

Country diary: Cambrian mountains

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Sunlight breaks through the mist in the mountains of Wales, the Brecon Beacons National Park. Photograph: Oli Scarff/Getty Images

They were as dear to the Great War poet Edward Thomas as they are to me, "The mountain ways of Wales", the roads along which "The next turn may reveal / Heaven". In the grey damp of an August day I follow one that climbs a moorland brow from Llanddewi to descend into Cwm Twrch and join an ancient way, Sarn Helen, in use since the time of those who erected the great megaliths and cairns that resonate across this landscape.

It's more Cormac McCarthy, the apocalyptic American novelist, than Edward Thomas these days. Red road signs above Llanddewi aver its closure; sheets of highway notices enforce the prohibition. Beyond them, the surface is crushed and comminuted by heavy contractors' vehicles hauling timber from clear-felled conifer plantations across Bryn Glas and Bryn Du – the green hill, the black hill. Texture of land there now is raw, ruined outrage. Mametz Wood to Insane Hill hath come! A few dead trunks still stand, stripped and blanched like bone. And investors who grasped Thatcherite opportunity were paid their dividends, earned of land compulsorily purchased decades ago for the commonweal.

That soured land is being washed away. I watch at the ford as the brown Afon Twrch – the pig-river – foams past. A raven calls. I think of US environmentalist Aldo Leopold's prophetic musings on the odyssey of an atom; I think too of how precious is Welsh hill country, as it swills and surges on its way to the sea. Later I mount Esgair Crwys – the shoulder of the cross – and descend towards Cellan. The lane is slick with algae. A dark dog fox leaps a fence stapled between native oaks chainsawed maliciously to the quick, their leaves withering. He entangles momentarily with barbed wire. A brief convulsion and he's free. I look for badger runs in this habitual ground. None are in use: " ... far more ancient and dark / The Combe looks since they killed the badger there." Edward Thomas again – who understood typologies.