**Millstone Grit, Blackstone Edge: Literary and Heritage Tourism in the South Pennines, England**

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**Introduction**

The South Pennines stretches across the southern end of the Pennines in England, the range of high moorland and millstone-grit outcrops that divides the Peak District of Derbyshire to the south from the Yorkshire Dales to the north. Millstone Grit is a form of hard sandstone, which weathers in the high moorland into jagged outcrops. In the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution the millstone grit is covered in black soot and grime from factory chimneys and the transport links that cross the Pennines: the old A-roads and the relatively new M62 motorway (the train lines go under the moors). The moors around the stones are nearly all owned by shooting estates or the successors of the local water boards; in the former moors, heather is encouraged to keep grouse numbers high enough for the shooting parties in late summer; in the latter, dams and culverts and access roads have been added to the valleys. To the east of the South Pennines is the post-industrial heart of metropolitan West Yorkshire, around the cities of Leeds, Wakefield and Bradford, where heavy engineering and mining dominated. To the west of the South Pennines are the mill towns of eastern Lancashire, and the metropolitan centre of Greater Manchester. The South Pennines itself as an area has no fixed boundaries, and some maps stretch out into Lancashire and as far into rural North Yorkshire as Skipton, but all maps agree the area encompasses a cluster of (mainly) Yorkshire mill-towns and villages in deep valleys that run into the middle of the hills, such as Holmfirth, Hebden Bridge, Todmorden, Haworth, Keighley and Ilkley. The towns and villages in the South Pennines grew in size in the nineteenth century, at the time of rapid industrialization and urbanization in Britain, spurred on by imperial capitalism[[1]](#endnote-1): the geography of the slopes and valleys enabled mills to use running water for power, then for use in steam engines. The area is a popular place for walking, for touring and visiting, especially as the Pennine Way, Britain’s first long-distance footpath, goes through the area on its way from Edale in Derbyshire up north to Scotland - and the idea that it was called the South Pennines was popularized when the name was used on the cover of one of the first yellow-sleeved Ordnance Survey Outdoor Leisure 1:25000 maps. These maps show much more detail than the usual 1:50000 maps, and include field boundaries, making it easier to navigate through the landscape following public footpaths.

In this chapter, I will explore the ways in which the South Pennines landscape and history has shaped (and has been shaped by) the romantic, literary stereotype of the wild moor, through a discussion of the Brontë sisters and Ted Hughes. In this discussion I will focus on Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*, which established the moors as a savage wilderness[[2]](#endnote-2), and Ted Hughes poetry collection *Remains of Elmet*, which connects the wild moors with the post-industrial heritage of the valley floors[[3]](#endnote-3). I will then describe and critique the literary and heritage tourism that has grown up around the Brontës in Haworth[[4]](#endnote-4), and Ted Hughes in the Calder Valley, through a semiotic analysis and discourse tracing of on-line promotional material for tourists, alongside my own ethnographic exploration through the landscapes and tourists spaces. This research is part of my wider interest in the intersection of leisure, tourism, sport and identity, in particular research on Scottishness and whisky tourism[[5]](#endnote-5), whiteness and leisure[[6]](#endnote-6), and northern Englishness in popular culture[[7]](#endnote-7). This work all draws on a number of key theoretical concepts. Firstly, social identity is constructed in anthropologically-defined imaginary communities with symbolic boundaries[[8]](#endnote-8). These symbolic boundaries are in turn based on signs and discourses, but also invented traditions[[9]](#endnote-9) and contested ideas of belonging, which are resolved in the creation of what Benedict Anderson calls imagined community[[10]](#endnote-10). Tourism is one way of constructing both the imagined and the imaginary, through the act of visiting spaces and reading assumptions into the landscapes, and through the act of selling destinations as mythic landscapes[[11]](#endnote-11).

**The South Pennines: An Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty?**

The United Kingdom’s Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) received official attention after the Second World War, when discussions were taking place in the Labour government about creating National Parks: areas of unique flora and fauna, geology, farming practices and recreational interest. In its history of the creation of AONBs, the national Association for AONBs states that in a 1945 report on National Parks for the Government, commissioned expert John Dower suggested ‘that although certain areas might not be suitable as National Parks because of their limited size and lack of wildness, their beautiful landscapes still needed protection’[[12]](#endnote-12). The Hobhouse Committee then produced a report that identified and recommended 52 areas, which led to the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, which legislated for both the formation of named National Parks and AONBs[[13]](#endnote-13). Although the area of the South Pennines was identified in the Hobhouse Report as a potential AONB, by the time the 1949 Act was published it had been removed from the list.

In a 2013 newspaper report on the launch of a campaign to give the South Pennines some sort of quasi-official status as a ‘regional park’ (something that has no meaning in legislative or planning terms), an explanation for the removal of the South Pennines AONB potential status is offered[[14]](#endnote-14):

Back in the 1940s the Government’s Hobhouse Committee recommended areas suitable for designation as national parks and AONBs and the South Pennines figured among these. But with its mills still working belching smoke into the valley bottoms, the review concluded that it was too industrial in character to be designated in the same way as the Peaks, North York Moors, Dales and Lake District, which all came into being between 1951 and 1954. But things have changed – most of the working mills have gone and attitudes have evolved. Relics of the area’s industrial past such… are now viewed as major assets adding to the distinctiveness of this unique corner of England.

The awarding of the status of National Park or AONB was fiercely resisted publically and privately by landowners, industries, the military, water boards and others with vested economic or political interests in the land[[15]](#endnote-15). The National Parks and AONBs that emerged from this reactionary campaigning were compromised: boundaries were altered to keep quarries free to work stone and to allow water boards to build dams; moorland tops were protected from the working-class walkers who had been arguing they should be allowed access to them[[16]](#endnote-16). The South Pennines AONB bid is likely to have been subject to the same kinds of off-the-record lobbying that allowed these other compromises to be made. It was not the ugliness of the industrial landscape, but the combined power of those who controlled the land and the industries in the valleys, who clearly did not wish to lose the rights they enjoyed to exploit the land in the South Pennines, as they were losing some of those rights in the adjacent national parks of the Yorkshire Dales and the Peak District.

Despite its failure to become an AONB, three upland areas (Rombald’s Moor near Ilkley, and either side of the Calder Valley) have been combined to be designated the South Pennine Moors Site of Special Scientific Interest. This official designation is due to the geology and the wildlife, and gives it some protection from over-development. Furthermore, this SSSI overlaps with the South Pennine Moors Special Area of Conservation, an upland area protected through designation under EC directives. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, local authorities and partners covering the South Pennines area started to work together to promote the area as a place to work, live and visit. A ‘heritage area’ was proposed by the umbrella organisation Pennine Prospects, a partnership of the main local authorities along with other stakeholders: the National Trust, United Utilities and Yorkshire Water, all major landowners, alongside Natural England, the quango responsible for conservation areas, and Northern Rail. The Pennine Prospects web-site and marketing document make the same claims about the importance of the South Pennines[[17]](#endnote-17):

With its Millstone Grit rock, heather moorlands, wooded valleys, traditional farmland and variety of birdlife, the South Pennines area is an important place for geology and wildlife.

For the stakeholders and local government, the South Pennines are as attractive as any AONB or National Park to the discerning tourist interested in geology, bird-spotting or traditional farming patterns. It is the colours of the rocks, the flora and fauna, which makes the South Pennines worthy of its status as a destination.

**Re-shaping and making the South Pennines: Literary, Heritage or Walking Tourism?**

The South Pennines had literary tourism ever since Elizabeth Gaskell made her way into the wilds of the north of England to visit Haworth, the home of the Brontë sisters, a small mill village in the Worth Valley[[18]](#endnote-18). Gaskell describes the Haworth streets and the moors behind the village in suitably wild, romantic language. Generations of literary tourists have followed her out into this wild place[[19]](#endnote-19), hung with dark shadows found in their reading of Emily’s *Wuthering Heights*. For these tourists, the Parsonage at the top of the main street in Haworth is as important as the moors themselves, though it is not clear how many tourists return home disappointed that Haworth is a suburb of Keighley, and the moor is a good stroll from the Parsonage Museum[[20]](#endnote-20). If one walks south from Top Withens along the Pennine Way (Top Withens being the ruined farm supposedly the inspiration for the name of the farmhouse in *Wuthering Heights*), one arrives in the Calder Valley, at the village of Heptonstall, which overlooks the town of Hebden Bridge. And here one can find another form of literary tourism: the grave of Sylvia Plath, and the village and valley which provided the inspiration for much of the work of her husband Ted Hughes. Pennine Prospects’ partners are mindful of the huge tourist economy in Haworth associated with the myth of the wild northern English moor, and use the fact of this literary tourist industry to also suggest that visitors explore the Elmet, the Calder Valley area of the Pennines, of Ted Hughes[[21]](#endnote-21):

The beauty of the South Pennines has long been recognised by novelists and poets – most famously the Brontë sisters of Haworth and Ted Hughes, who became Poet Laureate. The area continues to provide inspiration for artists and writers.

Pennine Prospects know that the sisters have their global fan-base willing to travel from Japan, China and the USA to the South Pennines – the sisters are so famous in contemporary popular culture (even in the post-modern version of the culture industry that values celebrity dogs over Victorian authors), they do not need to be named in full. Ted Hughes, however, needs to be explained to the readers of the marketing material in a way that does not frighten them. Ted Hughes, says the marketing, ‘became Poet Laureate’. All we need to know as potential visitors to the South Pennines is that it is a beautiful landscape that has a wild side to it, something that draws strange creative types such as Ted Hughes to it. The readers of this marketing material are not told anything else about Hughes: they are not told about his misogynistic domination of Plath and her legacy; or his obsession with death and his disgust with the material world, which haunts all his poetry, but especially the poems in *Crow*[[22]](#endnote-22). For the policy-makers promoting the South Pennines as a destination for any kind of tourism, the literary connections are enough to encourage people to come for themselves to be inspired by the hills. This is the old claim of the British Romantics re-cycled, that there exists in the hills, mountains and dales of the north of England something numinous[[23]](#endnote-23). Ted Hughes’ work is not as famous as that of those Haworth authors, but is certainly enough known for people to want to visit Heptonstall, Hebden Bridge, and his birthplace Mytholmroyd, all important stages in the Ted Hughes Elmet pilgrimage[[24]](#endnote-24).

There is a clear policy drive to promote the South Pennines as something authentically wild, yet sufficiently post-industrial in its towns. It is easy to make the claim it is authentically wild – there is the SSSI, and the SAC, and the history of trying to become an AONB. These letters show official recognition that the moorland and the wider landscape is wild enough to have rare species living there, though the fact is of course that the moors are products of human interventions and industry. The notion of post-industrialism in its towns is more problematic. The Pennine Prospects web-site mentions the heritage of the industries that shaped the towns, valleys and hills. The South Pennines is dotted with mill-museums, canals and restored railways. But industrial heritage can only exist as heritage once the industries have closed, and the jobs have all gone[[25]](#endnote-25). Mills can only be turned into museums and holiday homes once they have stopped being factories. This heritage might be something on which to build a destination tourism action plan, but it does little for the people who live in the villages and towns that once housed the industries.

There are, then, tensions over who takes part in passing through the South Pennines as a tourist, who does what and where, and tensions between visitors, incomers attracted to the area by its romantic landscape, and locals who live on the margins of the villages. For some visitors, the authenticity of the South Pennines is defined by its rural heritage, the sheep on the moors and the heather. For these people, the area is a wilderness park, where being a sheep-farmer is better than being an ice-cream salesman. For other visitors, the authenticity of the place is its urban heritage: the black-stained sandstone terraces that wind up the streets from the valley floors, and the mills with their dark windows and high chimneys. Again, these visitors probably regard ice-cream salesmen as interlopers to their fantasy world of men in flat caps walking on cobbles with clogs. Somewhere in the middle of this fantasy heritage is the South Pennines of people who want to make a profit from tourism, the people who own teashops, pubs, bed-and-breakfasts and other services. These private businesses seek to reconcile the conflicting demands over what the authentic South Pennines is with one another without losing any market share. But those conflicting demands are sometimes irreconcilable. Those who want to drive out to Haworth – to go on a steam train, to mooch about the Parsonage Museum and eat cake at the top of the main street - are not the same as those who want to pass through Haworth on long-distance walking trips with muddy boots. The wild nature of the South Pennines is not allowed to be embodied by muddy footprints in the more gentrified of its tearooms.

**Ethnographic reflections on being a tourist**

There are a number of stages and backrooms to Haworth[[26]](#endnote-26). Up the main street with its cobbles are tea-rooms and souvenir shops. There are signs in Japanese. There are tourists, hundreds of them in the winter, thousands in the summer. Most of the people walking up the street treat the incline and climb of the cobbles as a hill as hard-going as any on the Pennine Way. To reach the Tourist Information Centre at the top is a reward for their efforts; there they can buy tea-towels and cups that make fun of Yorkshireness: the strange dialect words, the stereotype of being tight with money. Down the hill across from the make-believe England of the steam railway (nostalgia for a world where Yorkshire was all-white, where Englishmen fought Germans, a world re-imagined every year in Haworth) there are people living cheaply in rented terraced houses, but they are not tight-fisted: they are poor. When we stay in the Youth Hostel in Haworth as we walk the Pennine Way, we stay on the poor side of the tracks; here, the only presence of the literary tourism industry is the *Brontë Balti* curry house.

As walkers on long-distance footpaths, we have a different view of the South Pennines. Not a more authentic one, just one different from that shared by the day-trippers who walk up Haworth’s streets, or who drive up to Heptonstall to take photographs of Hebden Bridge down in the valley. We are walking between these staged tourist spaces, but our footpaths are made and protected for us by the tourist industry, local government and national legislation. On the Pennine Way, we follow the high watershed of the hills as much as we can along paths gouged so deep in the peat that at times we lose sight of the ground like soldiers in a first-world war trench. On the second stage of the Pennine Way between Longdendale and Marsden, generations of walkers and pollution from the cities on either side of the hills have destroyed the fragile landscape on top of Black Hill. Now the path crosses the black mud on flagstones, as it does in those other places where walkers have imposed their footprints on the delicate soil. In the four days it takes to reach Haworth through the South Pennines, the path threads through a lunar landscape, interspersed with black millstone-grit and black-sooted sheep on Blackstone Edge. Walkers tell tales to each other about the rain and the bleakness of these moors. Rarely shared are the human constructions passed along or over, or besides: masts, reservoirs, private roads and the M62 motorway, which does not seem to be noticed at all by the walkers who cross its busy lanes on the pedestrian bridge. And the towns and villages in the valleys of the South Pennines become stopover points, rated by the number of curry houses rather than the beauty of their old mills or other built heritage. By the time Top Withens is reached, we have become cynical about the literary tourists, the day-trippers and car-drivers, and their presence at the abandoned farm makes us sneer and swell with pride and arrogance: we are better because we have walked there, across the hills at the day-trippers’ backs, which they miss as they take pictures of each other. Our arrogance is foolish, of course. We are as stupid as them, thinking we can find some authentic experience here, as if anyone can find such a thing!

On the Calderdale Way, we trail around the metropolitan district of Calderdale on field paths, causeways, woodland trails and minor roads. The Calderdale Way guidebook tells us all about the local built heritage, both the rural and the urban. As we pass along the side of the Calder Valley we are in a landscape that the guidebook insists is authentically South Pennines in nature. This is the landscape of the post-Roman British Kingdom of Elmet, we are told, but the remains are those of the industrial age, mapped out by Ted Hughes in his poems. I wonder about the Britishness of the Calder Valley, or rather this attempt to claim the land as something authentically Celtic when the Celts are fashionable. I know Elmet existed, but its boundaries are contentious, and anyway, there have been too many generations, too much movement from hills to towns and vice versa, for it to have any significant impact on the South Pennines today. For Hughes, the ghost of Elmet makes it a fitting metaphor for the mill-workers, weavers and farm-labourers whose way of life had already gone when he was writing his poems. This land that looks wild has been used by humans to make things for hundreds of years. But is that the truth? As we wander through the upper reaches of the Calder Valley, we see Heptonstall’s church up on the hill. It seems to have people standing in its graveyard, or this might be my eyes playing tricks. If they are there, are they there for Plath’s grace? Literary tourism around here seems to revolve around this notion only high art (poetry, canonical texts) is authentic culture. Nobody seems to think the popular culture of the workers means anything for tourists seeking authenticity, so there is an absence of the voices, stories and artefacts of the actual people who lived and still live here. The search for an authentic Celtic cultural heritage in the South Pennines demonstrates this: rather a fantasy story about King Arthur and racial purity than the hard life of the people who lives on the council estates in every town in this valley.

**Reading *Wuthering Heights* and *Remains of Elmet***

What is it about *Wuthering Heights* that makes it such an important text in the creation of northern wilderness tourism? The book deserves its reputation – it is a classic story of doomed lives on the edge of society. The book was produced at a time when fascination with the romantic and mythical north of England was fashionable. Simply put, the story uses the boundary between the urban and the moor as a boundary between bourgeois respectability and atavism. In the urban spaces there are two types of northern culture present: the middle-class one copying the manners of the southern English; and the working-class one mocked by Emily and her sisters for their roughness and strange accents. These working-class characters share some relationship with the wilderness, but they are not completely of it. It is Heathcliff who becomes the spirit of the wilderness, with his dark face and his moorland name, identified by Eagleton[[27]](#endnote-27) as the wild and dangerous man of Irish descent. Emily’s genius is leaving the spirit of the wilderness ambivalent. So, on the one hand, there are clouds, shadows and tragedies; on the other, a yearning to be freed from the parlour to explore the wild places. *Wuthering Heights*, then, is a myth-space that constructs and reproduces myths: about being northern English, being caught between the urban bourgeoisie and the rural working-classes; about being in that liminal space between the fake and the authentic; about being of the wilderness and the high moors. This myth-space has become part of everyday popular culture around the world, driven by the rise of Empire, hegemony and the spread of the notion of Western classics being classics of humanity. That is, the story of Cathy and Heathcliff has become the story of Wuthering Heights and of Haworth and its moors, a reduction of the actual narrative complexity of the book to the meme of a pop song and Hollywood film.

In *Remains of Elmet*, Ted Hughes captures the ambivalences of Emily’s narrative, and continues to reproduce the myth-space of the north of England and the South Pennines. His poems make pictures of the abandoned farms and mills, the blackened stone-walls and sheep in the brown grass fields (and were published with actual black-and-white pictures which made visible the impressions in the poems). In his engagement with post-industrialization and dereliction, his wilderness becomes a different place. For him, the Calder Valley has had its industrial character destroyed by the ravages of global capitalism and technological change, and it has become a new wilderness, a waste land that covers it in its entirety from the tops of the moors to the streets of its towns. The Calder Valley becomes a savage place – but its past is not romanticized, and Hughes shows us that it always has been a savage place, because life is savage. One can see that this makes it difficult to use the work of Hughes to sell the South Pennines to tourists seeking romance and wilderness. Both are used in tourism, as I have shown, but there is a clear favouring of the Brontë myth over the Hughes myth.

**Discourse Tracing**

Through this chapter I have been tracing the discourses at work in the construction of northernness, the consumption of northern identity, in and through tourism in the South Pennines. We can finally and formally describe and critique the literary and heritage tourism material that has grown up around the Brontes in Haworth, and Ted Hughes in the Calder Valley. One web-site stands in for the dozen or so that exist. SouthPennines.co.uk is a web-site that has been put together by designers working for Pennine Prospects[[28]](#endnote-28):

The South Pennines - a wild, wonderful and occasionally wuthering landscape at the place where Yorkshire and Lancashire collide. A land of steep-sided valleys, heather-covered moorland, canals, reservoirs and packhorse trails. The people who live here describe it as 'spectacular', 'inspiring', 'breathtaking' and 'dramatic.' It's a place where you'll find intense local pride - people who are passionate about the area and want to share what they know. And so we’ve obliged. We’ve gathered their recommendations of South Pennines places, people and pastimes and created this website.

The South Pennines here is constructed from the collision between Lancashire and Yorkshire. In other words, the South Pennines are sold to potential visitors as a place where northernness, that strange confabulation of Lancashire and Yorkshire identity, is created. It is a northernness that is sold to visitors as something to do with the north’s industrial heritage. This is a northern England of canals and packhorse trails. It is a northernness that is claimed to be authentic because it is conjured into existence from this working-class world of mills. This working-class north of England is defined by it oppositionality. It is not fake, because working-class lives and communities are believed to be more real than middle-class ones, a myth told in Wuthering heights. It is not soft, either. This supposedly authentic northernness is present in the extract from the SouthPennines web-site above. Visitors are assured that real northerners have made their recommendations on the web-site, local people with local pride, who adore the stark and ‘wuthering’ landscape. The roughness of the South Pennines – its millstone grit and its mucky sheep, its old mills and its stone-covered peat bogs – becomes a metaphor for authentic working-class northern culture. The landscape becomes as mythically northern as rugby league, the game for proper working-class men, played in towns and villages on either side of the South Pennines[[29]](#endnote-29) – that is, the northern myth of the landscape, like rugby league, is real only for those who find reality in it.

**Conclusion**

I am visiting Sowerby Bridge, a town on the edge of Halifax, just further down the Calder Valley from Ted Hughes’ Mytholmroyd. Like all these places, it is gentrifying, convenient for commuters to Leeds and Manchester. But it retains the character of its high street. It has charity shops, cheap food stores and a couple of greasy-spoon cafes. The market is tiny, mainly given over to junk and toiletries, but it still attracts older people and others unable to shop in Halifax’s big supermarkets. As I drink my tea in a nearby café I wonder – will this north be part of the tourist trail? Did Ted Hughes drink tea in one of these greasy spoons? Why should one story of the north be favoured over another? I feel smug drinking my tea, but after I have left the town I feel uneasy about my own middle-class romanticization of the authentic working-class north.

When it comes to northernness, there is no such thing. What is considered to be northern is subject to debate, and subject to a continually dynamic contestation of the symbolic boundaries. Who defines northernnness? It is defined by those in the north and those outside, and insiders and outsider alike are partial in their definitions. We all make myths about ourselves and others. Rugby league is defined by its northern roots, but its northern roots are defined by rugby league, to the extent that rugby league shapes its own north, apart from all over norths. I am as guilty as anyone in creating the north, and its oppositional south, in my own image. But what is northern is not the real question. The real question is: of all the northernnesses being constructed in the tourist industry and in the tourist places up north, which ones matter, and why do they matter?

The South Pennines ‘character’ is the key to the discourses about it as a place for tourism. It is seen as authentically north by many of its residents, but also by the tourist industry and its partners in local government. They need to create a version of northern identity that is ‘wuthering’, blown about by the wind and the rain across the moor, shaped like the millstone-grit of the mills and the moor-tops into grotesque formations. Literary tourism - especially that associated with those sisters of Haworth - gives the South Pennines a global market, but one based on the consumption of an inauthentic north. The version associated with Ted Hughes and the Calder Valley might be more middle-class and true to the industrial past, but it is just as problematic and contested. Heritage tourism may be more authentic to the past and to the place, but it still constructs a narrow version of what northern English culture and space actually means today for those who live there. Nearly all forms of tourism inthe South Pennines follow the logic of instrumental rationality, the free market of global capitalism, which puts the pursuit of profit first[[30]](#endnote-30). That means the industry gives its buyers what they want – and what they want are these tales of the north, this make-believe conflation of history and place, which confirms their view of the north as being a place full of dragons.

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2. Published under the pseudonym E Bell: Bell, E. *Wuthering Heights*. London: Thomas Cautley Newby; 1847. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Hughes, T. *Remains of Elmet*. London: Faber and Faber; 1979. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
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