

New life for a classic

'New Lives, New Landscapes' by Nan Fairbrother remains required reading.

Debbie Bartlett



I discovered 'New Lives, New Landscapes' (NLNL) by Nan Fairbrother, in a secondhand bookshop when I was considering moving from horticulture and garden design (with natural history on the side) into something more meaningful. It confirmed my interest in landscape as a discipline, instigating enrolment on the MSc in Landscape Ecology Design and Management (better known as the LEDM) at Wye College, then part of London University.

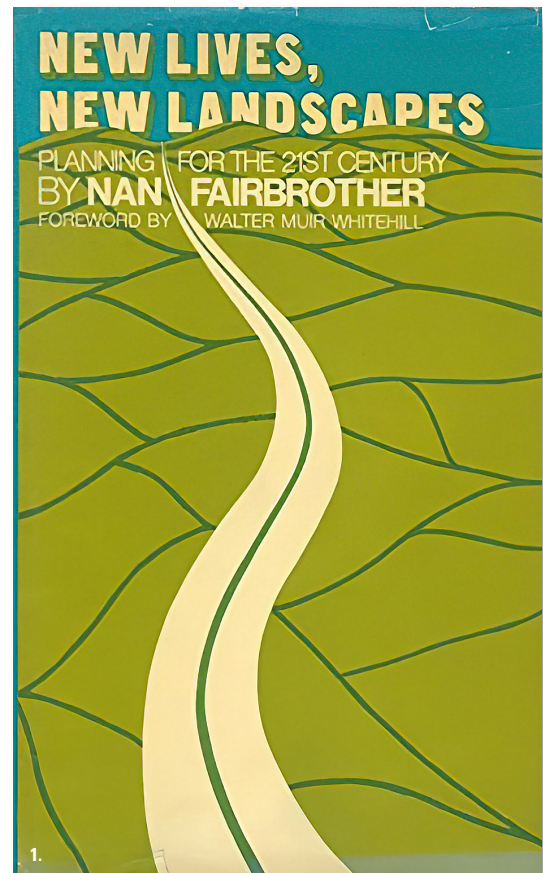
Fairbrother was born just before the First World War, had a degree in English, and her first career, before becoming one of the first wave of landscape architects, was as a hospital physiotherapist. She wrote several books, with NLNL published in 1970, reflecting rising environmental and ecological concerns, putting forward a vision firmly rooted in concern not just for the landscape but for those living and working within it. The first of the three sections is a historical perspective describing landscape change over time and the post-war scenario as 'a new society in an old

setting': the third and final section sets out a four-point plan for a new landscape framework. It is, however, the middle section, 'landscapes for an industrial democracy', in which she analyses the impact of social dynamics on rural and urban landscapes, comparing the speed of this to the snail's pace of land use planning reform. It was this that led Fairbrother to advocate for change, arguing that a robust land use planning system is essential for the controlled evolution of the environment and setting out a code for landscape practice (Fairbrother 1970 page 362).

One of the delights of reading Nan Fairbrother's work is her turn of phrase, perhaps the result of her academic background; her books are a good read as well as thought provoking. While we'd probably all agree that "As the birthplace of the industrial revolution Britain had a world start in landscape destruction – even though competitors rival if not surpass us in vandalism", (Fairbrother 1970, page 176) few would put this quite so succinctly, and perhaps even fewer would be willing to acknowledge so bluntly our pivotal role in the current climate crisis and biodiversity emergency. Her visionary – and sometimes brutal – turn of phrase borders on the political, directly challenging the preservation/conservation landscape agenda, and reminding us that landscape, urban or rural, is the direct result of

human activity and reflects changing social agendas. She grew up during the Depression but I suspect would be deeply shocked by cuts to basic services and our seeming inability to control, for example, sewage pollution and litter. Her statement that no-one could imagine the NHS could ever be

1. Alfred A. Knopf; 1st edition (January 1, 1970).



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2. Architectural Press; 3rd edition (January 1, 1971).
3. Penguin Books; Second Edition (January 1, 1972).

abolished is a stark reminder that the 1960s were a time of great optimism. Her comments on electricity pylons – “I accept them in the landscape as anyone would who brought up a family without electricity or gas” (Fairbrother 1970, page 105) – is a reminder that landscapes are functional and that pylons, like wind turbines, do not permanently disfigure the landscape; the benefits outweigh the ‘cost’ in terms of scenic beauty. Part one of NLNL ends with the statement that the view is fleeting, so expendable for a season while the landscape is long-term (p159). A stark contrast to the views of certain politicians who, despite the energy crisis – and that is not too strong a word – affecting us all, have expressed the view that they do not like to see solar panels in fields!

Fairbrother’s analysis of the post war social change and the impact on the landscape of increased leisure time and greater mobility (increasing

countryside recreation combined with the welfare state and expectations of a better quality of life) provides food for thought in this, the post COVID-19 era. We are again experiencing rapid change with working at home revitalising villages and re-focusing of personal agendas on what really matters. At the same time the divide, not just between north and south, but between rich and poor is increasing dramatically. In the wider context of the climate emergency and biodiversity crisis what does this mean for those of us concerned with ‘landscape’, and the people living in it? And how should we respond? Fairbrother, who died in 1971 aged just 58, saw landscape architects as the solution to resolving conflicting agendas but regretted that there were too few to have meaningful influence. We no longer have this excuse.

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