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# ***Military pastoral and the military sublime in British army training landscapes.***

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## **Abstract**

The British Army's major training areas are, by necessity, are mostly remote and under-populated, with non-military uses primarily restricted to basic transport routes, limited housing and non-intensive agriculture. Many training areas, as a consequence of their history and the development of cultural ideas around the rural, have become subject to pressures for civilian access. These demands for greater public access for recreational purposes have over the past decade or so prompted the development (and in places consolidation) of infrastructure to enable such access, primarily in the form of public footpaths. This paper draws on examples from the public paths on the perimeters of Sennybridge Training Area in Powys and the Otterburn Training Area in Northumberland, and considers some ideas about military violence and its appearance in military landscapes that walking on these paths invokes. Environmental management regimes, the organisation and practice of military training, and the methods of facilitating public access all combine to present these landscapes to the civilian visitor as spaces which suggest the possibility of quiet, undisturbed recreation in rural areas of high landscape quality. The primary purpose of these landscapes, which have armed violence at their core, is often obscured. This paper considers the experience of walking on these paths and thinking about ideas of the military pastoral and the military sublime, as part of an attempt to engage with the perplexing question of violence in spaces which so often are only suggestive of peace.

*Keywords: military training, British Army, landscape, sublime, pastoral,*

## Introduction

Underpinning this paper are questions that British army training areas pose about violence. Walking as a civilian visitor around the spaces used for military training is an exercise in engaging with armed violence. However, as many visitors to such places often observe, such engagements are paradoxical. Being in these spaces (particularly on days when there is no live firing) is frequently an encounter with peace, calm and stillness, both despite and because of the central utility of these spaces for military training. This paradox leads in turn to two questions. The first concerns how military violence can be visible and invisible in these spaces. The second concerns our perceptions of military power as a consequence of the invisibility of military violence in these spaces. In this paper, I explore these ideas with reference to two army training areas in the UK, the Sennybridge Training Area (SENTA) and the Otterburn Training Area (OTA) in Northumberland, using the experience of walking on both as the starting point. I draw on ideas about the 'military pastoral' and the 'military sublime' as ways of helping think about these two questions along the way.

Although individually distinctive in geomorphological and environmental terms, and in terms of the types of military training which are conducted upon them, like all the major British Army training areas in the UK, the training areas at Sennybridge and Otterburn share certain attributes. They have high environmental quality, officially recognised through various statutory designations in whole or in part. They are both sufficiently far from major urban population centres to feel remote in some way, and although both are sufficiently proximate to such centres to render them accessible (by car) to visitors both are slightly marginal places, distant from centres of power and influence. Both have long histories as military training areas primarily for use by the British Army (Otterburn back to the 1911, SENTA back to 1940). Both are predominantly peaty uplands, suited to upland sheep-farming and have long histories of agriculture and forestry into the present. Both have a landscape quality which has prompted civilian demands for public access for recreational purposes such as walking, cycling, horse-riding, and for more general purposes associated with enjoyment of open space, wildlife and landscape. Both have therefore seen an expansion over the past decade or so in measures to facilitate public access. Both have been subject to critique and campaign against the practices of military training carried out there, and in both places those critiques have effectively been silenced through a combination of downright assertion of the military's priorities for training in these areas and more subtle accommodations (or performances of accommodation) of the critiques and complaints of those uneasy for a range of reasons about the continued military presence there and/or desirous of access to these landscapes because of their environmental and geomorphological qualities. And on both of these ranges, to visit on a non-firing day is to wonder, sometimes, what those arguments against the military presence might really be about. Both present unusual landscapes in contemporary British terms with their extensive agricultural practices, absence of the usual civilian infrastructure of rural areas and almost total lack of other people. Beyond signs indicating Ministry of Defence ownership and the red flags which denote live firing, clear signs of the military presence are often absent, and the realisation that things just look, somehow, a bit different comes only gradually. It follows from this that these training areas very often present themselves to the visitor as spaces of quiet, harmony and tranquillity. It is because of this capacity of these training areas to obscure ideas about violence that they become so interesting.

It is through the act of walking in these spaces that these ideas about military violence and its frequent obscurity are most evident. Walking through these spaces brings to mind more abstract, more conceptual questions too, about landscapes and our engagements with them.

Walking, using the ‘archive of the feet’ (as Simon Schama puts it), is a method shared by the diverse disciplinary approaches to military landscapes. Reflecting broader trends in landscape studies over the past fifty years, studies of military landscapes include analyses of their histories and archaeologies, of their environments and of military environmental impacts, of terrain and tactics, and of the strategic uses of spaces both practically and politically. Studies of military landscapes consider the ways in which they are represented, both deliberately and incidentally, by the state and by military custodians, and consider responses to such landscapes by civilian visitors and interrogators working with both text and image (Woodward, 2004, 2013). Studies are also starting to engage with the affective responses these landscapes invoke in civilian visitors through the experience of walking in such spaces (Davis, 2008; Sidaway, 2009; Harrison & Schofield, 2010). It is this emergent body of work which provides the conceptual starting point here. Drawing on arguments articulated by Wylie (2007) and others, which in turn look back to a humanist turn in landscape studies within geography from the late 1960s onwards, geographers have become increasingly exercised by landscapes’ affectual capacities, by the ways in which personal encounters with landscapes invoke complex individual sensory, preceptual, emotional and haptic responses. My argument here is that the post-phenomenological turn in landscape studies is useful for thinking through the questions posed at the start of this paper, about how military violence becomes obscured in military landscapes, and how we can think about military power as a consequence of that invisibility. Although considering affectual responses to such places runs an inherent potential risk of descending into introspection and solipsism, I would argue that it is precisely the affective responses military training areas invoke at a personal level which raise the most troubling questions about military activities and military violence. How can somewhere that feels so peaceful be so violent? What can we understand about military violence by our engagements with somewhere so peaceful?

Influential also on this line of thinking, about absence and concealment and the centrality we can place on our emotional and sensory responses to military landscapes, are the ideas raised by non-academic, artistic encounters with such spaces. The work of photographer Simon Norfolk (to which I credit the origins of my thinking on this), particularly his series *The Hebrides: A Slight Disturbance of the Sea*, is a case in point (see also Norfolk, 2006). This body of work explores how military violence can be represented and considered through landscape photography, and has emerged, for Norfolk, as a reaction to what he identifies as an impasse in photojournalistic engagements with war with their capturing of the too-obvious effects and horrors of violence, and as a reaction too to his unease about the seductive capacity of violence working through many photographic representations of war (see [www.simonnorfolk.com](http://www.simonnorfolk.com)). In place of this, his work in the UK, and in Iraq and Afghanistan too, uses quite conventional ideas of beauty in landscape photography to lull the viewer into a state of calm reflection, to draw the observer in to the image, and after this subtle invitation to suggest a critique of military power and its violent effects precisely because of what is less visible, or unseen, or obscured within the image. Similarly, the work of photographers Ingrid Book and Carina Héden on Norwegian military bases and training areas examines the incidental and subtle effects of military training on landscapes in ways which seek deliberately to avoid more obvious or usual representations of destruction and its aftermath (Woodward, 2010).

With these two ideas in mind – an awareness of the affectual response to landscape, and an understanding of intangibility as a key feature of military landscapes – in the remainder of this paper I want to articulate some of the thoughts about military power and military violence invoked by two specific encounters with two different military landscapes, in order to start thinking about violence, its visibility and invisibility, and power.

## Sennybridge and the military pastoral

The Sennybridge Training Area comprises 12,000 hectares of upland moorland, in essence the Epynt plateau to the north of Brecon, in the county of Powys, Wales. Historically an area of upland sheep-farming, the plateau was requisitioned in 1940 as a training area and its inhabitants relocated to the valleys in the surrounding area (for a comprehensive history, see Dudley, 2012). Its primary use is for infantry training.

In 2003 in response to wider pressures during the 1990s for greater access to military training lands, subject to civilian safety measures, an 80km long-distance perimeter footpath, the Epynt Way, was established. Following the edge of the plateau escarpment, the Epynt Way used existing rights of way and new pathways. A visitor's centre was also opened in a disused farmhouse. The visitor centre provides exhibition space and a wealth of detail about the history, environmental quality and military training practices at SENTA, framed within a standard military environmentalist discourse of easy co-existence between the armed forces and the natural environment. 'Unfarmed', we are told,

*'for 70 years, it has regressed to wilderness. Its high exposed grassy moors are the perfect habitat for hardy troops. It is home to many rare and endangered species of animals, and plants now thrive under MoD care'* (Information board, Epynt Visitor Centre, 2012).

Situated on the edge of the training area, and in accordance with contemporary sensibilities about accessibility for all, a path (part of the Epynt Way) suitable for walkers, buggies and wheelchairs depart from the visitor centre for a short distance to the east to reach a picnic spot. Interpretation boards are encountered along the way. Through the provision of this infrastructure, the estate managers for the Ministry of Defence are demonstrably working in accordance with requirements for facilitated visitor access to the training area. A walk from here is not difficult.

At this point on the range, the topography is that of gently undulating enclosed fields incised by streams, with blocks of conifer plantations dotted around on the crests of the low hills. This is resolutely agricultural space. Sheep graze. Birds sing. It is quiet. But how inviting is this rural, pastoral space? The walker is directed from the visitor centre, the objective pre-given (a set of picnic benches silhouetted on the skyline), the interpretation ready made by the multiple interpretation boards at intervals along the way-marked track. This is access-enabled land, but the growing feeling as we walk the appointed route is that this is access with all the fun taken out. The markers substitute the need to consult the map, and the wide level track indicates a single destination. Interpretations boards bear the logos of a range of public sector bodies – the Ministry of Defence and rural amenity groups – and inform us of the geology and geomorphology and the historic military features visible, such as the line visible on a hill on the opposite side of the valley indicating the traces of a First World War missile training track. The fact of the institutional logos on the interpretation boards emphasises this as managed space. Explanation here, as with the visitor centre, emanates best practice; any mysteries this place holds evaporate as we walk up the track.

But the mysteries return, of course, and this is a feature of walks on military training areas, the continual switching between that which appears familiar in terms of British agricultural landscapes, that which is explained to the visitor, and that which appears strange, foreign, different or difficult to place within a landscape otherwise so recognisable. A Dutch army truck, its engine running, sits parked at the point where the access track meets the public road, two occupants in uniforms sitting looking bored in the front seats. The sounds of the sheep and the birds are cut across every so often by the sound of small arms fire way off in the distance,

over the hill and up on the plateau. The conifer plantations, such a feature of parts of the British rural landscape in upland areas, are utterly familiar in their rectangular shape, but something in their configuration is different, somehow. Small blocks, spaced at regular intervals, dot across the brow of the hill on one side of the valley. Other blocks, surely of uneconomic size and shape, are angled to one another in relationships at odds with the grain of the rest of the marks of field enclosure. Walking parallel to the edge of one such plantation, we see the familiar planting of spruce at regular intervals, the un-brashed trunks presenting a forbidding inaccessible gloomy interior, the grey and brown of the dry plantation floor coated in dead pine-needles. But we reach the corner of the plantation and see strange litter. A piece of paper showing a table of what we assume to be names (HUNT, KELLY, EKSTEEN, MANN) and numbers and letters (6, 7, 8, T) is gaffer-taped to a tree. A couple of burnt-out glow sticks dangle from a fence. The charcoal remnants of a small fire blacken a patch of ground. Unbranded metallic-effect plastic packaging and a strange canister lie discarded on the path. It is these minor traces which cause pause for thought. There is something indicative of youthful liminality in the glowsticks and the plastic packaging and the burnt-out fire. Something of escape and fun and camping out, something of the pastoral retreat, is suggested by this litter here.

The idea of the pastoral is less odd than might first appear as a notion to invoke in military space. As Kate McLoughlin (2011) elaborates, drawing on the work of Fussell and others, at first sight the notion of war as somehow anti-pastoral has considerable purchase, as a consequence of the configuration of land as a text of war '*recording its prosecution in the script of damaged terrain and denuded vegetation*' (p.84). Literary efforts to represent war more commonly suggest the idea of the battlescape as the antithesis of the pastoral, something oppositional to the latter with its values and associations of rurality, retreat and enhanced cognition. Yet, McLoughlin argues, war may be seen as an inverted pastoral, a space proactively entered rather than withdrawn to, and a state demanding and producing special consciousness, productive of insights not disqualified but rather privileged. There is a lingering sense of this idea of the inverted pastoral in the litter and the glow sticks and the gaffer-taped paper and the burn-out fire. We stand for a while and draw together what we see into a narrative of a rota for guard duty taped to a tree, glow-sticks marking out space, canisters for illumination flares or the concealment provided by coloured smoke, the discarded wrappers from military-issue ration packs, a fire for warmth and comfort, but small and sited to be less visible from afar. The sense of retreat, of privileged use, of what McLoughlin terms a distinct '*psycho-physiologico-physical space*' (p.102) is evident in the remains. It says something about violence, not through the deliberate destruction of this small corner of woodland (it would be stretching a point to see the litter as destruction), but rather through the reach of military power in marking out the most unremarkable, ordinary, uncelebrated corner of a conifer plantation on the side of a shallow Welsh valley as a space for preparations for war. The soldiers (or trainee soldiers) who left the detritus of training behind come to mind, and the inculcation in their bodies and minds of alternative ways of being in the countryside as polar opposites of the leisure camping and festival-going which constitute common contemporary modes of being in rural space. There is something unsettling about the gap between how we read the litter at first sight, and how we interpret it when we remember where we are. There is a sense of infantry training being domesticated here, made safe.

Driving further round to the north of the training area, along the top of the plateau escarpment and its carpark and viewpoint, we pick up the Epynt Way again. I test it out, walking on the designated footpath parallel to the neat, new freshly Tarmac-ed road, closed for civilian vehicle use, looking out to the north and the views of rural lowland Powys, and to the east and south and the views of the Black Mountain. A pair of red kites ride the thermals overhead. There is no-one else on the path, no vehicles on the road. This is civilian access to

military space in all its best-practice glory. But this is not a place to *enjoy* a walk. Those rambles for enjoyment and pleasure are to be had in the far-off places visible miles away from this point on the escarpment, and from our previous stopping point, in the Brecon Beacons National Park to the south. Beyond the views, there is little alluring or enticing about this path. Walking the Epynt Way at this point brings to mind Nick Mirzoeff's quoting of Jacques Rancière, about the modern anti-spectacle as a phenomenon of contemporary visual practices in the War on Terror:

*'The modern anti-spectacle now dictates that there is nothing to see and that instead one must keep moving, keep circulating and keep consuming. The police are above all a certitude about what is there, or rather, about what is not there: 'move along, there's nothing to see'.'* (Mirzoeff, 2005, p.16).

This footpath is anti-spectacle, an anti-footpath. There are no police, of course, insisting that there is nothing to see here, but that idea persists through the walk, a gently insistent voice asserting both the generosity of the military land access management regime that permits such access, and asserting a long-standing argument about military priorities for the uses of such spaces and dismissive of civilian interest in this question. There are no interpretation boards up here. Move along, there is nothing to see, beyond the views way off in the distance.

The Sennybridge Training Area, and the Epynt Way, are strange places to be. The civilian visitor's gaze and movement through this landscape is directed, things are not necessarily as they first appear, and there is, here, a sense of this as a distinctive kind of space. This is not a place of visible and obvious violence, despite its existence as a place for training personnel in the execution of lethal force. The violence lies concealed in the traces that visitors may see, or learn to see, or may not see. It is always there, though; the idea that this is a space purely of civilian agricultural work and rural leisure is not possible to sustain in this space, I think.

## **Otterburn and the Military Sublime**

The Otterburn training area, just over 22,000 hectares of open moorland to the south of the Cheviot, is vast. Occupying one quarter of the Northumberland National Park it encapsulates, depending on your viewpoint, easy co-existence or uncertain antagonism or practiced accommodation between the demands of environmental and landscape protection, British military capabilities to deploy heavy artillery, and the economies of upland sheep farming. Again, as with SENTA, access is facilitated through pathways and interpretation boards, and carefully managed because of the inherent dangers of live artillery firing. This walk requires not exactly courage and not exactly resilience, but at least a certain assertion of purpose, because to proceed to the edge of the range from a small carpark outside the village of Harbottle on the northern edge of the training area requires passing red flags and signs stating quite clearly that the point must not be passed when red flags are flying. Technically, however, the walker passing these flags is still well within the zone of safety, for a public footpath open at all times, live firing or not, takes the walker up and out of the valley of the River Coquet which defines the northern and north-eastern edges of the training area and up to the edge of the plateau. It is a walk I have taken annually for the past four years with a group of students on a military environments and landscapes field course, which I teach.

We walk uphill out of the Coquet valley and stop by a fence and cattle grid on the brow of the hill to look west into the impact area into which live artillery rounds may be fired. There is only really one question to ask at this point. How do you know you are in a military training area? Red flags and warning signs aside, the answers lie in the texture of the terrain. The ground on parts of this military training area, with its hundred-year history of unexploded ordnance, tend not be drained or improved using 20<sup>th</sup> century agricultural technologies.

Beyond the impact area and outside the boundaries of the wider training area, the slopes of the hills are a bright and specific shade of green reflecting the use of fertilizers and the installation of subsurface systems to drain water from boggy ground. Inside the boundaries, the colours of the grasses are more muted, the bracken and gorse survive because of low intensity grazing, and the land just looks different.

We make a sharp left turn, walking up through a wood – one of many conifer plantations which, as at Sennybridge, dot the hillsides. We climb gently and steadily uphill, to emerge from the plantation at the top, and the view is waiting. As a frequent visitor, I know what to expect and watch my students for their reactions. Flat boulders provide seats, Harbottle Lake sits below, and across, looking west, stretching off into the distance, are more impact areas. Through binoculars, and sometimes with the naked eye depending on the light and weather, darker objects are visible strewn across the slopes of the impact area. Tanks. Rusting tanks. Their size gives proportion and perspective to the view, a mechanism for the calibration of distance. The views are immense and the tanks are tiny. When the sun shines here, the students don't want to continue. Here, and at an observation point on the other side of the training area, there is something about this view. We stop and consider the military sublime.

The idea of the sublime, with its roots in Romanticism, is a little outmoded in contemporary landscape writing. The notion of suspending reason and rationality in the face of geomorphology and meteorology sits uneasily with a heritage from the natural and social sciences and humanities, to explore and explain our interactions with landscapes and environments. Kathleen Jamie, for example, is apologetic about just this response to the '*surging sea, the wind, the cliffs' bulk against the night sky*' on a December night on Orkney (2005, p.26). John Wylie (2005) has a thoughtful critique of the concept's utility when talking about walking. But the sublime, the idea of awe and terror as the only possible response to the power of landscape, has a certain utility here. It is there in the response to the view: I notice this in the students as they quieten and gaze. This is more than just being stilled by the visual pleasure of a good vista. The tanks are chilling, unsettling; the observation posts visible on the ridge lines off in the distance are disquietening with their implications of watchfulness. There is something here which brings to mind the words of Simon Norfolk, used in his commentaries about his photographs of Afghanistan in which he attempts to capture something of the awe that these war landscapes invoke, something he identifies as the 'military sublime'. In his articulation of the idea, the military sublime encompasses '*feelings of dread and insignificance in the face not of God but of the power of weaponry*', in its distance from democratic control, its distance from the rational and comprehensible. The military sublime is that which is '*inscrutable, uncontrollable, beyond democracy*' (Manauagh, 2006, npn; Finoki, 2006; see also Lee, 2011). There are echoes of this here, a sensation of unease at the sight of the rusting tanks and pock-marked ground through the binoculars. There is something about this view which is chilling, which stops many of the students in their tracks. In an upland moorland landscape, particularly on non-firing days when the only sounds are those of the wind in the trees and across the grasses, the sudden realisation about the purpose of this space is disturbing. There is something of the military sublime at work, with the sudden realisation of individual insignificance in the face of power.

## **Violence and (in)visibility**

Above all else, military training areas are spaces for preparation in the use of lethal force. For all the MoD, governmental and statutory managerial regimes and practices which portray these spaces in other terms for other users – as wildlife sanctuaries, as places to ramble, as spaces of quiet and solitude – they exist to facilitate preparations for war. The fact that at first sight this

essential function can seem rather obscure or even invisible is significant to the interest these landscapes provoke. The encounters described here, at Sennybridge and at Otterburn, are just two personal responses amongst the multiple possibilities for thinking about military power and space which these landscapes inculcate. In a wider cultural context where military capabilities and activities are overwhelmingly represented through texts and images which prioritize the visible, the dramatic and the obvious, the landscapes of training areas provide an interesting counterpoint because of the ways in which military power can be seen to work, subtly and quietly. Alluring as they often seem, when I leave these spaces I am always slightly relieved. There's something unsettling about the strange visibility of the marks of preparations for violence in these spaces, and in thinking about what these landscapes are actually for, particularly when they are quiet.

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