



SEVERANCE BY FIRE AND WATER

ANNA STENNING

'The fell and fen his fastness was, the marches his haunt.'¹

Present

My friend Mary and I are about to walk the ten miles from Colchester to a brown-green island off the Essex coast (it is accessible at most tides). She is from a sunny place that many people imagine escaping to. I am a native of this flat and muddy part of the world. I spent my first four years on the island that is our destination. It is a cold, amorphous day and the ground is sodden and lumpy. My map-reading skills are hopeless, yet my enthusiasm for walking is almost boundless. Mary accepts this as a fair exchange. We're doing this as something of a 'project', but for me it is a pilgrimage.

Our target is Mersea Island. Let me create no illusions. It is a desolate spot, and sets the scene for a ghost story. I have brought people here who have found it nothing special, even ugly. The island is about five miles long and two miles wide, shaped like a native oyster. There are two villages, encircled by farm land, and an umbilical causeway, or Strood, linking to what people ambiguously refer to as 'England'. The solid

land is protected by salt marshes. There are few buildings of note, or other signs of culture. Perhaps there is little that is obviously beautiful, but it offers a glimpse of the wild.

These days, I have no purpose here, other than this strange peregrination: this is a place of fishermen, farmers and families. Blending in with tourists as a 'grockle', the Mersea word for outsider, I'm not at home here. I have conducted exploratory missions into the family 'archives' (a collection of people's memories and photos), to find out what drew my grandparents to this island. But most of the recorded genealogy is focused on grander narratives of colonialism and conquest by my grandfather's Anglo-Irish ancestors: some glorious naval battles, a cardboard-box millionaire and the earls of Courtown. There is little in the way of details on my grandparents' flight to Essex: a story of my great-grandmother tipping her cigarette ash carelessly on passers-by from an upstairs window in a seaside house near Dublin. My grandmother's brother turning up with his young wife pregnant and cast out by the parents in Suffolk, and granddad using his erudition to convince the local vicar to marry them. Holding, as a child, a beige, fabric parasol

that belonged to the great-grandmother – granny glasses, my brother called her. Then, photographs of Christmas dinners at my parents’ later home in the town. Now, antiques, prized by my mother. Perhaps the smell of the sea, sky, wind and mud, will give me clues.

I’m doing this a lot lately: looking at history, natural and otherwise, to understand the present. I’m no expert, but it’s something I’ve overlooked before. The simple act of naming and recording can help me protect something sacred – a memory or a place. Nothing I know can make that experience more vivid, but it can stop me losing all these recollections. A strong impression means more to me than a reductive theory: a curlew’s discordant cry, rising up from the Strood, is beautiful, whatever else I know.

Mary and I take the path along the south side of the river Colne in the industrial east of the town. Here was a thriving port until the eighties, and the various corrugated-iron roofed warehouses have been left pretty much as they were since I first saw them, except with more holes (I remember learning when I was a child that wheat was then transported out of the Colne out along the North Sea and to the Thames). We pass the evidence of civilisation’s distress: dumped mattresses, mini-fridges, graffiti. Various groups of young men walk the concrete path, smoking and chatting.

Along from the muddy path to the red-brick village of Rowhedge, with its new design-guide houses along the waterfront, boatbuilders’ terraces climb the hill past a mysterious white, octagonal church. We cross a football pitch, through a tangled copse of blackthorn and brambles thriving high up on a former rubbish tip, down to the Roman River. We head south west, walking through farmland around the edges of the Army’s firing ranges. The laces of my boots collect spiny burs from burdock. The fields here are marked with large white signs: ‘DANGER’ (red flags appear as further evidence).

The staccato of the machine guns blends with the distant hum of traffic, creating an edgy soundtrack to our journey. The god of war had a temple in Colchester during the Iron Age, and his spirit pervades even the edge lands of the garrison town. Two dead pheasants are arranged in a tree as though they were a sacrifice for a giant fox or some ancient tree spirit, or a warning to us in this unpeopled place. Joining the main road, my cerebral cortex clanks up a gear as cars whoosh past us. I notice items of rubbish in the midst of pavement grime. You’d think it would blend in – caffeine drinks cans, cheap beer – but each one brings a strange sort of surprise. To which god are these offerings made?



Past

Some background on our island retreat: in Saxon times it was Mersig, meaning island (*sig*) of the pool or mere (*mer*), evolving to Meresai by 1086.² The ghost story, famous locally, invokes Roman legionnaires crossing the Pyefleet channel from the capital of Roman Britain, to visit a commander who lived among the obstructive mudflats. They travelled from Colchester, the largest garrison town today, which was the first city on these wild islands. Tonnes of building materials – wood, sand, clay and gravel – were brought in from the Essex wastelands to construct bricks and mortar housing. This was a place to mark emperor Claudius’s great victory over the savages, a *Colonia Victricensis*.³ Later, the Romans moved to London, after Boudiccan Revolt. William the Conqueror built his castle on the site of the former Roman temple to Claudius. The Temple had been built on the shrine to the Iron Age god of war. So what was gained was measured, each time, in terms of what was replaced.

Daniel Defoe, Essex’s first entrepreneur, eyed up Mersea Island as a strategic location in the 18th century.⁴ In 1848, East Mersea had just 300 residents and the rest remained ‘diversified in hill and dale, and richly wooded’, according to Samuel Lewis in his *Topographical Dictionary of England*.⁵ The 20th century saw a rise in population of West Mersea and increase in tourism through sailing, and as an escape from urban Essex. There was a golf club and a yachting fraternity which persists: the regatta every August mixes the sailing classes with a fun fair and other boozy Essex revelry.

Present

We’re at the Strood by 1pm. Muddy islands, miniature universes, lie between the arterial creeks of the salt marsh that surround the curve on the west of the island. The glasswort (or samphire) is now autumn pink-red, the most striking colour in this landscape apart from a deep green-blue grass which seems to have inhaled the tidal water. To the left is a ditch, then a verge of overgrown grass, then farmers’ fields. On a final stretch, I see the graveyard that marks the beginning of the village, where my grandparents, great grandmother and great uncle, now lie buried. Emily. Robert. John Desmond (Dessie) and Dorothy. Or Dobbie. Gazing down the hill at us. The last section of seawall runs past a caravan park, which appears deserted – it is a curiously lonely spot for a vacation.

The sound of rigging clanging, an aerial communication of the boats, greets us as we reach the first houses in the City, the former



heart of the village of West Mersea. There are about a thousand moorings in the creeks surrounding in the island. The boats' jangling joins the heady chorus of cries from gulls and geese flapping against the wind. We arrive at the Blackwater Pearl cafe. I am thinking of Sabine Baring-Gould's *Mehalah*.⁶ This is a Brontësque novel set on Mersea Island, published in 1880.

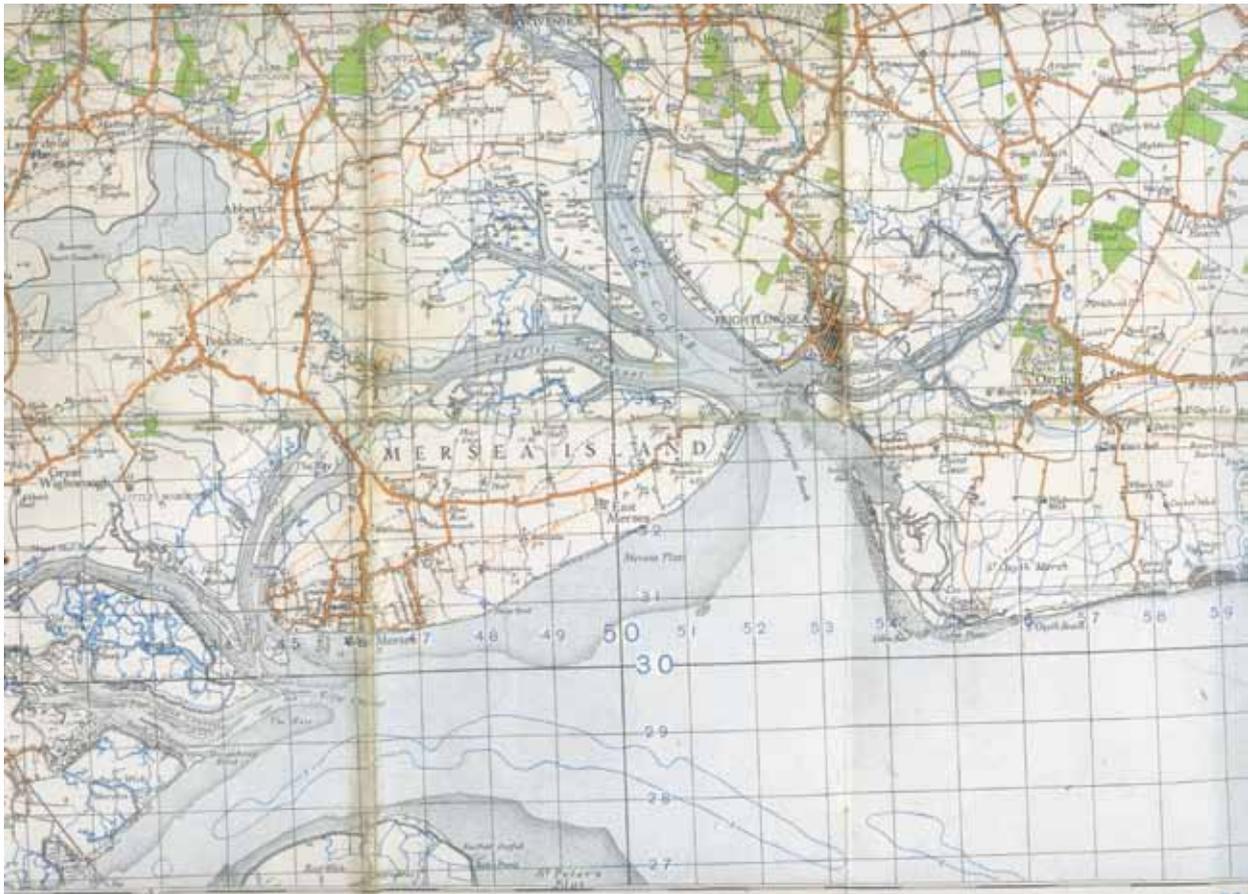
I picture the belligerent character of Mrs De Witt, the hero's grog-soused mother, with her oyster smack moored here at the hard, constantly concerned to protect her 'wittals' (or victuals) and 'wessel' (the boat), in the perpetual gloom of a 19th-century Gothic romance. Now it is, on this Sunday, full of families eating Mediterranean shellfish, and the sailing classes sporting Joules-brand clothing in the emerging sun. Students anchored to their friends jump into taxis. No smugglers, nor even many fishermen, and no curious lispng locals. But somewhere on this island the fictional characters' real ancestors remain: the Mussets as well as the De Witts.

Despite spending ten years in a rectory on the island, Sabine Baring-Gould didn't think much of Mersea. In his *Further Reminiscences* he creates the image of a wasteland: '[t]he island is extended seaward by mud flats for a mile, over which the tide flows. Towards the island the clay has been dug out so as to form a sea-wall on the land side, leaving a channel between the fields and the flats, and this channel is

filled with decaying marine and animal matter, producing an intolerable stench that pervades the air when the tide goes out and forms a breeding place for myriads of mosquitoes. Between Mersea and the mainland is a dismal tract of marsh, with dykes and a channel or run of mud and water - a famous district for wild-fowl shooting and the catching of ague [a type of Malaria].⁷ Baring-Gould's dystopian island contrasts oddly with the Mersea of *Mehalah*, which serves as a melancholic reminder of the heroine's enchanting wildness (her nickname is Glory).

The Mersea I recognise through my sojourns on the island is constructed from the sounds of wild birds; the light shining on an island across the creek that appears through the gloom as though for the first time; clouds that lay their shadows on a patchwork of fields and water, so that sky and land unite. It is made from breaths of salty air and sappy vegetation; the image of an elderly figure moving slowly through narrow lanes and sheltered fields. Eyes taking in an expanse of land created afresh with each tide, and the endless horizon.

'A more desolate region can scarce be conceived, yet it is not without beauty,' admits Gould at the start of *Mehalah*. 'In summer the thrift mantles the marches with shot satin, passing through all gradations of tint from maiden's blush to lily white. Thereafter, a purple glow steals over the waste, as the sea lavender bursts into flower, and simultaneously



every creek and pool is royally fringed with sea aster.' Alone, solitary and scholarly, Gould didn't care much for the people on the island, nor the festivals and celebrations of life anchored to the sea. The contrasts of shelter and an elemental force that drags you out of yourself.

Ancient History

My uncle Chris, who was a fisherman here in the seventies, would bring buckets of mackerel and oysters to my grandparents' home, before modern trawlers decimated the oceans. I learned to speak in a terraced house on Queen Anne Road in West Mersea, and my brother discovered his appetite for adventure by cycling to the wild east of the island. Until I was four, my mother and I spent every day in a disused beach hut, making sandcastles and staring at the sea.

My grandfather came to Hingham in Norfolk from Dalkey, just outside Dublin on the coast, in the 1930s – going blind, kicked out of Trinity College because of this, parents running out of money – to become a farm labourer and marry my peasant grandmother. When he eventually took an office job, he chose Mersea because of its proximity to the sea. My parents met through my grandparents' architect neighbour who, in the socially levelled island shared my grandfather's love of sailing. As a child I always felt I was out of my depth with my family's history and the male tradition of sailing.

Nanny's kitchen, however, offered comfort. While I could barely talk, I recall making pastry on her blue-and-

white painted table. She could measure the ingredients by eye as daughter of a country estate's cook, flour carefully hoarded in the 1930s pantry, with its smell of orange squash, cocoa, biscuits, tins and gin. She would ask, 'Anna, would you like some orange squash, a biscuit, some crisps?' She was a natural with children, a tiny woman with a commanding presence and six siblings. Granddad, dozing, listening to cricket with his oversized headphones in the living room, playing 1940s big-band songs on the old upright piano, his pipe lost somewhere in the house, or drinking his murky and volatile home brew.

Granddad sailed, with my uncle for eyes when he was still a child – who knows how they did it? Poor eyesight craved immersion the slop and whirl of a choppy sea. He taught me how to swim, the schoolboy diving champion of Blackrock Island. Once, when I was eighteen, he asked me to record the sounds of conversations in pubs in Dublin and the waves on stony beaches, which he missed, and please would I bring some seaweed for him to smell, before his memories washed away? Big hands like paddles would pour local seaweed onto the garden to grow potatoes. In his last active years, he'd take his wheelbarrow down St Peter's Road, past the spring to the beach at Monkey House, stopping off in at the White Hart for more beer and gossip.

I wish Granddad had taught me to sail, but it didn't occur to me at the time that this was an elitist and expensive hobby. The boys went on grand adventures around the world, and dissected boats and machines on the garden and in the garage, and reported back to us what wonders

and truths they discovered. I was coerced into taking part in piano competitions, because it had been decided that I would become a professional musician. My grandparents' house was a place where we had parties, opened presents, sang together and, mostly, ate.

My father was an urban man and felt out of his element, preferring coffee and cigarettes to roast dinners, and would sit with a building design on the dining table. He had no interest in the sea or other such wilderness, as a hobbit-like Stenning from the Sussex downs. When we left the island, I became a creature of a sub-urban wilderness. I can still remember smelling the fumes for the first time.

Space

Forgive me, reader, but the next journey is entirely imaginary. I am travelling through time, around the periphery of this five-mile island. Along the road from Colchester, ten miles away, like those legionnaires. Only I'm searching for something, measured against certain ideas, the nature around me, and the places and people of my inner landscape. Maybe I'm trying to prove something: look, I can tell stories too, and make them come alive. Not tales that fit into the family archives, but I can reflect the world as I see it. I'm hoping that I'll find a new direction by going back to the beginning. But to do this, I shall embark on my own, albeit rather Gothic, journey.

Sabine Baring-Gould, vicar of East Mersea for ten years in the late 19th Century, had a curious fascination with folklore, and his *Book of Werewolves* (first published 1865) is one of the most widely cited authorities on the mythology of lycanthropy. It also starts with a journey: arriving in Champigny-le-Sec in rural Western France, Baring-Gould intends to visit a druid relic, to be warned not to venture out for fear of the *loups-garoux*.⁸

Baring-Gould's Gothic imagery is an exceptional starting point for getting lost on Mersea island. In the right light, on a bleak day, you can understand his inspiration in the shadows on the horizon across the saltings. His island sets a perfect backdrop to a doomed romance. *Mehalah*, like the myths of the Orford Merman, medieval wildmen, or King Canute, reiterates the infeasibility of taming the wild. When poverty and illness lead *Mehalah*'s ageing mother to seek out Elijah Rebow's mansion, the young heroine resists a role as his mistress. Her captor laments '[t]hat girl is the curse and ruin of me and of this house. She might have made me happy and built up my prosperity and family ... Yet she is destined for me.'⁹

Real island women have been more literally caged. Just to the north east of Baring-Gould's church is an unusual grave, with iron hoops over it. A cast-iron plaque reads 'Sarah Wrench died 6th May 1848 aged 15 years and 5 months'. Sarah had been a wild youth, and was buried in the sinners side of the church because she was pregnant when she died. The cage was to prevent grave robbers from taking the body during the frenzy for anatomical experiments.¹⁰

There are also real stories about suspected witches. According to the first major review of documents on the

Assizes for information on witch trials, there were four victims from Mersea. Margaret Prior and Thomas Harvey, 1589, (West), Elizabeth Maun, 1591, and Joan Colson, 1584 (East). Many think that suspicions of witchcraft were a bottom-up business by ignorant locals. In fact, between 1563 and 1736 it was royal decree that led to the persecution of suspected witches. Against another myth: although 95 percent of victims were women, and in Essex it was higher, men could also be witches. Alan Macfarlane argues that those accused of witchcraft were generally older, poorer and non-conforming woman who were scapegoats for a community's misfortune.¹¹ This conforms with the little we know about Joan Colson from the Witham Assizes:

Colson, Joan. East Mersea, spinster, indicted for murder by witchcraft. On 12 Jan, 1581 at East Mersea she bewitched John son of Richard Wager so that he died on 10 March. On 30 June 1583 she bewitched Richard, son of Richard Kennett, so that he died on 20 Aug. Guilty; remanded without sentence.¹² [She didn't survive prison conditions.]

Keith Thomas argues that a shortage of resources led to the spate of trials in the late Elizabethan era.¹³ However, the law against witchcraft was enacted through fear of ungodliness, and horoscopes that predicted the Virgin Queen's demise. The most prolific Essex witchfinder, Matthew Hopkins, prospered after accusations dwindled in the rest of the country, benefiting from his connections with the city.

Like these poor misfits, a writer can conduct sorcery of the imagination. Perhaps the most exemplary practitioner is Alan Moore, spokesman for the occult, who takes the voice of a young woman condemned to death by burning in *Voice of the Fire*:¹⁴

We had our fun, and at the end of it they fetched us out and burned us both to dust. They had a stronger magic. Though their books and words were lifeless, drear and not so pretty as our own ... Our Art concerns all that may move or change in life, but with their endless writ they seek to make life still, that it soon shall be suffocated, crushed beneath their manuscripts.¹⁵

Sitting at my grandmother's kitchen table, lighting candles. Hundreds of them, for no good reason other than I would not have been allowed to do this at home. And now, this writing feels like a form of witchcraft, mixing images of fire and water. This imagining allows me to conjure my grandmother's spirit in ways that photos or stories cannot. Are women like fire, in my mind, in their guises as kind and tragic grandmother, demanding mother? Is it the power I discern in them? Wondering about the significance of burning as a punishment for witches, I randomly came across the philosopher Gaston Bachelard's 'psychoanalysis' of fire:

Fire is the ultra-living element. It is intimate and it is universal. It lives in our heart. It lives in the sky. It rises from the depths of the substance and offers itself with the warmth of love. Or it can go back down into



the substance and hide there, latent and pent up, like hate and vengeance. Among all phenomena, it is really the only one to which there can be so definitely attributed the opposing values of good and evil. It shines in Paradise. It burns in Hell. It is gentleness and torture. It is cookery and it is apocalypse.¹⁶

Aged 15, my brother gave me a wart by rubbing his hand on mine. When the doctor's remedy didn't work, my grandmother pulled a shiny purple-and-pink broad bean across it and buried it. It soon disappeared. And when I was very young, girls played 'princesses', but they always needed a witch to emphasise their femininity.

Later, I tried to play the part of a princess as a bride-to-be, and got a white dress and pointy shoes. I was to marry a man who turned out to have a nasty temper, but the role didn't suit me. He took my book away because he saw me escape into it, tore the shirt off my back until I nearly burst with fear. He didn't know that that in the guise of a witch, I had the power of flight. When I retreated from our home in Witham to the suburbs, my mum was brave enough to send him away. I couldn't. I've adapted to plodding along on muddy paths, a slow-burner.

Present

I cannot begin to tell you how much I love the smell and sounds of the salt marsh. Sometimes, immersing swimming in the mud-heated waters leaves things clearer, whenever words are lost. It is a paradise in which to relieve a searing memory.

Such as: my grandfather standing in his living room challenging us to bail out the room of water, his brain eroded by Alzheimer's. Nanny, constantly lamenting, forgetting to eat. The people who gave my family a story and a sense of place, sank deep into the wilderness of their minds.

Mary and I catch the bus back. Feet aching. It's dark now, and cold, but we've performed the beating of the bounds. I catch a whiff of my grandmother's home on my clothes and a feeling of home. And I think about, not just my grandparents, but their parents, too, and their fire that glimmers on through my life. 

¹ From the Old English epic poem 'Beowulf.' Michael Alexander (trans) (London: Penguin, 1973).

² Mersea Museum, 'A Brief History of Mersea Island (based on an article by Elsie M Karbacz)' (n/d) WWW documents <http://www.merseamuseum.org.uk/mmhistory.php/>.

³ M. Ibeji, 'Roman Colchester: Britain's First City' (n/d) WWW documents <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/romans/colchester_01.shtml> (April 2010).

⁴ Daniel Defoe, *Tour Through the Eastern Counties* [1724] (Ipswich: East Anglian Magazine Ltd, 1949).

⁵ S. Lewis, 'A Topographical Dictionary of England' [1848] WWW documents <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=51145>> (April 2010)

⁶ S. Baring-Gould, *Mehalah: A Story of the Salt Marshes* (London: John Murray, 1880).

⁷ S. Baring-Gould, *Further Reminiscences 1864-1894* (London: John Lane The Bodley Head Ltd, 1925) p37.

⁸ S. Baring-Gould, *The Book of Werewolves* [1865] (New York: Cosimo, 2008), p2.

⁹ Baring-Gould, *Mehalah*, p222.

^{10, 11} Tony Millat, 'Sarah Wrench, died 5 May 1848, buried East Mersea' (May 2009) WWW documents <<http://www.merseamuseum.org.uk/mmresdetails.php>>

¹² J.S. Cockburn (ed), 'The Witham Assizes of July 1584', in *Calendar of assize records. Home circuit indictments, Elizabeth I and James I*, (London: HMSO 1985).

¹³ Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in sixteenth and seventeenth century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹⁴ Alan Moore, *The Voice of the Fire* (Marietta GA Top Shelf Productions, 2009).

¹⁵ Moore, p248.

¹⁶ Gaston Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* (Boston MA: Beacon Press, 1968) p7

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