

Searching for the source

Peter Reason follows the course of the river Avon

When I sold my boat and was no longer able to take long wilderness pilgrimages at sea, I wondered where next to turn for teachings from the wilder world. I decided to follow the course of the river Avon from its source in South Gloucestershire to Avonmouth, where it joins the river Severn. I met with my friend David for our first exploration in late November, near where the Avon is said to rise just north of the village of Acton Turville. It was a cold day, with a clear blue sky and bright sun; the fields were covered with frost. Leaning on a farm gate, we drank coffee laced with whisky and shared a piece of cake. A pied wagtail flew down to drink from a frozen puddle in front of us, tapping at the ice in several places with its beak to no avail, before flying off again.

Refreshed, we set out to find the source. The Ordnance Survey map shows a stream rising next to the mainline railway embankment; but the path was barred by a locked gate and stern notices about trespassing. After some searching, we found a deep ditch, fed by a culvert under the road, choked with brambles and ash saplings. This was as close to the 'source of the Avon' as we were likely to get.

The river is a teacher, and this was the first lesson: the very idea of a 'source' is a construct. Expecting to find a stream bubbling out of the ground, we discovered a rather dirty ditch. As Alice Oswald puts it, "it's a pitiable likeness of clear running struggling to keep up with what's already gone."

On another fine day, I returned alone, exploring the next place the river crossed under the road in a culvert. I caught sight of a shallow hollow meandering across the frost-frozen fields, clearly the river's original course. The low November sun shadow-marked the dried-up stream: one side still glistening white with frost, while opposite,

beads of meltwater clinging to the grass reflected tiny points of light. I followed the watercourse with the railway to my left, the meadow set about by ancient oaks to my right. After a while, the dip opened out into a boggy area with a small pond set about by dried-up grasses

ditched in a straight line. Arriving at the other side of the sticky ploughed field that had blocked our earlier exploration, I felt great satisfaction at joining the ends together.

This was the river's second lesson: there is no clear division between the



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and hawthorn trees. Small birds were making off with the last of the berries.

Upstream, the river disappeared under part of the railway embankment through a low brick arch obscured by a tangle of hawthorn, bramble and nettles, fenced off by strands of barbed wire. A dead oak stood nearby, its massive trunk denuded of bark, gnarled with the patterns of organic growth that were interrupted by two flat planes where branches had been mechanically amputated with a chainsaw.

Finding my way through hedges and over barbed-wire fences, I followed the stream's meander across another field. Beyond that, once again it was

'natural' world and human artifice. In a pattern repeated endlessly downstream, the river ran relatively free and wild, and then merged in places where it was hemmed in and controlled. It is both 'natural', following its inevitable course toward the sea, and at the same time very thoroughly constructed and reconstructed over millennia by human activity. As the French intellectual Bruno Latour points out, our world consists of 'hybrids': 'Nature' and 'culture' entangled in endless multiplicity of forms. **R**

Peter Reason's latest book, *In Search of Grace: An Ecological Pilgrimage*, is published by Earth Books. www.peterreason.eu