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ROUNDTABLE 3: FOREST ECOLOGY AND ENGAGEMENT

On Literature and the Experimental Forest Laboratory

Thomas Kaye

Independent Scholar, UK
Email: tkayewriting@gmail.com

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Abstract

This article outlines the way in which the H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest Laboratory in Oregon has nurtured a conversation between writers, artists, and scientists. The Andrews was the birthplace of New Forestry, a concept and philosophy that has impacted writing on (and in) old-growth forests. In this article, I also introduce some of the key themes and core concerns of a literature connected to New Forestry and produced at this experimental forest laboratory.

Keywords: ecology; forestry; Jerry Franklin; Richard Powers; Robin Wall Kimmerer

> Let us adopt a forest ethic. Let us approach forest ecosystems with the respect that their complexity and beauty deserve. And, considering our current level of knowledge, let us approach the forest with appropriate humility.[1]

In *The Overstory* (2018) by Richard Powers, Patricia Westerford—a character widely discussed as a fictional version of Canadian scientist Suzanne Simard—finally finds a home of like-minded "geologists, microbiologists, ecologists, evolutionary zoologists, soil experts, [and] high priests of water" at the "Franklin Experimental Forest."[2] This empirical clergy all follow what Powers describes as "the gospel of new forestry."[3] The "Franklin Experimental Forest" is at once Powers's homage to Jerry Franklin and the fictional version of the H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest in Oregon. It is here that my short article will dwell. The Andrews and its "gospel of new forestry" has significantly impacted the way in which forests are managed on federal lands, influenced literary depictions of old-growth forests, and gone one step further by actively encouraging and contributing to creative writing on the subjects of forestry, ecology, scientific enquiry, and old-growth forests.[4] In this short essay, I will introduce readers, via Powers's novel, to the Andrews Experimental Forest, to New Forestry, and to the collection *Forest Under Story: Creative Enquiry in an Old Growth Forest* (2016). I will introduce the key themes and hallmarks of literature produced at and set in

[1] Franklin 1989.
[2] Powers 2018, 176, 177.
[3] Ibid, 177.
[4] Ibid, 177.

Figure 1. H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest Entrance, photographed by Tom Iraci.

experimental forest laboratories, primarily through close readings of Potawatomi writer and scientist Robin Wall Kimmerer's contributions to *Forest Under Story* (Figure 1).

In the above epigraph, I quote from the final paragraph of Jerry Franklin's landmark 1989 article "Toward a New Forestry." Theodore Catton describes how "Franklin's article in *American Forests* appeared just as the conflict over logging in the Pacific northwest reached a climax."[5] This conflict is now often referred to as the timber wars, and while its intensity may well have been reaching a climax as the 1990s began, the divisions in the forestry profession, forest communities, and environmental movements had been deepening since (at least) the 1960s. New Forestry is a concept that emerges into a polarised forest and proposes (as Jon R. Luoma writes) that "timber itself should no longer drive forest management."[6] In short, New Forestry is a more ecologically minded forestry. This can be seen in Franklin's deliberate channelling of Aldo Leopold in his call for a *forest ethic.* Like Leopold's land ethic that "simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land," Franklin, New Forestry, and its forest ethic attempt the very same encompassing view of the forest community.[7] Franklin's forest ethic also tunes into Leopold's definition of "an ethic, ecologically, [as] a limitation on freedom of action in the struggle for existence."[8] The call for humility and the case for beauty is an attempt by Franklin to check the way in which forestry (or, what we might call for the purposes of this essay, old forestry) sought to alter old-growth forests by liquidating

[5] Catton 2016, 158.
[6] Luoma 1999, 162.
[7] Leopold 1970, 239.
[8] Ibid, 238.

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them and converting them into stands of young, even-aged, fast-growing trees. This is of course a generalisation on their points of difference; an excellent and more nuanced discussion of these diverging camps can be found in Samual Hays's chapter "New and Old Forestry" from his book *Wars in the Woods: the Rise of Ecological Forestry in America.*[9]

Powers writes about this divide in the forestry profession through the character of Patricia Westerford. Patricia's research makes her the first casualty of the conflicts in professional forestry that found itself unwilling to accommodate new ideas while finding itself increasingly unable to continue on its current course, whether that be due to protest, court injunction, or the unignorable fact of sickly trees and soil erosion. Westerford first comes into contact with this rigid logic at forestry school where she is tutored by "the men in charge of American forestry," who "dream of turning out straight clean uniform grains at maximum speed."[10] These men "speak of *thrifty* young forests and *decadent* old ones, of *mean annual increment* and *economic maturity.*"[11] Powers picks up here on what Jon R. Luoma calls "the jargon of conventional forestry."[12] These terms, *thrifty* and *decadent*, are noted and expanded on by Luoma while he defines the essential problem with this economic view of the forest: "economic maturity can come decades, even centuries, before the tree would be classified as mature, and even longer before it would be called old growth."[13] In the jargon critiqued by Powers and Luoma, a tree's value is defined by its ability to produce wood fibre.

Such terms exemplify the discord between economy and biology that had come to define forest management in national forests. The disparagement of and lack of interest in old-growth forests in the mid- to late twentieth century is encapsulated by a term that became a common descriptor for ancient forest: *cellulose cemetery.* Powers has Westerford confront this attitude towards death in the forest during her time in academic (and literal) exile:

> Death is everywhere, oppressive and beautiful. She sees the source of that forestry doctrine she so resisted in school. Looking at all this glorious decay, a person might be forgiven for thinking that *old* meant decadent, that such thick mats of decomposition were cellulose cemeteries in need of the rejuvenating ax.[14]

Patricia's magnanimous perspective connects the attitudes of traditional forestry to long-held fears of the deepwoods. John Miller concludes his chapter on "Horror" in *The Heart of the Forest* by stating that "horror puts us back in our place, and because of that carries a vital political force at a time of out-of-control deforestation [...] [and] encourages an approach to trees that reaches beyond materiality to gesture toward sacredness."[15] Reading Patricia's view of death in the woods with Miller's writing on horror in mind, one can begin to see the role decay plays in nurturing the humility Franklin calls for in his forest ethic. One can also infer that the attempt to wrest old-growth forests from the grip of dripping, crumbling, putrefying, oozing chaos and replace it with neatly planted rows of Douglas fir grows from a repulsion at decay and its intimate association with darkness. Powers captures the way in which New Forestry allows for the paradoxes of death and decay in forests that are very

[9] Hays 2006.
[10] Powers 2018, 153.
[11] Ibid, 153.
[12] Luoma 1999, 40.
[13] Luoma 1999, 40.
[14] Powers 2018, 169.
[15] Miller 2022, 149.

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much alive. That decay can be both "oppressive and beautiful" channels the complexities of picturesque forest aesthetics that result from timescales and natural processes that eclipse both human lifetimes and the immediacy of any apparent ugliness or beauty. These paradoxes help to contextualise the simple fact that decaying deadwood is full of life.

Beauty, humility, ethics, and ecology—it is my contention that New Forestry (as a philosophy) has fostered a convergence in sciences and humanities. Its ecological outlook is based upon a scientific study conducted at the H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest *and* upon a deeply personal reverence for old-growth forests. The collection of essays, reflections, and poems in *Forest Under Story* is a perfect encapsulation of this merging of disciplines. This book is a result of the Long-Term Ecological Reflections programme run at the Andrews and "is intended to be a humanities analogue to the scientific research [...] [by] gathering the writing as part of a long-term, cumulative record."[16] The project is slated to span two hundred years and requires its writers in residence to spend time at various "Reflections Plots" described by Charles Goodrich in the introduction to the collection as "a gravel bar created by a recent major flood, the Log Decomposition plot, a recent clear-cut, and an experimental selectively logged site."[17] Goodrich goes on to outline how "the writers who visit the Andrews engage in the many complicated ways that humans alter nature, whether through forestry management or through the interventions of science itself."[18] The scale of these interventions varies from the sweep of a clear-cut at one of the reflections plots to the presence of plastic collars, sensors, and tubes that represent what John R. Campbell describes (in his contribution "Scope: Ten Small Essays") as "the bric-a-brac of inquiry" (Figure 2).[19] While these instruments of data

Figure 2. Log Decomposition Study Site, photographed by Tom Iraci.

[16] Goodrich 2016, 7.
[17] Goodrich 2016, 8–9.
[18] Goodrich 2016, 9.
[19] Campbell 2016, 23.

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collection disturb any notion of a pristine wilderness, so do the "Specimens Collected at the Clear-Cut" by Alison Hawthorne Deming. These include, but are not limited to, a "wild iris," a "wild currant twig flowering with cluster of rosy micro-goblets," and a "empty tortilla chip bag," a "empty Mountain Dew bottle," a "shotgun shell."[20] Deming's list-like structure to her prose poem mimics the monotony of data collection as the piece seems to follow a transect through the clear-cut, with Deming counting the messy layers of organic life and man-made detritus in her quadrat.

These interruptions and disturbances that the writers of the Long-Term Ecological Reflections programme are encouraged to engage with exemplify how New Forestry—as it permeates literature—is akin to traditional forestry (or scientific forestry as it is otherwise known) in its fascination with the way in which "humans alter nature."[21] This is one of the reasons why Jerry Franklin concedes that "many of the concepts embodied in New Forestry are not new"; instead, Franklin asserts that the term reflects "a fresh philosophy" where "the focus [...] is on the maintenance of complex ecosystems not just the regeneration of trees."[22] Despite this clear ecological aim, the "ecological" of ecological forestry becomes a tricky term that sits on a blurred boundary where science bleeds into art, happenstance bleeds into design, wild mixes with the tagged, the monitored, and the studied.

Robin Wall Kimmerer negotiates this ecological tangle in her two contributions to the collection, "Interview with a Watershed" and "Listening to Water." The former plays closer to Deming's homage to data collection and opens with data points on a computer screen. These numbers "arrive at the telemetry terminal as a radio signal transmitted from a small box of wires out in the woods where a chipmonk sits on the cover absorbing the modicum of heat from within."[23] Again, the instruments used to measure water flow (in this instance) become a part of the forest and are used by the local fauna. However, Kimmerer does more to merge the two in her elision of data and storytelling. She tells of how "the elders used to say that you could learn a lot from listening to water" and later writes "water is a storyteller."[24] The story it told the Andrews scientists was one in which clear-cutting and heavy logging led to a "landscape haemorrhaging nutrients and filling the stream pools with sediment as the soil washed away."[25] The data collected from the water becomes a rudimentary language in Kimmerer's account that tells of the importance of old-growth forests—within which streams "run cold and clear and pure"—yet falls short of translating "the forgotten language of the land."[26] Kimmerer then begins to describe this forgotten language and how we might read it:

> Its alphabet is the elements themselves, carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen. The words of this language are living beings, and its syntax is connection. There is a flow of information, a network of relationship conveyed in the rising sap of cedars, in tree roots grafted to fungi, and fungi to orchids, orchids to bees, bees to bats, bats to owls, owls to bones, and bones to the soil of cedars. This is the language we have yet to learn and the stories we must hear, stories that are simultaneously material and spiritual.

[20] Demming 2016, 53.
[21] Goodrich 2016, 9.
[22] Franklin 1989, 2.
[23] Kimmerer 2016a, 41.
[24] Ibid, 41, 44.
[25] Ibid, 44.
[26] Ibid, 44, 49.

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> The archive of this language, the sacred text, is the land itself. In the woods, there is a constant stream of data, lessons on how we might live, stories of reciprocity, stories of connection. Species far older than our own show us daily how to live. We need to listen to the land, not merely for data, but for wisdom.[27]

The instruments of science in this reflective essay become an imperfect mouthpiece for the forest. Kimmerer, a botanist herself, is attuned to how vital those numbers on the computer screen are, yet she is also acutely aware of how blunt they are when communicating with or for the forest. The forest ecology in this "Interview with a Watershed" is something that requires different kinds of attention to extrapolate the stories we need from the land. This attention is in itself one of the hallmarks of New Forestry as it permeates literature. Proponents of this consciously ecological form of forestry (scientists and artists alike) are often receptive to the need for finely tuned sensors that measure and record the chemistry of place *and* for the kinds of attention with more ancient roots. Sensitivity to the forest in the literature of New Forestry is informed by this blend.

In her second contribution to the collection, Kimmerer diverts her attention away from the "bric-a-brac of inquiry" and stays closer to the greener parts of the forest.[28] In "Listening to Water," Kimmerer tunes into the way in which "the fall of rain on moss is nearly silent" and seeks shelter from the constant deluge under a "giant log" where "the cushiony moss keeps me warm and dry" (Figure 3).[29] It is under this log that Kimmerer (literally immersed in the woods beneath this fallen log) observes something torn between caterpillar and moss; it is described as "a shiny green filament, a moss thread, lit from within like a fiber optic element."[30] The form of this shimmering creature does not become any more stable or defined in the ensuing observation:

> As I watch, the wandering thread touches upon a leaf and then, as if reassured, it stretches itself out across the gap. It holds like a taut green cable, more than doubling its initial length. For just a moment, the two mosses are bridged by the shining green thread, and then the green light flows like a river across a bridge and vanishes, lost in the greenness of the moss. Is that not grace, to see an animal made of green light and water, a mere thread of being who like me has gone walking in the rain?[31]

This instance of slow and steady attention is one that communicates emotions of wonder and awe through one of the forest's slightest threads. Kimmerer the scientist is disarmed in this essay and carries no instruments of data collection. She might wish for "a set of calipers" to measure the "drops of moss water," but instead must make do with her own faculties.[32] In place of conclusions and empirical observations, Kimmerer draws images and metaphors. The shimmering green thread above becomes an indistinguishable organism. What is introduced as a caterpillar becomes "a moss thread," which in turn becomes "an animal made of green light and water."[33] Kimmerer's appreciation of this minute movement beneath a log communicates the very things Jerry Franklin calls for in his forest ethic. Complexity and beauty abound in Kimmerer's description, yet it is the protean nature of the filament, the inability of the reader to discern between animal, plant, and insect, that

[27] Kimmerer 2016b, 49.
[28] Campbell 2016, 23.
[29] Kimmerer 2016b, 192.
[30] Ibid, 193.
[31] Kimmerer 2016b, 193.
[32] Ibid, 191.
[33] Ibid, 193.

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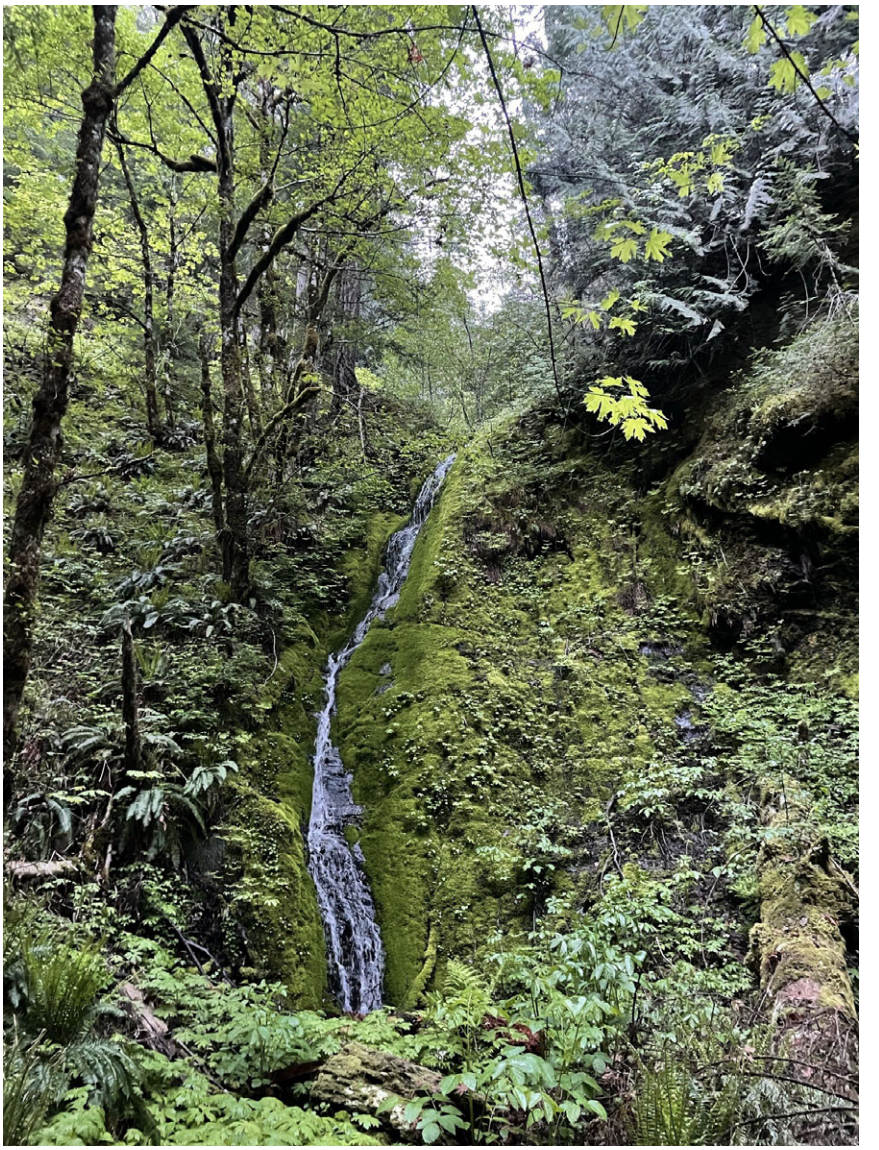

Figure 3. Waterfall Flowing Down Mossy Bedrock in Watershed 2, photographed by Nina Ferrari.

communicates the need for humility due to our limited knowledge. By expanding one's awareness of the forest from the trees to the soil, the understory, the watersheds, and the many connections between species, New Forestry also entails an awareness of how much we do not know. Writers that engage with New Forestry draw out the wisdom of this humble assessment of our understanding of the forest. It follows too that forests are considered on a different scale in the literature of New Forestry. The surprising niches of old-growth forests—like the underside of Kimmerer's log—are as vital as the species of trees.

The H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest Laboratory is a space that has clearly nurtured and inspired a great many writers. The research environment of the Andrews in the late

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twentieth century also fostered the development of New Forestry and helped to push federal forestry towards ecosystem management. My provocation at the close of this short essay is this: Can we not learn from this interplay between creative writing and scientific study at the Andrews? How do we develop more humanities studies that intersect with forest environments and forest research in places like the experimental forest laboratory? And how do we foster an exchange of information between disciplines that rely on their own unique languages of expertise? The Andrews, *Forest Under Story*, and the Long-Term Ecological Reflections programme from which the collection was born have begun to answer these questions.

Dr Thomas Kaye was one of the University of Birmingham's Forest Edge Doctoral Scholars. During his time at Birmingham he worked in the interdisciplinary research environment of BIFoR (Birmingham Institute of Forest Research) and conducted research into the literature of American forestry. He has been published in *Western American Literature* and continues to write upon loggers, rangers, ecologists, and fire lookouts.

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