reminds us, is the negation of memory: ‘[r]emembering or forgetting is doing gardener’s work, selecting, pruning’ (2004: 17). In order to remember it is necessary at the same time to forget. Liminal rites of transition – and by extension the spaces in which they are practised – provide the possibilities of a *strategic amnesia* by which, paradoxically, an archaeology of deep memory may be performed. Cultivating a (spatial) dialogue between the living and the dead – between the estuarine wayfarers of the past and those of the present – the place or *topos* of the liminal is explored here through topoanalytic (Bachelard 1994) reflection on the act and trope of *drowning*.

## The Sands of Dee

*O Mary, go and call the cattle home  
And call the cattle home,  
And call the cattle home  
Across the sands of Dee  
The western wind was wild and dank with foam,  
And all alone went she.*  
(Charles Kingsley, ‘The Sands of Dee’, 1849)

Working on ideas for a music video for the Manchester band New Order, in 1988 the American film producer Michael Shamberg approached the legendary British director Michael Powell – by then well into his eighties – to see if he would be interested in directing the video. Powell expressed interest in the project, and proposed the idea of a short film based around Charles Kingsley’s poem ‘The Sands of Dee’. The poem tells the tragic tale of a cattle girl called Mary who ventures out onto the sands of the estuary and is overtaken by the tides and drowned, her body later found caught amongst the fishing nets. In preparation for the film Powell and his wife, the film editor Thelma Schoonmaker, went on a location scout to the Dee Estuary, but, due to delays in the

production and Powell's subsequent death, the film was never made. Powell's preference for casting the actress Tilda Swinton in the role of the cattle girl Mary – he described the close up of Swinton dead in the salmon nets as being 'box office'<sup>3</sup> – provides an indication that, had it been completed, the film would have owed some debt to the work of one of British film's heirs to Powell's legacy, Derek Jarman. Whether the brownfield sites and edgelands of the River Thames in 1988's *The Last of England* (in which Swinton performs an apocalyptic dance against the burning backdrop of a city doomed by Thatcherism) or the vast shingle expanse of Dungeness in *The Garden* (1990) – the setting for a contemporary retelling of the Passion – Jarman's films often inhabit liminal landscapes in which the performative presence of Tilda Swinton is a recurrent element.

In *Blue*, Jarman's final feature released shortly before his death in 1994, the metaphor of drowning – of dwelling for eternity in 'submarine gardens' – is woven into a poetic meditation on the imminence (and immanence) of death, the final breaching of the limen between presence and oblivion: *Deep waters/Washing the isle of the dead/In coral harbours.../Across the still seabed/We lie there/Fanned by the billowing/Sails of forgotten ships/Tossed by the mournful winds/Of the deep*. While Powell's interest in Kingsley's poem and the landscape that inspired it may have been similarly bound up with a growing sense of mortality, it is more instructive to attribute it to the director's long-standing fascination with the Old Testament story of Moses and the parting of the Red Sea.<sup>4</sup> As a visual motif, the image of the sea as an epic, portentous force that at any moment might engulf an otherwise insignificant humanity appears in several of Powell and Pressburger's films: in *The Red Shoes*, for example, the centrepiece performance of 'The Ballet of the Red Shoes' is at one point flooded with crashing waves (Conrad 1992); in *I Know Where I'm Going* 'the epic drama of the Corryvreckan whirlpool' was inspired, as Ian Christie (2001) notes, by Cecil B. DeMille's 1923 portrayal of the parting of the Red Sea in *The Ten Commandments*. But perhaps the most striking example can be found in *The Elusive Pimpernel*, made in 1950. Temporarily holed up in the abbey at the island of Mont St Michel in Normandy, the Pimpernel/Sir Percy Blakeney (played by David Niven) is planning his escape back across the Channel with his latest consignment of aristocratic asylum seekers. Strategically deploying the forces of nature, he tricks his arch nemesis Chauvelin (Cyril Cusack) and the advancing forces of the French Republic by timing his escape just as the tide is coming in, cutting off Mont St Michel from the mainland and engulfing the army as they attempt to apprehend the Pimpernel before he makes his escape.

From a contemporary perspective, the association between asylum seekers and metaphors of water and the sea is more likely to connote negative attitudes surrounding immigration policy. The fear of being 'swamped' or 'flooded', rhetoric frequently deployed in right-wing British newspapers such as the *Daily Mail* and the *Sun*, draws on these metaphorical associations to present a view of the nation as a bastion community struggling to maintain the sanctity of its borders from forces beyond its immediate power to control. The strengthening of



Figure 7.2 'Welcome to Poland': the River Dee at Saltney on the England/Wales border.

national frontiers of identity (a logic which 'goes against the tide' of transnational mobility and increased global flows), as with environmental efforts to prevent coastal erosion and the encroachment of the sea, becomes essentially a reactive and defensive exercise, predicated on the management or containment of 'otherness'. It is not the spirit of the Pimpernel that pervades the liminal landscapes of millennial Britain, but a Canute-like denial of the borderzone as a porous space of flows and 'radical openness' (hooks 1990).

Viewed in the aftermath of the death of 23 Chinese migrant workers in Morecambe Bay in February 2004, Powell and Pressburger's magnificent set-piece of Mont St Michel mnemonically evokes a more tragic *mise-en-scène*, where the confluent themes of migrancy and drowning have soberingly literal connotations. Located on the north west coast of England in Lancashire, Morecambe Bay is notorious for its fast moving tides and treacherous quicksand, as well as its lucrative cockle beds. Despite the dangers posed by this stretch of coastline the Bay has long attracted itinerant workers, many of whom, as with the Chinese cockle pickers, were (until the introduction of the 2004 Gangmasters Act<sup>5</sup>) at the mercy of exploitative and illegal gangmasters. While the Morecambe Bay incident brought to light the appalling conditions faced by these migrant workers, it also forced an awareness of the extent to which such groups are an invisible but immutable presence, occupying a ghostly liminal zone on the social and geographic margins of the nation; caught in the interstices of transnational space.



Prior to 2004 hundreds of cockle pickers were drawn to the sandbanks of the Dee Estuary, which, like Morecambe Bay also boasts a thriving cockling industry. Working in similarly hazardous conditions, the pickers now harvest the banks in more sustainable numbers, although there are still tensions between local cocklers and those from outside the area, and unlicensed cockling remains rife. In an effort to control cockle picking in the estuary, the Environment Agency use so-called 'Cockle Cams' to monitor cockling teams. Heat-sensor searches by police helicopter have also been used to locate unlicensed pickers working the cockle beds at night (Butler 2008; Wainwright 2010).

*The western tide crept up along the sand,  
And o'er and o'er the sand,  
And round and round the sand,  
As far as eye could see.  
The rolling mist came down and hid the land:  
And never home came she.*

Had it been written today, Kingsley's poem 'The Sands of Dee' might well have recounted the tale of a cockle picker rather than a cattle girl. Either way, as a lyrical reflection on a landscape in which poor and marginal groups have for centuries eked out a precarious living, and through which individuals of all classes once travelled along the many fords that snaked across the sands, the poem sketches the outlines of a deep topography that has long been shaped by the omnipresent threat of drowning.

### Cestrian Book of the Dead

Straddling the England–Wales border near the Roman city of Chester, the town of Saltney takes its name from the former salt marshes that occupied the area prior to the canalisation of the Dee in 1732 and subsequent reclamation of land either side of the river. As with other areas of marshland in the estuary, Saltney Marshes were renowned for being a dangerous landscape to attempt passage through, partly on account of the wild and waterlogged terrain, but also because it provided refuge for criminals and other undesirables to whom travellers ran the risk of falling victim. Church Registers between 1585 and 1750 record many instances of deaths by drowning or murder on Saltney Marsh (Anon. 1989: 2). Known by the Welsh as '*Morfa Caer Leon*', or 'marsh of the fort of the legions' (Owen 1994: 125), the route westward into Wales from Roman Chester was barred by this wild expanse of *morfa*, which Gee Williams in her short story of the same name describes as 'two thousand acres of legion-defying swamp' (2008: 186; Mason 1987: 153). It was not until the reclamation of the marshland in the eighteenth century that safe and direct passage westward through Saltney to the Welsh district of Broughton became possible (on what is now the A5104 Chester Road).

Saltney today turns its back on the river. Even along River Lane – the former industrial hub of the town – the canalised stretch of Dee to which Saltney owes

its existence tries its level best to conceal itself from view. De-industrialisation and modern transport communications have rendered it an industrial ruin: a silted relic of modern nature. This is not to suggest that it is a forgotten or desolate landscape – dog walkers, cyclists and joggers move leisurely along the embankments or linger for a moment atop the footbridge at Saltney Ferry (named after the river crossing it replaced). Even death still has its place here. But, as with the case of a local man found hanging from the bridge early one morning in 2009, the river becomes a sacred and intimately private place of death where final acts of ritual oblivion are silently observed. Although the river has for centuries been a place where people have chosen to end their life – the Dee Bridge in Chester was a particularly popular suicide spot (see below) – what distinguishes the types of death that occur on or around the Dee today from those of earlier times is the extent to which they are detached from the everyday and mundane. Separation – whether from life, society, loved ones, habitat (and habitus), environment, and so on – is the prerequisite for transition: the *liminal phase*. The margins, edgelands and in-between spaces of the river become, in turn, its spatial correlate: the *liminal zone* where the living are ushered from this world into the next. Whereas, before the estuarine landscape was drained and tamed (and its inhabitants displaced from the newly reclaimed land), the liminality that defined this space was more firmly embedded in the social practices of everyday life. By examining coroners' records of deaths by drowning that occurred at Chester and at various locations on the Dee Estuary we can get a clear sense of a landscape that was geographically but by no means socially or culturally marginal, and whose transitional properties were intrinsically bound up with the 'mesh-works' (Ingold 2007: 80) of mobility, wayfinding and everyday habitus by which, as a social space, it was constituted.

Dating back to the early 1500s the Chester Quarter Sessions Coroners' Inquest records<sup>6</sup> provide a fascinating insight into the ways different social actors engaged with the Dee, whether in and around Chester or further out along the estuary in ports such as Parkgate, at one time a major departure point for Ireland. The records include details of the names and locations (where known) of over 300 deaths by drowning from Chester to the mouth of the river at Liverpool Bay. For example:

- *Ales Rutter, drowned while washing clothes at 'the cage', a common washing place. June 11th 1630*
- *William Cowpack, fell into the Dee while gathering daisys and was drowned. April 2nd 1775*
- *Boniventrus Hanky, drowned while bathing at 'Le Posterne'. Aug. 6th 1586*
- *Edward Davenport, drowned when he rode his horse, while under the influence of drink, into the Dee at the bottom of Sandy Lane. Dec. 3rd 1700*
- *John Blundell drowned when he fell overboard in a drunken stupor from a certain sloop near the Crane. Aug. 24th 1734*
- *Unknown girl, fell off cart with a drunken driver while crossing the ford to Hawarden and was drowned. May 4th 1730*



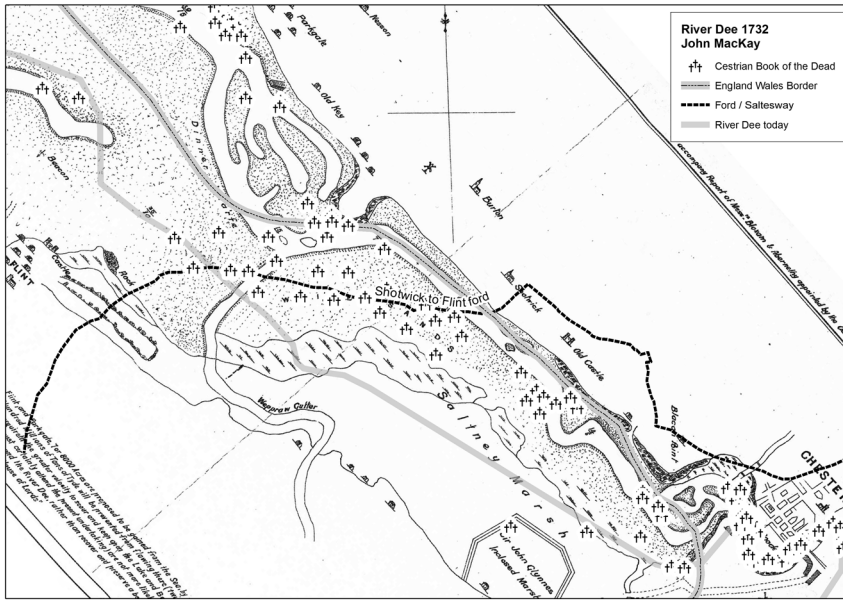


Figure 7.3 'Cestrian Book of the Dead': GIS map of sites of death by drowning on the Dee Estuary, 1524–1871. Topographic map made in 1732 by John Mackay.

As nearly half of the entries record the exact (or approximate) location of death it is possible to geo-reference the sites of drowning, and from this attempt to formulate a clearer understanding of the social geography of the estuary's pre-reclamation landscapes. The Cestrian Book of the Dead – a digital necrogeographic map of Dee drowning locations – traces the performative spaces of the living (public laundry areas, recreation sites, fords, pathways, etc.) by spatialising the patterns and clusters where drowning fatalities were recorded.

Most of the drownings occurred in three main locations: the Dee Bridge in Chester, the port of Parkgate, and the Shotwick to Flint ford. The Dee Bridge, overlooking the weir and salmon leap, is where the medieval mills were sited and where, at the nearby 'cage' (salmon cages), people congregated to wash their clothes. The majority of deaths by suicide on the Dee are recorded here. Records also show that attempts were made to cross the river via the weir, which, as with the nearby ford, offered a toll-free, but dangerous alternative to the bridge. Downriver at Parkgate, many of those who drowned were mariners falling overboard (often as a result of inebriation) when transferring to and from ships moored at the port. By the early eighteenth century Parkgate had become the main anchorage serving Chester, whose fortunes as a trading port had declined due to silting which had made river navigation increasingly difficult. From the sixteenth century ports had been established at successive locations downriver at Shotwick, Burton, Neston and Parkgate, but each in turn would

also fall into decline due to the build up of silt, a situation which would eventually contribute to the rise of Liverpool as a major port city.

Another notorious place of drowning was on and around the ford at Shotwick which was part of an ancient salt traders' route called 'Saltesway', an important line of communication between North Wales, Cheshire and Lancashire. A description of the ford is contained in the travel memoirs of Celia Fiennes who passed through Cheshire in 1698:

I forded over the Dee when the tide was out, all upon the sands at least a mile, which was as smooth as a die, being a few hours left of the flood. ... When the tide is fully out they frequently ford in many places which they mark as the sands fall, and go near nine or ten miles over the sands from Chester to Burton on to Flint town almost.

(quoted in Young 1926: 154)

As those travelling into Wales via the Dee Bridge in Chester would have faced a long detour to avoid Saltney Marshes (as well as pay tolls to cross the bridge), the fords downriver at Blacon and Shotwick were widely used, despite the hazardous and constantly shifting sands, which claimed many lives (Thacker *et al.* 2005):

- *Unknown man, drowned while attempting to cross the ford at Shotwick. May 26th 1681*
- *Arthur Carr, apprentice to John Lovett, merchant of Dublin, mistakenly forded the Dee near Shotwick while riding to Parkgate to embark for Ireland and was drowned trying to return. April 23rd 1698*
- *Anne Blackburn, widow, drowned while crossing the sands from Flint. June 24th 1718*
- *Thomas Pearson, labourer, drowned while attempting to ford the Dee from the Welsh side. Aug. 18th 1725*
- *Alice, wife of Thomas Harrison, drowned while crossing Shotwick ford. Jan. 9th 1753*
- *Thomas Harrison, drowned while crossing Shotwick ford. Jan. 12th 1753*

The latter two are consecutive entries on the page: husband and wife drown crossing the ford in January 1753, three days apart. Did Thomas Harrison already know that his wife Alice had died when he set out across the sands? Was he attempting to complete the journey where she had failed? Perhaps he had gone to look for her or retrieve her body? Or, possessed by grief, he had resolved to join her in her watery grave? And where were they headed anyway? These and other fragmentary tales of life and death on the Dee have no resolution other than that of their documented fate. That much we know. Clipped narratives, they haunt the palimpsestic spaces of the estuary and, in so doing, reinscribe their presence on a landscape savaged by oblivion. As topographic features the fords are as intangible as the memories they evoke. The route of Shotwick to Flint ford

appears on John Boydell's 1771 map of the estuary, but in actuality its location would have changed over time, rendering it all but unmappable. Nonetheless, provisionally at least Boydell's ford remains a line that can be drawn in the sands, whether as GIS polyline data overlaid on a present day map of the estuary, or by attempting to navigate its deep topographies on foot. The latter strategy – a psycho-topographic mode of intervention 'in the field' – draws the layered geographies of past and present into oblique confrontation. Through this process the shapes, vectors and affective geometries of today's estuary are brought into relief, revealing a physical landscape that bears little resemblance to that through which the wayfarers of the past once travelled. By the late eighteenth century, the fords, along with Parkgate's brief status as a port, had become early casualties of modern nature.

### Sealand empire: taming the land

Always shifting, the sands of Dee not only posed challenges for those navigating the estuary on foot, horse or cart, they also impeded safe river navigation to Chester, a problem that had been the bane of city officials since the fourteenth century (Pritchard 2002: 168). In an ill-fated attempt to address the problems of silting and to reverse Chester's decline, in the early 1700s the city authorities began to consider the option of implementing a canalisation scheme, called the New Cut or Navigation Cut. The aim was to re-route the river from its old course along the Wirral side of the estuary through a deeper channel on the Welsh side so as to improve navigation along the estuary to Chester. One of the criteria that prospective engineers were required to address when constructing the channel was to ensure the prevention of future silting or at least reduce it to sustainable levels. In 1733 an Act of Parliament 'to recover and preserve the Navigation of the River' was passed which granted exclusive rights to Nathaniel Kinderley and the newly formed River Dee Company (ibid.). Completed in 1740, the New Cut runs for five miles through the former Saltney Marshes to Connah's Quay where it joins the estuary.

In what seems to have been a monumentally bad negotiation on the part of the city authorities (Armour 1956: 109–10), Chester relinquished all rights to the estuary and in exchange for undertaking and completing the canalisation scheme, Kinderley received all the lands reclaimed by the drainage of the former marshes, as well as the levying of tolls on shipping tonnage. Kinderley ignored completely the requirements for the project to prevent silting. One of the consequences of the reclamation of Saltney Marshes was the eviction of poorer classes who used the area as common land and grazing land for cattle. The rich soil of the reclaimed land was perfect for arable farming and was thus extremely profitable to the River Dee Company. Meanwhile the river continued to silt up and Chester's fortunes continued to decline. Less than a century later in 1826 the *Chester Chronicle* reported the minutes of a meeting of the River Dee Commissioners in which it was acknowledged that 'The Port of Chester is gone', putting the blame squarely on Kinderley and the River Dee Company (Herson 1996: 75; see also Armour 1956: 78–110). As John Young, writing in 1926, concludes:

the indiscriminate reclaiming of land in the upper estuary [the area now called Sealand] ... did more, perhaps, than anything else to bring about the great increase of silting ... *Dee Estuary simply stands out as one great tragedy* – one which might not have been so great had it not been for Man's selfish desire for immediate wealth, as illustrated by the policy of the River Dee company.

(1926: 194, 4, emphasis added)

The sheer scale of the folly and impact of the canalisation scheme on the landscape and ecology of the estuary has been immense. Looking north westward from Saltney Ferry footbridge the geometric precision of the New Cut leads the eye towards a vanishing point that converges at Flintshire Bridge. Old and new, horizontal and vertical, these abstract formations hold their sway over a landscape tamed. The rational uniformity of Kinderley's navigation has ironed out the contingent and uncertain; and with it much of the vitality, sociality and history that had formerly defined this liminal zone. Boats are rarely seen on this stretch of the Dee, with the exception of the Afon Dyfrdwy,<sup>7</sup> the barge that carries the Airbus A380 wings from the nearby Broughton factory where they are made to Mostyn Docks further up the Flintshire coastline.

The marshland reclaimed either side of the New Cut is now largely characterised by low-lying farmland, retail parks and industrial sites. The settlements of Saltney, Saltney Ferry (Mold Junction), Sealand, and Sandycroft are also located here. The subtle legibility of the pre-reclamation shoreline defines a zonal boundary which, once read, can stir a dormant imaginary of place in which the river and wetlands reassert their hold over the land. After periods of heavy rain the sight of waterlogged fields and drainage ditches ready to burst heightens this sense of a resurgent historical landscape, as if the past and its ghosts are seeping up through the soil.

As a cultural landscape, the aesthetic virtues of the canalised Dee, unlike some of its more picturesque locations upriver (in Cheshire or the Vale of Llangollen, for example), are perhaps not so readily apparent. In his Dee travelogue, *River Map*, for example, Jim Perrin writes,

the canalised cut ... meanders across the dreariest of industrial landscapes to this loss of identity. ... Let's skip a few miles and a period in time, because I do not want to impose any more than is necessary of that desperate landscape upon you.

(Perrin 2001: 4)

Yet insofar as the story of the estuary is, as Young suggests, one of tragedy, it is precisely this ellipsis in the river's spatial story that casts the longest shadow. Like the river, the mythopoesis of the Dee – the wellspring that Michael Powell had sought to draw from – has silted over; narratives and their geographies have been canalised, their spoil used to build embankments within which they are safely contained. The spirit of Nathaniel Kinderley looms large over this sealand-scape. The barriers need breaching; the river reclaiming.

## Reclaiming the Dee

*Flow back to your sources, sacred rivers,  
And let the world's great order be reversed.*  
(Euripedes, *Medea*)

In a historical analogue to *The Elusive Pimpernel*, sometime around 1800 an émigré or asylum seeker from revolutionary France came to Chester from Normandy (perhaps passing through Mont St Michel). A relative of Quatremère De Quincey, we do not know much about this individual other than that he was the cause of mistaken identity, precipitating Thomas De Quincey's journey to Chester to return a letter which contained a banker's draft for 40 guineas mistakenly sent to the writer. In his account of his time in Chester in *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, De Quincey describes a walk to an area of the city known as the Cop which is an open space overlooking the River Dee. Already in a state of some anxiety as a result of having to attend to the matter of his mistaken inheritance, the writer is paralysed by 'a sudden uproar of tumultuous sounds rising clamorously ahead' (1994: 80). He later realises it was the tidal bore which in De Quincey's day would have come in close to the city centre. Clearly affected by the phenomena – 'until that moment, I had never heard of such a nervous affection in rivers' (ibid.: 82) – De Quincey is moved to describe the river as 'hysterical', invoking the above-cited lines from Euripedes's play *Medea* (ibid.: 80).

In this moment of hysteria, the psychic connection De Quincey makes with the river strongly alludes to a state of inversion, transition and the suspension of established rules and societal conventions: qualities that we can quite readily characterise in terms of the liminal. Re-framed within the broader context of this chapter, the *Medea*'s injunction calls upon the Dee to reassert its dormant spirit of transition and flux. Retracing the footsteps of those who have trod before us – be it De Quincey, Charles Kingsley, Celia Fiennes, or the marshland wayfarers of the Book of the Dead – establishes a relationship of co-presence (Ingold and Vergunst 2008: 7) by which a psycho-topographic remapping of the Dee becomes possible. As a liminal practice it is instructive to think of this not so much in terms of the tripartite formulation of Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner (the three stages of the ritual process), but in the more truncated terms which the artist Phil Smith (aka CrabMan) outlines in his book *Mythogeography*. Reworking the Situationist concept of the *dérive* or 'drift', CrabMan suggests:

If romantic walking ... can be compared to the rites of passage defined by anthropologist Victor Turner ... then the *dérive* ... lops off the last of the three [stages] (re-integration) and short-circuits flux [the liminal phase] straight back into separation. And keeps doing that until the practice can stand no more repetition and throws off some new, mutant activity.

(Smith 2010: 118)

Reclaiming the Dee, the estuarine excursions I have set out in this chapter have sought to map the confluence of past and present geographies of liminality. These liminal landscapes are transitional in the sense of occupying a space 'betwixt and between', but also, as performative spaces, their affective cartographies map the latent energies that reside at these confluence points, offering the potential for transformation, but also for danger. The trope of drowning, while connoting death, can also serve as a metaphor for the saturation of an indurated land. To drown may be to go under, but it can also mean renewal.

## Notes

- 1 [www.airfieldinformationexchange.org/community/showthread.php?2989-Dee-Estuary-Burton-Marsh-decoy-for-Garston-Docks](http://www.airfieldinformationexchange.org/community/showthread.php?2989-Dee-Estuary-Burton-Marsh-decoy-for-Garston-Docks); [www.airfieldinformationexchange.org/community/showthread.php?2988-Dee-Estuary-Heswall-Decoy-for-Liverpool-northern-dock-area](http://www.airfieldinformationexchange.org/community/showthread.php?2988-Dee-Estuary-Heswall-Decoy-for-Liverpool-northern-dock-area); [www.wikiwirral.co.uk/forums/ubbthreads.php/topics/330639/Hilbre\\_Island\\_WW2\\_Bombing\\_Deco.html](http://www.wikiwirral.co.uk/forums/ubbthreads.php/topics/330639/Hilbre_Island_WW2_Bombing_Deco.html) (all accessed 27 April 2011).
- 2 [news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/north\\_east/3847799.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/north_east/3847799.stm) (accessed 28 April 2011).
- 3 Michael Shamburg, 'The Sands of Dee', [www.kinoteca.net/Text/sands\\_dee.htm](http://www.kinoteca.net/Text/sands_dee.htm) (accessed 21 June 2010).
- 4 In *Million Dollar Movie*, the second volume of his autobiography, Powell recalls how at chapel in school he often spent his time meditating 'on my favourite miracle, the parting of the Red Sea' (quoted in Conrad 1992).
- 5 This legislation was introduced in response to the Morecambe Bay tragedy. The purpose of the Act is 'to make provision for the licensing of activities involving the supply or use of workers in connection with agricultural work, the gathering of wild creatures and wild plants, the harvesting of fish from fish farms, and certain processing and packaging; and for connected purposes.' [www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/11/introduction](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/11/introduction) (accessed 11 May 2011).
- 6 The Chester City Coroner Records can be viewed online at [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/a2a/records.aspx?cat=017-chec\\_2&cid=5-10#5-10](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/a2a/records.aspx?cat=017-chec_2&cid=5-10#5-10) (accessed 30 March 2010).
- 7 This is also the Welsh name for the River Dee.

## References

- Anon. (1989) 'Saltney Marsh', in B.D. Clark (ed.), *Saltney and Saltney Ferry: A Second Illustrated History*. Saltney: Saltney Local History Group.
- Armour, G. (1956) *The Trade of Chester and the State of the Dee Navigation 1600–1800*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University College London.
- Augé, M. (2004) *Oblivion*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bachelard, G. (1994) *The Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Butler, C. (2008) 'Cockle pickers can return to Dee Estuary [*sic*]', *Daily Post*, 1 September, [www.dailypost.co.uk/news/north-wales-news/2008/09/01/cockle-pickers-can-return-to-dee-estuary-55578-21645247/](http://www.dailypost.co.uk/news/north-wales-news/2008/09/01/cockle-pickers-can-return-to-dee-estuary-55578-21645247/) (accessed 20 May 2011).
- Christie, I. (2001) 'I Know Where I'm Going', *The Criterion Collection*, [www.criterion.com/current/posts/95-i-know-where-im-going](http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/95-i-know-where-im-going) (accessed 20 May 2011).
- Conrad, P. (1992) 'Prospero at Play', *Observer*, 11 October, [www.powell-pressburger.org/Reviews/Micky/Prospero.html](http://www.powell-pressburger.org/Reviews/Micky/Prospero.html) (accessed 20 May 2011).
- De Quincey, T. (1994) *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*. London: Wordsworth Classics.



- Dobinson, C. (2000) *Fields of Deception: Britain's Bombing Decoys of World War II*. London: Methuen.
- Douglas, M. (1966) *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Herson, J. (1996) 'Canals, Railways and the Demise of the Port of Chester', in P. Carrington (ed.), *'Where Deva Spreads Her Wizard Stream' – Trade and the Port of Chester*. Chester: Chester City Council.
- hooks, B. (1990) *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- Ingold, T. (2007) *Lines: A Brief History*. London: Routledge.
- Ingold, T. and J.L. Vergunst (2008) 'Introduction', in T. Ingold and J.L. Vergunst (eds), *Ways of Walking: Ethnography and Practice on Foot*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Jarman, D. (1992) *Modern Nature: the Journals of Derek Jarman*. London: Vintage.
- Mason, D.J.P. (1987) 'Chester: the Canabae Legionis', in *Britannia*, 18: 143–68.
- Owen, H.W. (1994) *The Place Names of East Flintshire*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.
- Perrin, J. (2001) *The River Map*. Ceredigion: Gomer.
- Pritchard, T.W. (2002) *A History of the Old Parish of Hawarden*. Wrexham: Bridge Books.
- Thacker, A.T. and C.P. Lewis (eds), J.S. Barrow, J.D. Herson, A.H. Lawes, P.J. Riden and M.V.J. Seaborne. (2005) 'Economic infrastructure and institutions: Roads and road transport', *A History of the County of Chester: Volume 5 Part 2: The City of Chester: Culture, Buildings, Institutions*: 73–83. British History Online. [www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=57309](http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=57309) (accessed 28 February 2010).
- Smith, P. (2010) *Mythogeography: a Guide to Walking Sideways*. Axminster: Triarchy Press.
- Wainwright, M. (2010) 'Cockling on the Dee', *Guardian*, 15 July, [www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2010/jul/15/cockling-dee](http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2010/jul/15/cockling-dee) (accessed 09 October 2010).
- Williams, G. (2008) 'Morfa', in *Blood, etc.* Cardigan: Parthian.
- Young, J.A. (1926) *The Physical and Historical Geography of the Dee Estuary*. Unpublished MA thesis, University of Liverpool.