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Gabriel Moshenska, Dale Daykin, Yangmengsha Guo, Julia Schmidt, Elise Unwin & Jelena Wehr

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Reading Kipling's *The Land* Through a Lens of Archaeology, Landscape, and English Nationalism

GABRIEL MOSHENSKA 

UCL Institute of Archaeology, London, UK

DALE DAYKIN

UCL Institute of Archaeology, London, UK

YANGMENGSHA GUO

The Palace Museum, Beijing, China

JULIA SCHMIDT

Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies, Bonn, Germany

ELISE UNWIN

UCL Institute of Archaeology, London, UK

JELENA WEHR

UCL Department of Information Studies, London, UK

Rudyard Kipling was enchanted by the Sussex landscape surrounding his house, Bateman's. Many of his stories and poems are set in this landscape, and draw on its rich history, archaeology, and folklore. In this paper we examine Kipling's 1917 poem *The Land*, which weaves together strands of landscape archaeology and nationalist origin mythology. *The Land* is the story of a single Sussex field, its colonial landowners from Roman Britain to the present, and the generations of the peasant Hobden family who care for it. In examining the poem we consider the notions of Englishness that Kipling conjures, their disconnection from the realities of rural Sussex,

their contexts of war and revolution, and the uses of archaeology in the creation of nationalist myth.

KEYWORDS Englishness, landscape, nationalism, poetry, public archaeology, Rudyard Kipling, Sussex

Introduction

Rudyard Kipling's 1917 poem *The Land* is a striking evocation of landscape, archaeology, and Englishness. The poem recounts 1600 years in the history of a single Sussex field, and tells the story of the Hobden family whose knowledge of the landscape is passed down through the generations. With a neatly repetitive structure, *The Land* describes the Hobdens' faithful service and good guidance to a sequence of landowners, from a Roman Tribune of the fourth century to invading Danes, Normans, and finally to the present owner, narrated in the first person (see Eliot, 1963: 275–79). Each generation of owners and labourers leave their mark in the archaeology: cropmarks, flints, and the stumps of wooden piles, creating a material palimpsest that Kipling unweaves into a history.

It is the nature of this narrative history that concerns us here. Kipling deftly mythologized the places he inhabited, from India to New England, and his writings on the Sussex landscape — most notably the *Puck* stories — are enchanting tales of place and time (see Kipling 1948 [1910]; 1975 [1906]). These works and their archaeological elements have been previously explored in Moshenska, 2012). Myths of England, or of any country, tend to follow established patterns and pathways of national self-fashioning. In *The Land* Kipling presents a more than usually tangled set of threads including indigeneity, invasion, and the ownership of land. The result is a recognizably nationalist narrative of collective origins and long lineages. *The Land* is unquestionably an account of roots, of continuity and change, but in its final stanzas it also turns to questions of the ownership and rights to land, and the tensions between indigeneity and what could be described as benevolent colonialism. These tensions and ambiguities raise the questions that we consider in this paper: what type of English national origin myth does Kipling promote in *The Land*? And who, in Kipling's view, are the English? To address these questions we explore the background to Kipling's Sussex writings and the connections that they draw between archaeological remains, nationalist myth, and the nature of England and Englishness.

Kipling at Bateman's

Indian-born writer Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936) is best known today for his short stories, his poems (most famously *If*), and his writing for children including *The Jungle Book*. In 1902 Kipling and his family moved to Bateman's, a seventeenth-century house in Burwash, on the Sussex Weald (Figure 1). Over the previous decade the family had spent time in New England, in Devon, and in the Sussex seaside village of Rottingdean. They spent their summers as guests of the imperialist robber baron Cecil Rhodes in Cape Town, South Africa until his death in 1902



FIGURE 1 Kipling's house, Bateman's.
Photograph by Mike Prince via Wikimedia Commons

(Carrington, 1955). Many of Kipling's stories and poems are set in the Sussex landscape surrounding Bateman's, including the time-slip fantasy stories and poems collected in *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1906) and *Rewards and Fairies* (1910).

Kipling remained at Bateman's until his death in 1936, immersing himself in local folk traditions and learning dialect words from local people, and uncovering traces of the earlier prehistoric, Roman, and medieval inhabitants of the land (Carrington, 1955). Bateman's was rich in archaeological discoveries, most uncovered during work on the land. The excavation of a well revealed a latten spoon, a clay tobacco pipe, and 'the bronze cheek of a Roman horse-bit' (Kipling, 1937: 185). The dredging of an old pond produced a Neolithic polished stone axe 'with but one chip on its still venomous edge' (Kipling, 1937: 185).

Shortly after taking possession of Bateman's the Kiplings borrowed the records from the local church, in an attempt to trace the names of previous owners of the house. Kipling scholar Michael Smith speculates that this study sparked Kipling's interest in the past masters of the estate that culminated in the writing of *The Land* some years later (Smith, 2008).

One of Kipling's sources for Sussex lore was William Isted, a hedger and ditcher who worked on the farm at Bateman's. He was over seventy when the Kiplings moved to the area, a loquacious drinker and a practised poacher. From Isted Kipling learned about local folklore and dialect, while his wife shared her knowledge of Sussex magic. Kipling immortalized Isted in his writings as 'Hobden',

another common Sussex name (Moshenska, 2012). Hobden the Hedger first appears in *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1906) as the friend and confidant of Dan and Una, the young protagonists and fictionalized versions of Kipling's children John and Elsie. In these stories Hobden is a wise and knowing old man, with a deep understanding of nature and his Sussex landscape. He is also on good terms with less earthly creatures of the landscape, including the nature-sprite Puck. Hobden's cottage next to the forge was one of the anchor-points that Kipling used to mark historical continuity in the back-and-forth time slips of the *Puck* stories.

The Land: history

There are allusions to Hobden's forebears in *Puck of Pook's Hill* and *Rewards and Fairies*, but in *The Land* Kipling brought them to centre stage, as symbols of a specific and very much imaginary ideal of the English rural working class. *The Land* was first published in 1917 in *A Diversity of Creatures*, a collection of mostly previously published short stories with accompanying poems. *The Land* was written to accompany *Friendly Brook*, a dark and peculiar tale of accidental death with a vague supernatural feel (Lyon, 1989). *The Land* is set a year earlier, as evidenced by the line *Georgii Quinti Anno Sexto* (the regnal year 1916) that opens the second part of the poem.

The first eleven stanzas give the historical account of the river field at Bateman's and the Hobdens who worked and managed it. The first, 'Hobdenius', is described as a 'Briton', in service to the Roman Sub-Prefect Julius Fabricius during the reign of Diocletian (285–305 CE). This Hobden advises his master that in order to grow hay in the river field it would need drainage ditches dug along and across it. But in advising drainage he makes a revealing statement: 'my father told your father'. This establishes a lineage even from the beginnings of the poem, but it also casts Julius Fabricius — a wholly fictional character — as a British-born Roman. These sons of Empire held a particular fascination for the Indian-born Kipling: Parnesius, the Roman centurion in *Puck of Pook's Hill* is also British-born, and expresses his more fervent loyalty to Roman Britain than to Imperial Rome. Kipling's British-born Romans were remarked upon by archaeologists A. L. F. Rivet (1958: 27) and Richard Hingley (2000: 43) as expressions of Edwardian Britain's ideology of race and empire projected rather simplistically on to Roman Britain.

The drainage ditches that Julius Fabricius decreed at Hobden's urging create the first archaeological traces listed in the poem:

Still we find among the river-drift their flakes of ancient tile
And in drouthy middle August, when the bones of meadows show,
We can trace the lines they followed sixteen hundred years ago.

Roman tile amongst the river pebbles, and cropmarks revealed in dry or 'drouthy' weather: each time period in the poem adds a layer or two to the archaeological palimpsest from which Kipling unpicks the story of the lower river field, placing each segment in its relation to the present. Kipling employs a similar trope in the

poem *Puck's Song*, a piece worthy of archaeological consideration in its own right (Kipling, 1975 [1906]).

After the decline of Roman Britain, the land comes into the possession of Ogier the Dane, one of the 'robbers [who] enter[ed] Britain from across the Northern main'. Unlike the wholly fabricated Fabricius, Ogier has a long and rich mythical pedigree. First appearing in the *Song of Roland* as a knight of Charlemagne, Ogier makes later appearances in various guises in several Arthurian and medieval Scandinavian romances. In as far as these have any basis in fact, Ogier is thought to be based in part on the Frankish knight Autcharius Francus (Cresswell, 2014; Møller Jensen, 2007).

In consultation with yet another Hobden who has 'known that bit o' meadow now for five and fifty year', Ogier has his men bring chalk from the Downland to the Weald to spread across the field. The use of lime, limestone, chalk, and similar base additives is a common agricultural practice intended to reduce soil acidity and increase crop yields (Tarlow, 2007: 54). The imported stone brings with it small flints that remain in the soil after the chalk has dissolved away: these are the next layer of the lower river field's archaeological palimpsest.

Kipling's interest in the British-born children of empire extends to Ogier's sons, who in his words 'grew English — Anglo-Saxon was their name'. With this, the troublingly Germanic origins of the English is neatly avoided. Britain in 1917 was ferociously anti-German, three years into a bloody World War and two years since Kipling's only son John was killed at the Battle of Loos (Carrington, 1955; Panayi, 1991). In that climate even a fictional Anglo-Saxon invader of Britain was likely too much to bear, and the conveniently Danish or mildly French Ogier was a more palatable alternative. In Denmark itself, the legend of Ogier or 'Holger' was a figure of folklore, subject of a popular opera and a tale by Hans Christian Andersen (Elkington, 1999). In the eighteenth century, and again in the Second World War, Holger became a symbol of Danish opposition to Germany, a feature that might have further endeared him to Kipling, although there is no evidence that he was aware of this particular context. The writing of origin myths is as much a matter of elision as it is invention, and the resolutely Germanic Anglo-Saxons have troubled British nationalists for many years.

The third historic landowner in *The Land* is William of Warenne, gifted the lower river field by William I in the aftermath of the Norman Conquest. Unlike Julius Fabricius and Ogier, William de Warenne was a real historic figure who fought at the Battle of Hastings, and was rewarded for his longstanding loyalty to the new king with land and manors in East Anglia, Yorkshire, and Sussex (Loyd, 1933). Whether he owned the land that Bateman's now stands on is doubtful. As the brook in full flood eats away at its banks along the lower river field, William consults his bailiff, another Hobden, who advises the use of wooden piles to reinforce the sides of the watercourse. These piles of willow, elm, and oak are long gone, but traces remain:

And when the spates of Autumn whirl the gravel-beds away
You can see their faithful fragments, iron-hard in iron clay.

Despite these and other allusions to the archaeology and the periodic flooding, the poem gives surprisingly little information about the field itself, its specific

uses (although we can deduce it is intended for arable farming), general appearance, or location.

The Land: present

The final six stanzas of the poem take place in the present day of 1916, and focus on the landowner's reflections on rights to the land: his, enshrined in laws, 'power and profits'; and Hobden's, grounded in centuries or millennia of lineage and labour:

His dead are in the churchyard — thirty generations laid.
 Their names were old in history when Domesday Book was made;
 And the passion and the piety and prowess of his line
 Have seeded, rooted, fruited in some land the Law calls mine.

Hobden's metaphorical 'ownership' of the land, in Kipling's view, is derived from two sources. The first and foremost is his 'line' cited above, stretching back into pre-history. The second is his personal depth of understanding of the land itself: some learned or passed down the generations, and some gained through long experience. This makes him, in Kipling's view, 'bailiff, woodman, wheelwright, field-surveyor, engineer'. The application of these skills benefits Kipling as his employer, but they are also the basis of his skill as a poacher. Hobden's poaching is the subject of the three final stanzas, which comment both on his cunning, and on the landowner narrator's reluctance to bring the force of the law against him:

Shall I dog his morning progress o'er the track-betraying dew?
 Demand his dinner-basket into which my pheasant flew?
 Confiscate his evening faggot under which my conies ran,
 And summons him to judgment? I would sooner summons Pan.

The tone of this final part of the poem is one of near-adulation for Hobden, his land-wisdom, and his lineage, leading up to the final lines: 'whoever pays the taxes old Mus' [Master] Hobden owns the land'. However symbolic or hyperbolic this might be, it remains a politically charged statement about land, landscape, and Englishness. The image of the pheasant has particular resonance: Corinne Fowler traces their 'aristocratic pastoral' symbolism in poems from the seventeenth century, through Pope, Betjeman, and *The Land*, and onwards to Plath and beyond (2020: 104–05).

Gilbert (1993) argues that many of Kipling's narratives, including the *Puck* time-slip tales and *The Land*, should be read as ghost stories in which history and its characters still exist within the landscape. It is the past, through these enduring figures and their archaeology, 'that most solidly occupies the world' and what follows is 'a present that's ephemeral, impotent, dispossessed', the true 'ghost' of the story (Gilbert, 1993: 100–01). *The Land* is, at least in part, a manifestation of Kipling's anxieties about displacement and dislocation, the decline of the English countryside and empire: themes that he habitually returned to throughout his career (Gilbert, 1993).

In the concern with lineage and change, *The Land* reflects Kipling's keen awareness that — with the death of his son in battle — his own male line had come to an

end. *The Land* is a resolutely male poem, almost biblical in its recitation of dynasties: and as Murfin notes, 'Englishness is to this day as male as it is southern and rural' (1987: 105). The question of future lineages — perhaps too painful to Kipling at that moment — is left unanswered. There is no mention in *The Land* of younger Hobdens, leaving the future of this apparently timeless breed unclear (in the *Puck* stories we meet Hobden's son the Bee Boy, see Kipling 1975 [1906]).

As a son of empire, lacking deep genealogical roots in any particular place, Kipling finds his continuity as the inheritor of Julius Fabricius, Ogier, and William de Warenne's estates and social status. Which, given his near fetishization of the idea of imperial authority (Howe, 1982; Orwell, 1946), is hardly surprising. These themes of stability, responsibility, dispossession, and landscape would influence the brand of nationalism to which Kipling subscribed and the type of national origin myth he created in *The Land*.

Hobden the Englishman

Hobden as hedger and poacher represents a view of the English countryside that Kipling held dear: unchanging, traditional, and spared from what he and other romantics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw as the degeneration of urban life post-industrial revolution. Hobden is a classic example of the lower-class Kipling subject as described by Orwell: 'patriotic, feudal, a ready admirer of his officers' (Orwell, 1946). For Kipling, the rural peasantry held the last traces of real, unadulterated English culture in their folk songs and craft traditions, their dialects (reported phonetically) and their dances, all of them — at the time — assiduously collected and recorded by well-intentioned scholars. Alun Howkins has cast a critical eye across Kipling's imaginary rural Sussex, and places him firmly within this tradition:

Sharp and Vaughan Williams in music, Thomas [and] the Georgians in literature, Philip Webb and Lutyens in architecture, as well as a host of reformers like Ebenezer Howard, Rider Haggard and the 'back-to-the-landers' sought to carry through a similar project. In a very real sense they (and Kipling) succeeded. The impression that there is a kind of continuity, that as Cobbett put it 'we are all deserters from the plough', is probably a dominant one in English society, as is the belief that rural life is somehow more natural and English. (Howkins, 1987: 28)

Howkins is at pains to emphasize the fantasy nature of Kipling's landscape. Burwash, like much of the Sussex Weald, was affected by the Swing Riots of 1830 and their brutal suppression, and by the late nineteenth century the area saw the rise of modern farming methods including intensive chicken farming (Howkins, 1987: 26–29) (Figure 2). Kipling seems a little more conscious of this transformed landscape in his later works, including his 1917 poem *Natural Theology* and the 1926 poem 'Very Many People', in which the incoming hordes of civilization have driven the Old Gods from the land (Kipling, 2001).

How literally are we meant to take the Hobden lineage? That Kipling calls the first Briton 'Hobdenius' suggests a more playful approach, where the broader



FIGURE 2 View of fields and the landscape around Burwash.
Public domain image via Wikimedia Commons

point is one of the continuities of rural peasant wisdom and experience passed through generations. But the reference to ‘thirty generations’ of Hobdens buried in the churchyard suggests at least some literalness, raising the question of Englishness and race.

The idea of an unbroken line of Hobdens stretching back millennia proved particularly attractive to the noted right-wing ideologue John Derbyshire, whose views on race verge on extremist fantasy. Derbyshire asserts that the population of the British Isles is little changed since the Mesolithic and that Kipling apparently ‘knew this all by instinct and imagination’, as evidenced by his creation of the character of Hobden (Derbyshire, *n.d.*).

Myths of the English

Ogier’s sons, the neatly de-Germanicized Anglo-Saxons, exemplify the perils facing any English nationalist who cares to search for racial origins. For centuries, fantasists of English origins have held up rather optimistic visions of stray Trojans, enterprising Phoenicians, and most neatly of all the Lost Tribes of Israel returning one by one to their promised land, so that waves of invasion and immigration can be neatly homogenized under a single blessed covenant (MacDougall, 1982). In the face of Defoe’s view of the English as a ‘mongrel half-bred race’, Kipling presents us with a new origin mythology of social hierarchy, albeit for a single family and a

single patch of English land (Anderson, 2006: x). As Helen Wickstead has pointed out, in English art and literature 'the nation has often been imagined as a *field*; a bounded land' (2008: 25). What Wickstead calls 'scenic nationalism' takes certain landscapes as symbols of the nation as a whole, and links true Englishness — as in the case of Hobden — to 'those who are authentically *of that landscape*' (2008: 30).

What does it mean to call *The Land* a myth, rather than a fiction or a history? National myths are heart-warming tales, not empirical claims — as Lowenthal notes, 'that myths are batty and irrational does not spoil their worth. Camelot and the Grail lack historical integrity but carry psychological weight' (Lowenthal, 1998: 18). As Schöpflin (1997), Kumar (2013), and others have observed, a nation's myths are a bricolage of fantasy and history, inlaid with fragments of truth, told as a story 'more akin to poetry than to historiography' (Kumar, 2013: 95). This precisely describes Kipling's teaming of the real William de Warenne with the mythical Ogier and the wholly invented Julius Fabricius.

National myths hold up a mirror to a nation's vanities, aspirations, and self-fashioning. They exaggerate and emphasize chosen characteristics that a population believe (or choose to believe) unique or distinctive to their own nation, creating a stereotype of sorts (Assmann, 1995). The exaggerated or grotesque aspects of Kipling's mythology in *The Land* are, therefore, particularly revealing of his own concerns and prejudices as an eloquent and wildly influential propagandist of Britain and Empire.

Brown (2000) identifies two primary means of construction of nationalist myths with different emotional appeals. A myth of common ancestry, which uses claims of shared descent and appeals to ideas like kinship to provide a sense of unity and authority; and a myth of community continuity, where claims of a 'permanent, fixed, homeland' and appeals to anxieties and insecurities about a changing modern world to provide a sense of stability and identity (Brown, 2000: 23–25). Kipling's origin myth for the English in *The Land* is firmly in the latter camp. Whilst the many Hobdens have a shared ancestry, what unites them with Julius Fabricius, Ogier, and William de Warenne is not a shared bloodline but an unchanging landscape and an understanding of their responsibilities as part of an enduring social hierarchy. By adhering to these responsibilities, they have maintained stability and avoided dispossession, even continuing to exist on the land long after their demise through the archaeology they left behind. However, despite each landowner leaving his mark, the land itself remains constant. The river continues to flow and flood, so Hobden must continue to advise and his master must continue to listen. This motif of landscape continuity provides 'a sense of comfort and security' in an English countryside that was in reality undergoing rapid change (Gazeley, 2002).

Archaeology plays a distinctive and well-attested role in the creation and reinforcement of nationalist myth, from the Arthurian folklore of prehistoric sites to the more modern uncritical use of temporal/cultural categories like 'Celt' or 'Anglo-Saxon'. Tying artefacts and monuments into mythological narratives serves to anchor them in place, ground them in reality, and give them a general air of authenticity (Paphitis, 2020). This serves different purposes: the many different sites identified as Arthur's Camelot illustrate the publicity value, the financial

benefits, and the impacts on regional identity that a well-mythologized archaeological site can provide.

Whose land?

Kipling published *The Land* in 1917 in the shadow of a devastating war and the seeds of a revolution that together would destroy the Russian, German, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman Empires. The Russian Revolution in particular sent shockwaves around the world, with the sense of old social orders under threat of sudden, radical change. These external threats shed a different light on Kipling's reflections on heredity, social hierarchy, land, and power. The nationalist myth-making in Kipling's Sussex writings has been described as a response to anxieties over the future of the British empire, even before the First World War (e.g., Chen, 2011). To return to the questions we posed earlier: what kind of England and Englishness is Kipling celebrating in *The Land*, and to whom does it belong?

Aside from the slight aversion to Anglo-Saxons, it would be a mistake to look to the poem for a coherent myth of English ethnic origins. On the surface, there are two contrasting narratives at play: England as the product of waves of invasion and immigration, and the timeless and eternal rural English peasantry represented by Hobden and his line. To reconcile these, we argue that Kipling is outlining the origins not of a single population, but of a social structure — in a simplified, feudal form he is valorizing the relationship between master and servant, landowner and peasant. The imperial reflections of this vision are not difficult to see, particularly in the relationship between the Briton and the British-born Roman.

Why does *The Land* heap so much adoration upon the poacher Hobden? By nature and lineage he is happy to serve a master, even an invading or immigrant one. He is tied to the land by his intimate knowledge of it and by his dead, with no cosmopolitan or migratory dreams. Unlike, say, Russian serfs he enjoys a degree of freedom in his work and a blind-eye to his lesser crimes — and therefore, we can infer, is far less likely to take up hammer or sickle against his masters. He is neither a Swing Rioter nor a sepoy mutineer, but rather a symbol of constancy — enduring Englishness — in a world turned upside-down. Ridgwell's (2018) exploration of Hobden as poacher further illuminates this point, and the intricacy of tacit social relations in Kipling's Sussex landscape.

The land belongs to Hobden, as Kipling states, but only (aside from his poaching) in the sense of stewardship. The profits from the land and the labour belong to the landowners, but perhaps this would not have occurred to Kipling, whose farm at Bateman's made consistent losses, to the quiet amusement of his neighbours (Nicolson 2018). Only the fortune in royalties from his writings kept Kipling's rural fantasy land afloat and allowed him to play the role of gentleman farmer, antiquarian, and benevolent landlord.

ORCID

Gabriel Moshenska  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4926-072X>

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Notes on contributor

Correspondence to: Gabriel Moshenska. Email: g.moshenska@ucl.ac.uk