



consider the sheep  
the political ecology of raymond williams



by josie sparrow

Sheep! They're everywhere.

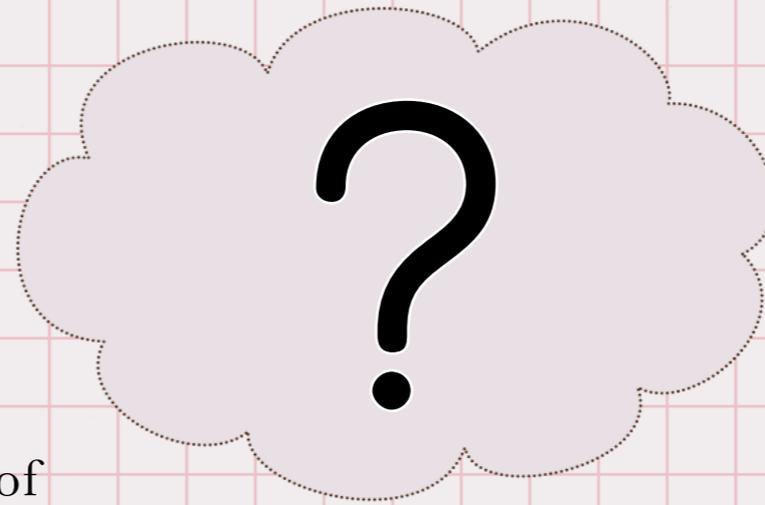
How many of us, as children, sat down to draw and ended up with a green hill dotted with little fluffy shapes?

Sheep seem inextricable from the concept of the countryside. In English—the dominant language of these islands—the word we often use to describe a country scene is *pastoral*: a word which derives from *pāstor*, the Latin word for shepherd.

Sheep, then, are so embedded in the landscape that the landscape almost hides them. It's easy to pass them by without paying much attention; to look at them without really seeing.

But if we *did* stop to look at a sheep—to really try to *see* them—what would we see?

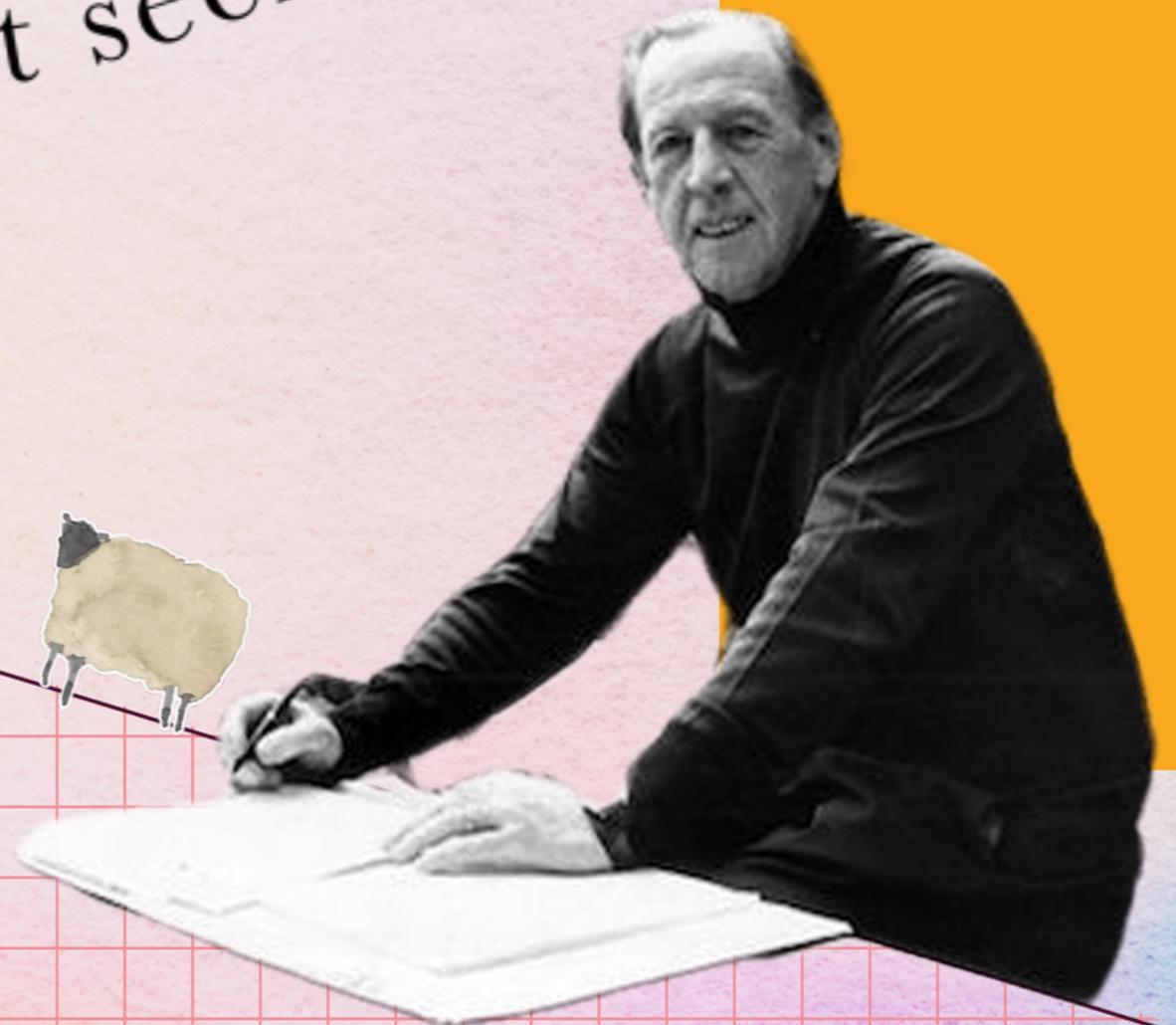
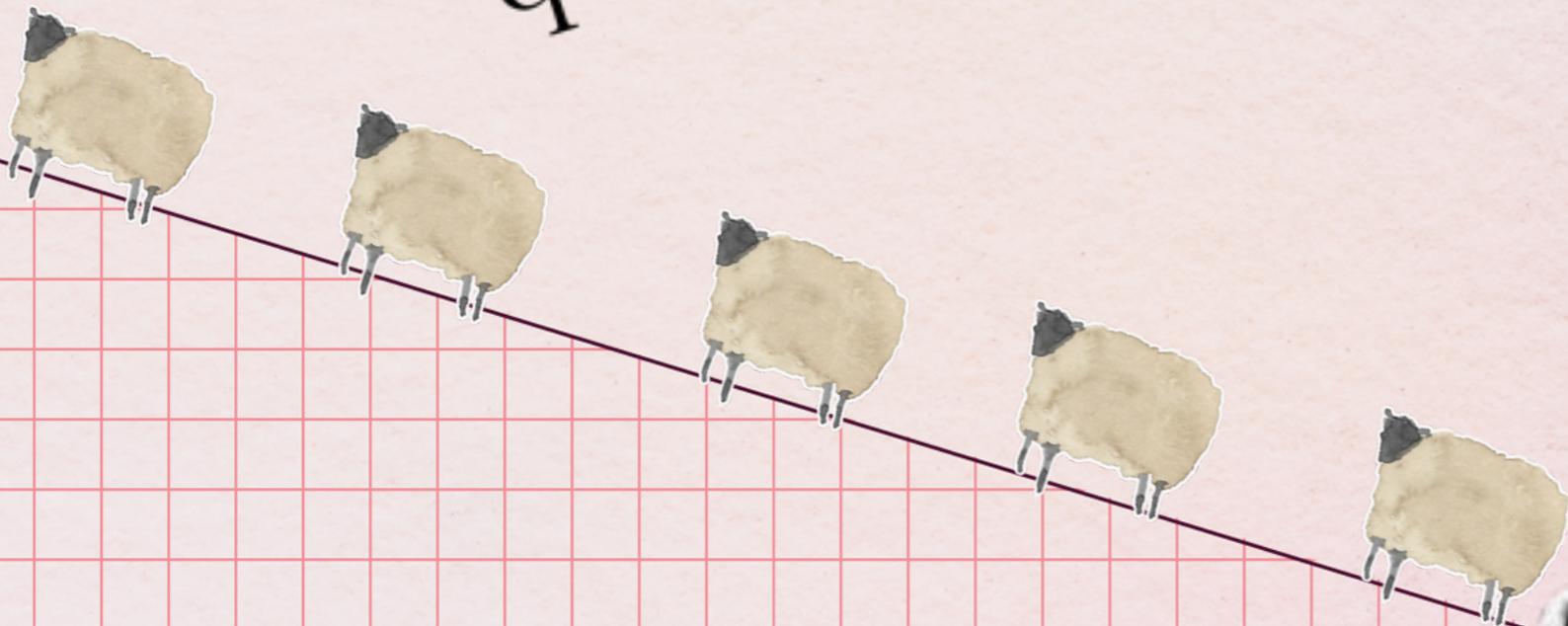
What, exactly, are we looking at, when we look at sheep?



When Raymond Williams looked at sheep, he saw whole complicated histories, human and other-than-human, intertwined together, for better and for worse.

When Raymond Williams looked at sheep, he found himself wondering about these histories: why were the sheep there? Where did they come from? Who brought them there, who kept them there, and who—or what?—was there before? In doing this, he was following a key principle of Marxist philosophy—something we can all do:

question what seems 'natural'

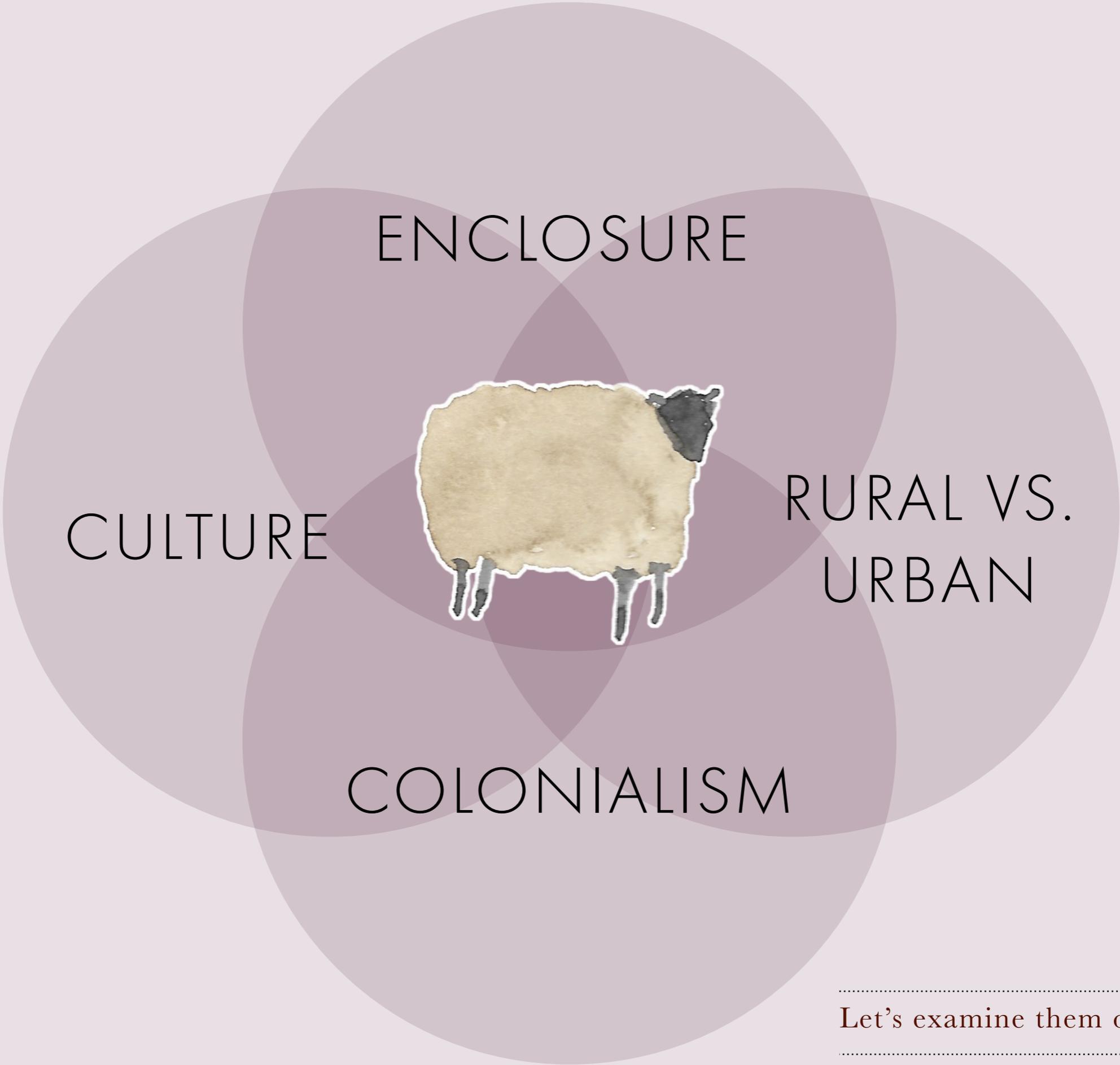


so, with this in mind, what happens when we

**c o n s i d e r   t h e   s h e e p ?**

what stories, what histories, might a sheep tell?





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Let's examine them one by one...  
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# ENCLOSURE

Enclosure was, broadly, a process by which land formerly held in common (that is, for everybody to access and use) was brought into private ownership, or *enclosed*. Usually, this was to do with a desire to increase the productivity and profitability of the land (although sometimes it was done in order to create vast landscaped parks for the owners of stately homes to enjoy). Sometimes, whole villages were cleared, and the land enclosed for farming. In 1773, this process was formalised by an Act of Parliament, and was modified by a number of other Acts throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is still in force today. If you've ever encountered a notice reading *PRIVATE PROPERTY: KEEP OFF* or *NO PUBLIC RIGHT OF WAY*, you've encountered enclosure in action.

But the process didn't begin in 1773, with the Act. Arguably, it began in the sixteenth century, when, as Williams reminds us, Thomas More "rightly said the sheep were eating the men". In *The Country and the City*, Williams points out that "the drive for more pasture, in the growth of the wool trade, led to major enclosures, the destruction of many arable villages, and the rapid development of new kinds of capitalist landlord".

The exploitation of sheep for wool, and therefore for profit, brought them onto the newly-enclosed land. The sheep displaced the people.



# COLONIALISM

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What happened to all the people who were moved off the land to make way for the sheep and crops and little faux-wildernesses of the landowners' country estates? Many of them moved into the towns and cities to seek work in the new factories and mills that were springing up; but many others migrated (or were transported) to 'the colonies': the lands that the British state invaded and occupied. In a painful irony, their displacement and subjection led to the displacement and subjection of others, whose land was now taken and enclosed for the use of British settlers. Much of this land, too, was used for farming—sheep were first introduced to the land currently known as Australia by British landowners, who proceeded to set up huge farms on stolen land which was cleared and worked by convict labour. The historian Elinor Melville called this process “biological conquest”.

Finally: where did the money come from to enclose the land, to buy the sheep, to sculpt the wildernesses? Williams has the answer:

“The new rural economy of the tropical plantations—sugar, coffee, cotton—was built by [the slave trade], and once again the profits fed back into the country-house system: not only the profits on the commodities but until the end of the eighteenth century the profits on slaves.”



# CULTURE

In *The Country and the City*, Williams uses the phrase “a working agriculture” to describe (among other things), the ways of life that have developed in farming communities. In 1979, he made a film with the director Mike Dibb based on that book, in which he went into more detail about the ways of life that depend, particularly, on sheep farming. Sheep farming in its current form is a result of enclosure, colonialism, and the drive for profit, yes; but it is *also* a livelihood and a way of living for numberless people—not just farmers themselves, or even the labourers they employ, but whole communities and relationships that are sustained by, and in turn sustain, the rural economy and rural society.

It is very rare for this to be considered ‘culture’. In fact, the ways in which sheep and sheep farming most often appear in what is considered ‘culture’ is through pastoral images—in novels, paintings, and cinema—that reduce the rural to a picturesque scene for the consumption of the viewer. In other words, to the dominant way of thinking, culture is something that is used to *interpret* the rural, rather than something that emerges within rural communities themselves, in all sorts of forms. And, of course, to see the rural as a pretty picture, absent any people, is not far from seeing it as your playground, or your canvas: yours to consume, to exploit, to mould.



# RURAL VS. URBAN

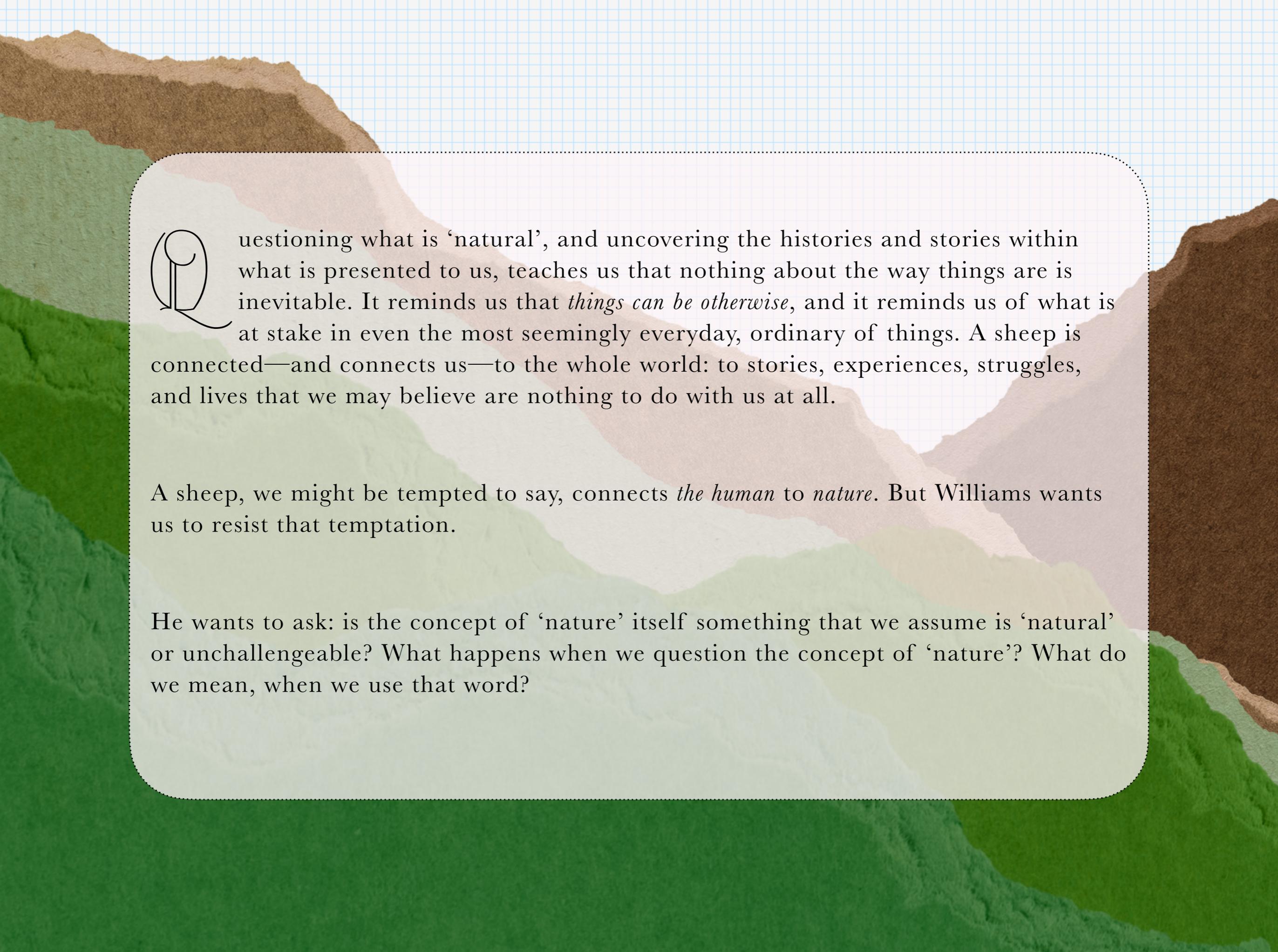
Although, as Williams says, “much of the worst damage, to people and to the land, happened in the rural economy from the rural economy,” the system of enclosure, the expansion of intensive agriculture, and the migration into the cities have all impacted strongly on the relations between the rural and the urban.

Much as the 18<sup>th</sup> century landowners created parklands, ‘wildernesses’, and follies on their country estates, designed entirely for leisure, so too do some city-dwellers today (particularly the rich and mobile) treat the countryside as a picturesque playground. In his essay *Between Country and City*, Williams tells us:

“I have watched, only this summer, a car arrive at the edge of a mountain full of grazing sheep, and three large dogs immediately released and of course chasing and terrifying them. A young farmer neighbour told me that much of his cut winter firewood had been stolen from a stack by his gate...”

These two stories tell us much about how the rural is perceived by those of us who dwell in urban places: as either a playground, or a resource, where everything is ‘natural’, and therefore available for free. The wood that that young man had painstakingly cut and dried and stacked was seen as nothing but a picturesque offering: his labour was invisible to those who stole it. And so it is with much of what we city-dwellers (and dwellers in the Global North) consume.





Questioning what is ‘natural’, and uncovering the histories and stories within what is presented to us, teaches us that nothing about the way things are is inevitable. It reminds us that *things can be otherwise*, and it reminds us of what is at stake in even the most seemingly everyday, ordinary of things. A sheep is connected—and connects us—to the whole world: to stories, experiences, struggles, and lives that we may believe are nothing to do with us at all.

A sheep, we might be tempted to say, connects *the human to nature*. But Williams wants us to resist that temptation.

He wants to ask: is the concept of ‘nature’ itself something that we assume is ‘natural’ or unchallengeable? What happens when we question the concept of ‘nature’? What do we mean, when we use that word?

# THE IDEA OF NATURE

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In his essay ‘Ideas of Nature’, Williams writes:

“the idea of nature contains, though often unnoticed, an extraordinary amount of human history.”

I think he means (at least) two things by this.

Firstly, that the very idea of ‘nature’ can mean different things depending on context. Depending on where you are in the world, what sort of culture and traditions surround you, and when in history you happen to be living, you might have a very different definition of ‘nature’ to somebody else.

Secondly, I think Williams is reminding us that the history of nature *is* the history of humans (and *vice versa*). Humans are a part of what the geographer Jason Moore calls “the web of life”; we affect things, and things affect us; there’s no clear line to be drawn between what is ‘natural’ and what is ‘human’.

The presence of sheep is one example of this. But the existence of this zine is another! Let’s find out how...





## A NATURAL HISTORY OF THIS ZINE

In 1492, Christopher Columbus and his fleet of ships made landfall in the islands of the Caribbean. The Spanish state set about colonising and exploiting the so-called ‘New World’ for its resources in a violently wave of genocide, enslavement, and disease swept across lands and through societies. It is estimated that, by 1650, the Indigenous population of the continent had dwindled to around 20% of its pre-invasion size.

One of the resources the Spanish plundered was the potato: an energy-dense root vegetable that had first been domesticated by Andean people millennia ago, and was widely cultivated across what is now known as ‘South America’. The Spanish invaders saw how the potato provided cheap energy that powered the Indigenous peoples whom they forced to labour in their mines, and began exporting the tuber to Europe, where it gradually took hold as a staple crop, and helped to power the emergence of capitalism.

Spanish sailors, stopping off on the long voyage home, introduced the potato to southern Ireland in the 1570s; and by 1589, Walter Raleigh had spied an opportunity and had set up a potato plantation on several thousand acres of stolen land in Co. Cork. By the 1840s, the exploited, colonised Catholic peasants of Ireland were almost entirely dependent on a single variety of potato—the Irish Lumper—for survival.





## A NATURAL HISTORY OF THIS ZINE (CONT.)

It wasn't that there was no other food in all of Ireland: it was just that the other forms of food were intended either for the consumption of the so-called 'ascendancy class' (Protestant landed gentry, be they English or Anglo-Irish), or for export to England. Grain was imported into Ireland—but it was used to feed cattle, not people. The rural Catholic majority from whom those landowners extracted ever-higher rents for tiny plots of land that could not sustain proper crops did not choose to rely upon the Irish Lumper: it was all that they could grow.

So when, in 1845, the pathogen *Phytophthora infestans* (better known as 'potato blight') made landfall in Ireland, the consequences were devastating. The damp conditions and the fact that potatoes in Ireland were a monoculture, with no genetic variation, meant that the disease rapidly took hold and spread. By the harvest of 1846, when  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the crop was lost, people had begun to starve to death. And this was only the beginning: the hunger would continue for another 5 years. Those who didn't die of starvation were so malnourished that disease took them instead. And those who managed to survive both headed for the shore, where boats of all sizes took them far from home, in search of food and shelter. The only places in all of Ireland to experience population increases during those years were the coastal cities of Belfast, Dublin, and Cork.





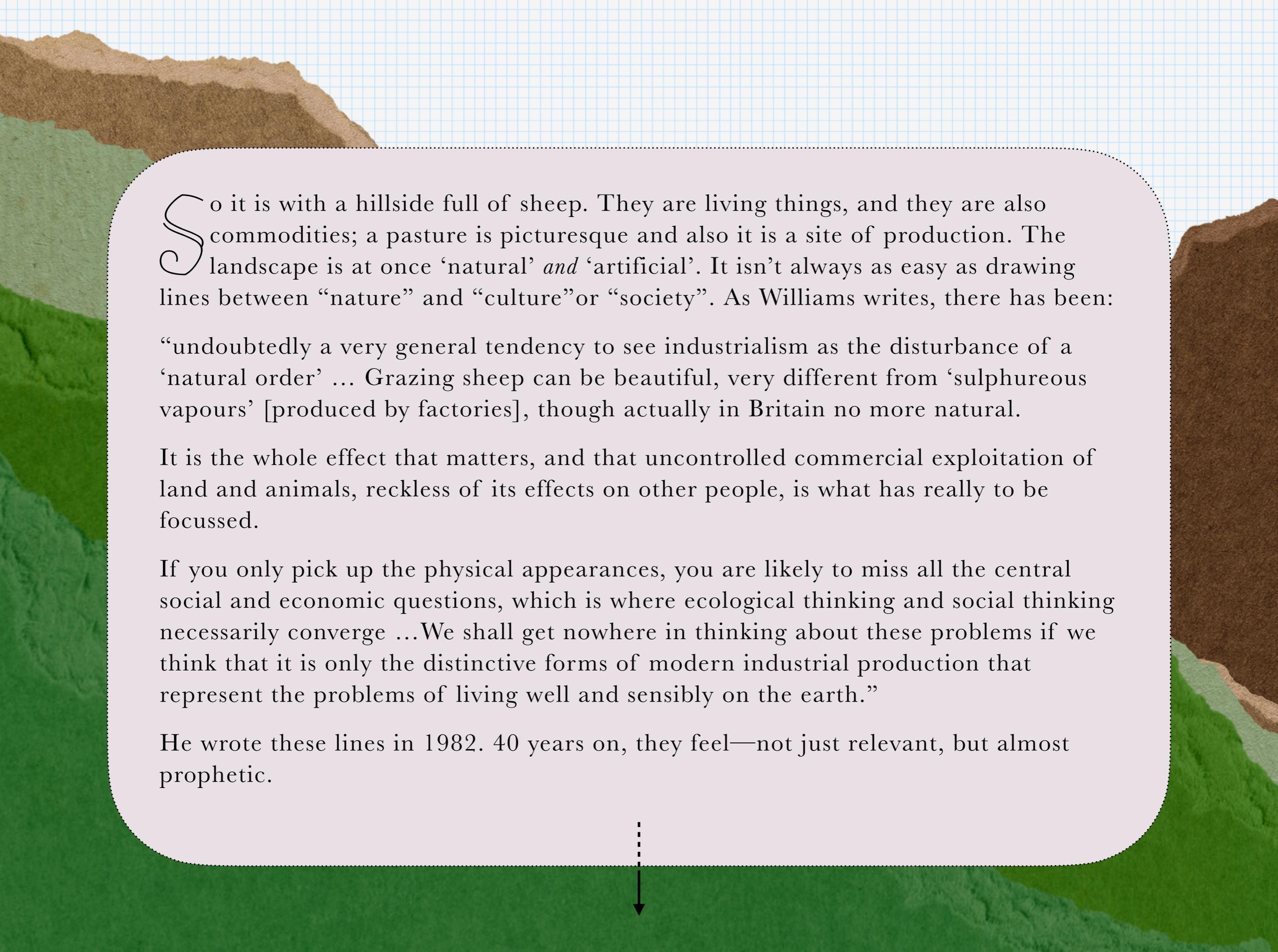
## A NATURAL HISTORY OF THIS ZINE (CONT.)

A mong those desperate migrants who left everything behind them were my own ancestors. They disembarked at Liverpool, and made a home in the Scotland Road area, not far from the docks. There they lived, for many years, in conditions of appalling poverty, racism, and neglect, until the bulldozers rolled in after the Second World War. They never forgot where they came from; I was brought up to see myself as Liverpool Irish.

A combination of this family history and my own experiences growing up in 1980s Liverpool, during the era of Thatcher, Militant, and ‘managed decline’, gave me strong political and ecological commitments that have sustained me throughout my life. Through a series of twists and turns, I was invited to become an editor of *New Socialist*, a role which gave me a small platform for my theoretical work. When we at *New Socialist* were invited to pitch ideas for ‘explainers’ to the Raymond Williams Foundation, I suggested producing a zine about Williams’s ecological thought—an overlooked and crucial aspect of his politics. And that is what you are reading now!

So we can see that, without all these complex histories, this zine would not exist—and that’s before we get into the minerals in my laptop, the coffee and food that’s sustained me, and the histories of everything and everyone that has supported me while writing.

But where in this story would we draw the line between what is ‘natural’ and what isn’t?



So it is with a hillside full of sheep. They are living things, and they are also commodities; a pasture is picturesque and also it is a site of production. The landscape is at once ‘natural’ *and* ‘artificial’. It isn’t always as easy as drawing lines between “nature” and “culture” or “society”. As Williams writes, there has been:

“undoubtedly a very general tendency to see industrialism as the disturbance of a ‘natural order’ ... Grazing sheep can be beautiful, very different from ‘sulphureous vapours’ [produced by factories], though actually in Britain no more natural.

It is the whole effect that matters, and that uncontrolled commercial exploitation of land and animals, reckless of its effects on other people, is what has really to be focussed.

If you only pick up the physical appearances, you are likely to miss all the central social and economic questions, which is where ecological thinking and social thinking necessarily converge ... We shall get nowhere in thinking about these problems if we think that it is only the distinctive forms of modern industrial production that represent the problems of living well and sensibly on the earth.”

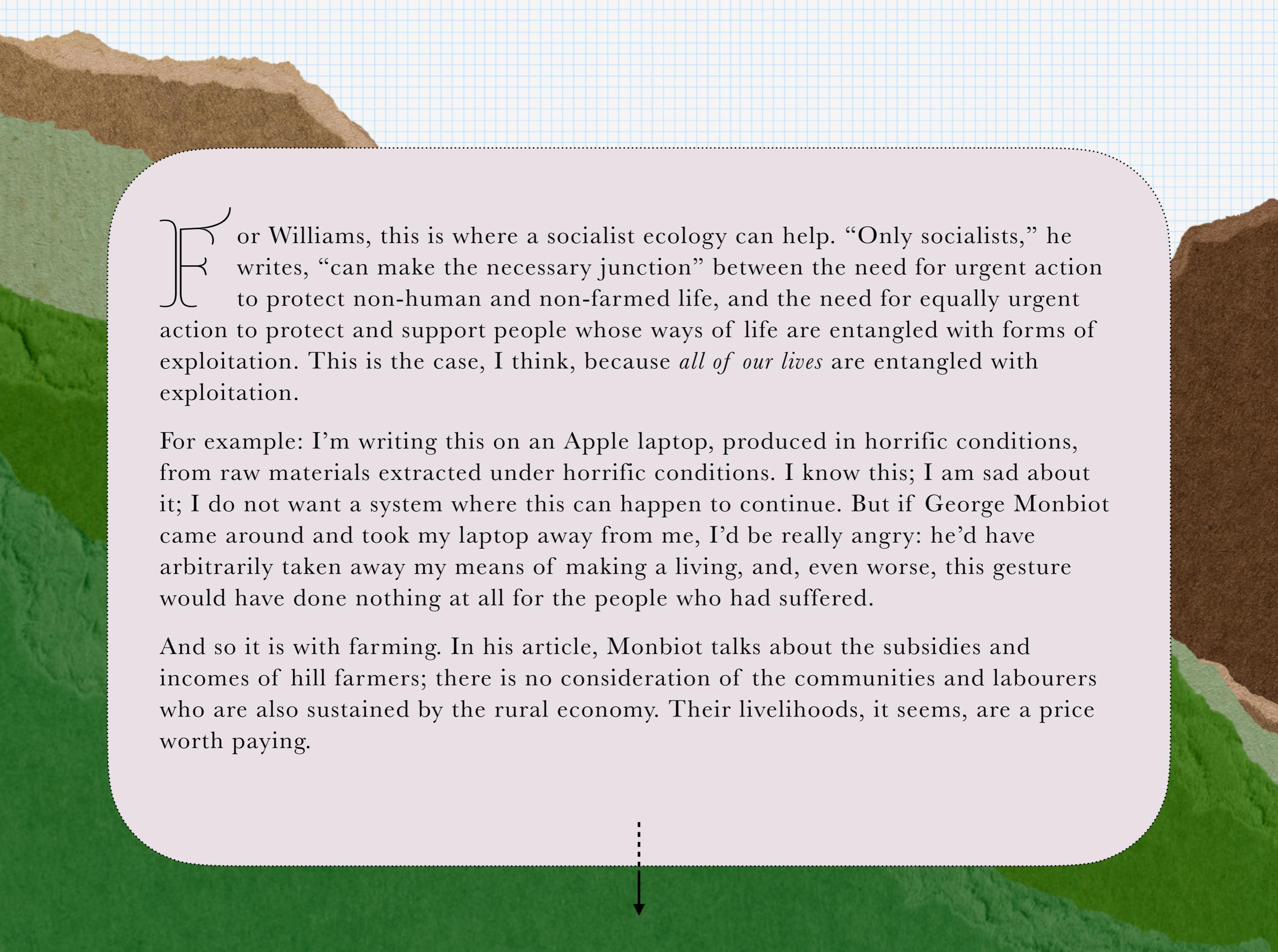
He wrote these lines in 1982. 40 years on, they feel—not just relevant, but almost prophetic.





Advocates of such pseudo-ecological measures such as ‘rewilding’ would do well to listen. Since at least 2013, the journalist George Monbiot has been railing against sheep to anyone who’ll listen, from the pages of the Guardian to his social media accounts. In an article entitled ‘Sheepwrecked’, he describes sheep as “woolly maggots” and a “plague”, rails against hill farmers (and, by extension, whole rural communities), and despairs that “only the merest remnants of life persist” on the hills (he does not, it seems, consider sheep—or the people who tend them—to be *alive*); that he can see more species of bird in “a bushy suburban garden”. This, once again, is a vision of the rural as ‘unspoilt’; it’s the enclosed ‘wild’ park of the 18<sup>th</sup> century country gent, expanded across whole communities. The whole of the countryside is equated to a suburban garden: decorative and picturesque, a place of passive enjoyment. The value of a whole way of life is reduced to its impact on a wealthy man’s birdwatching weekend; and all of this claims to justify the wholesale appropriation and enclosure of even more land, in the name of ‘rewilding’. Meanwhile, apparently, we should import even more food and fleece, outsourcing forms of intensive agriculture to lands and peoples that are least able to bear it, and burning tonnes of fossil fuels in transporting the products here. There is no doubt that agriculture, like all things in Britain, needs to be liberated from the imperatives of overproduction and exploitation of land and life. But can this new ‘ecological’ enclosure really be the right way to go about it?





For Williams, this is where a socialist ecology can help. “Only socialists,” he writes, “can make the necessary junction” between the need for urgent action to protect non-human and non-farmed life, and the need for equally urgent action to protect and support people whose ways of life are entangled with forms of exploitation. This is the case, I think, because *all of our lives* are entangled with exploitation.

For example: I’m writing this on an Apple laptop, produced in horrific conditions, from raw materials extracted under horrific conditions. I know this; I am sad about it; I do not want a system where this can happen to continue. But if George Monbiot came around and took my laptop away from me, I’d be really angry: he’d have arbitrarily taken away my means of making a living, and, even worse, this gesture would have done nothing at all for the people who had suffered.

And so it is with farming. In his article, Monbiot talks about the subsidies and incomes of hill farmers; there is no consideration of the communities and labourers who are also sustained by the rural economy. Their livelihoods, it seems, are a price worth paying.

The sort of socialist ecology that Williams argues for is not going to “simply say ‘keep this piece [of land] clear, keep this threatened species alive, at all costs.’” A socialist ecology of this sort is not guided by the demands of the person “who makes money all week from the muck and the spoil, and then—because this is the English pattern—he changes his clothes and goes down to the country for the weekend; he is spiritually refreshed by this place, which he’s very keen to keep unspoiled, until he can go back, refreshed, back into the making of the smoke and the spoil, which is the precise resource for his escape.”

The ecology of Raymond Williams is to do with *relations*, and a recognition that the global, centuries-long exploitation of land and life not only has real, material limits (certain resources *will* run out), but is also based in attitudes that cause not only environmental damage, but poverty and oppression, in the name of profit and accumulation.

These are the conditions we must un-make.

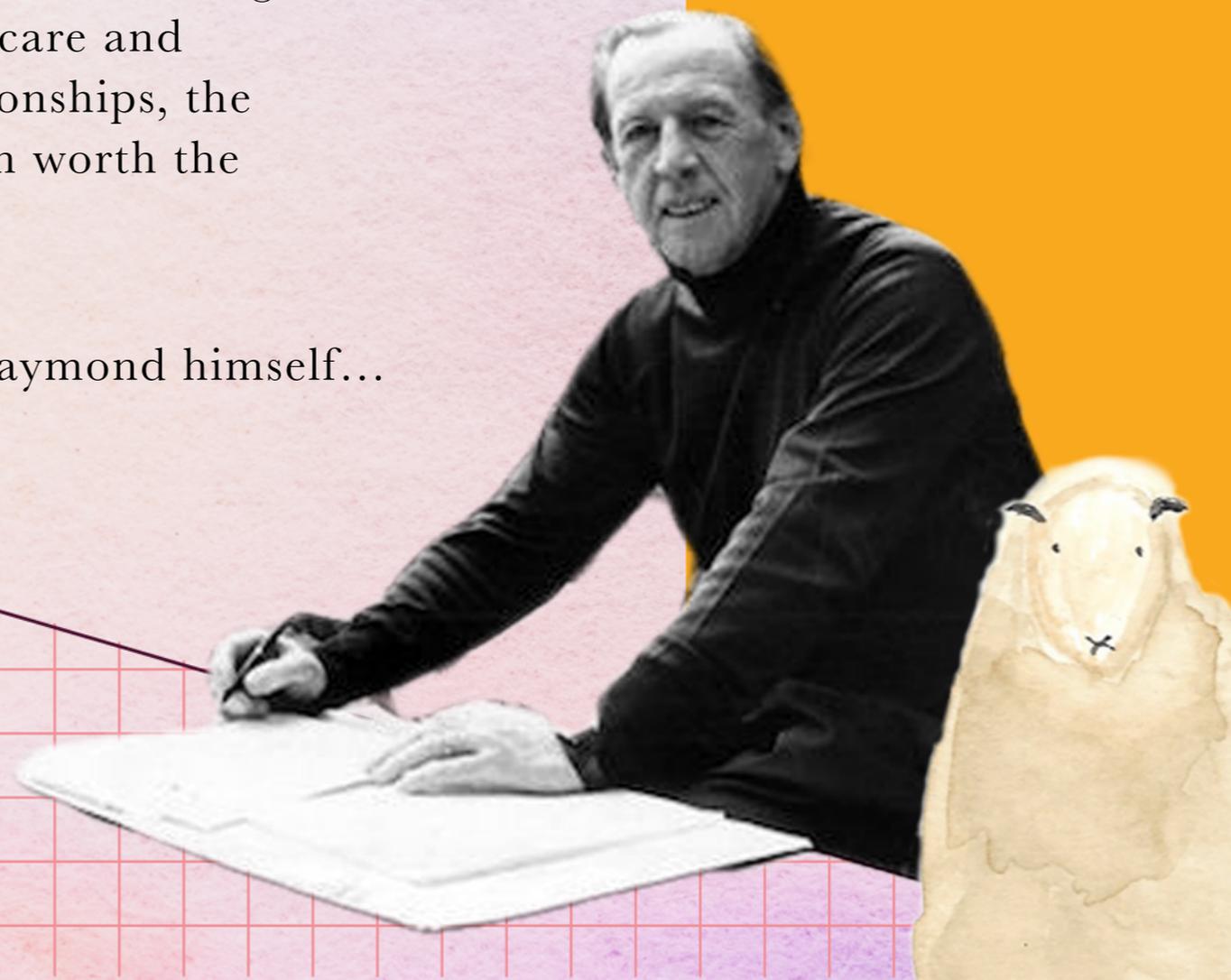
These are the challenges—and the possibilities!—presented to us by the little, unassuming sheep.

WHO, ME?



Why does all this matter? It matters because people matter; because happiness matters; because our planet and the webs of life that she sustains matter—and not one of these things matters more than any other, because they are all interconnected. Above all, the ecological thought of Raymond Williams reminds us of this. It reminds us to question what seems natural—including ways of relating that are based on production, exploitation, and use. It reminds us that there are other ways of seeing things, of doing things—and that these might well lead us to new relationships, new possibilities, and new forms of joy and freedom, for everybody and everything. The processes of working this out are likely to be difficult, and will need great care and much negotiation. But the rewards—these new relationships, the end of enclosure and exploitation—will be more than worth the effort.

Let's give the final word to Raymond himself...



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“We need different ideas because we need different relationships.”

*Raymond Williams, 'Ideas of Nature'*

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# Reading List:

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## Main sources:

Elinor K Melville, *A Plague of Sheep* (Cambridge University Press)

George Monbiot, 'Sheepwrecked' (available online at [monbiot.com/2013/05/30/sheepwrecked](http://monbiot.com/2013/05/30/sheepwrecked))

Jason W Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (Verso Books)

Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Verso Books)

Raymond Williams, 'Socialism and Ecology' (available online at [newsocialist.org.uk/socialism-and-ecology](http://newsocialist.org.uk/socialism-and-ecology))

Raymond Williams, 'Ideas of Nature' (in *Resources of Hope*, Verso Books)

Raymond Williams, 'Between Country and City' (in *Resources of Hope*, Verso Books)

Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City: A Film* (available online at [youtube.com/watch?v=DV1krEyCgCM](http://youtube.com/watch?v=DV1krEyCgCM))

## On agriculture, exploitation, and rewilding:

Max Ajl and Rob Wallace, 'Red Vegans against Green Peasants' (available online at: [newsocialist.org.uk/red-vegans-against-green-peasants/](http://newsocialist.org.uk/red-vegans-against-green-peasants/))

Kai Heron and Alex Heffron, 'Renewing the Land Question: Against Greengrabbings and Green Colonialism' (available online at [newsocialist.org.uk/transmissions/renewing-land-question-against-greengrabbings-and-green-colonialism](http://newsocialist.org.uk/transmissions/renewing-land-question-against-greengrabbings-and-green-colonialism))

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Thank you for reading!



josie sparrow, 2022  
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