BEN CULLEN



On the anniversary of the untimely and sudden death of Ben Cullen in 1995.

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I dedicated my book, *The Archaeological Imagination* [Link], published in April, to Ben. It is seventeen years today since he died. Uncanny.

I wonder what I would say to him about the book, that might reveal how much has changed, how so much has stayed the same in the way we both thought, think about the archaeological past.

Ben would have called the book quirky, eccentric – somewhat off-center, oblique, at the edges, in the margins, literally in the borders. He was comfortable in these spaces.

I take us back to the 18th century, to the borderlands between England and Scotland, between Edinburgh's Scottish Enlightenment and one of the heartlands of the industrial revolution, the North East of England. It was a world of speculation in all senses, radicalism and review of received opinion, technological innovation and agricultural improvement. It was in places like this that so much of the way we now conceive of the past-in-the-present took shape.

I am deeply familiar with these borderlands; Ben chose to make his home at another edge – Cardigan Bay in the far west of Wales.

I home in on the intense debates about history, its shape, remains of the past, oral traditions and memories, archives and manuscripts, books and broadsheets, sites and monuments, coins and sculptures. How the past clings on, is passed on.

To trust a manuscript over a memory recounted? Who were the reliable witnesses to the past? Or what? Can material fragments speak to us?

How best to connect the past to the present that we might understand who we are and where we have come from?

Matters of restoration of the fragment and ruin, conservation and preservation. To critically inspect our sources and evidence (yes – source criticism – that mainstay of classical scholarship). Triage – how might we decide what to keep and what to let go? Listening to the voices of reason.

Matters of engagement and encounter – walking the land and meeting its folk, mapping, measuring, noting details in a diary.

The reach of scholarship and cultural aspiration – in 1768 local curate, naturalist, and antiquarian, John Wallis, recites Virgil on the banks of the River Coquet to establish the character of a polysyllabic echo; Walter Scott, inventor of the historical novel, and, some would say, of contemporary Scots' identity, tours the remains of Pompeii in 1832 with classical scholar William Gell, dreaming not of Roman grandeur but of his dog at home on the banks of the River Tweed.

This is how ideas get shaped, and how ideas shape the world – in modest everyday encounters, utterly particular. We know that the shaping of national and European identity deeply informed antiquarian, archaeological and classical scholarship – this is how that relationship worked.

The *sublime particular* – on a beach in Berwickshire James Hutton, keen agricultural improver, looks into a bottomless abyss of geological time, and the security of time-honored Classical and Biblical historiography, their account of the human past, evaporates.

The debates respected no boundaries to discipline, expertise or field as we understand them today. Antiquarians met with philosophers, with novelists and classical linguists, geologists and chemists, as fieldwork merged with ethnography, as esoteric debates about the voice of the past informed industry and town planning.

Ben dug into his own conceptual borderland – between human and non-human, people and things. Here, in the eighteenth century borders, such distinctions and elisions are equally pertinent. The land *and* the people. Roman or Scot? Barbarian or civilized? Remains in geological strata; remains collected in a museum.

To use the jargon – this is a genealogy of our contemporary paradigm of past-in-present, our cultural imaginary that deals in the remains of the past. While we don't have to rely upon Foucault and Nietzsche, an analytic is helpful, to see through the anecdotes and incidents, the marginalia. So I attempt a kind of reverse engineering of the stories I tell, using a wonderfully suggestive graphical device first put forward by the semiotician Greimas – revealing models and mechanisms that generated the possibility of different kinds of engagement and encounter with the remains of the past in the present. And this is *the archaeological imagination*.



The wind that shakes the barley – Flodden field – September 9 1513: in the low rolling hills of north Northumberland, England's border county, an invading Scottish army was defeated in the bloodiest ever encounter between England and Scotland. James IV, King of the Scots, nine of his Earls, fourteen Lords of Parliament, five Highland Chiefs and 10,000 men at arms fell between 4 and 6 o'clock that afternoon. Scott's poem *Marmion* is set in the days leading up to the disaster.