

FOREWORD

JEAN SPRACKLAND

The Sefton coast is a haunted place, where the past can suddenly reappear, bursting into the present, the way a gust of wind in a ghost story flings open a loose window and rushes into the room.

Concealment and revelation are its talents. It knows how to throw a covering of sand over a wrecked ship, to suck it down into its underground chambers and keep it there. This stretch of coast was once notoriously difficult to navigate, and no one knows how many shipwrecks are still buried in the intertidal zone. But a few, like the *Star of Hope*, rise to the surface every now and then and take the air for a few days. She sits becalmed in a muddy puddle, barnacled, black and rotting in places, before sinking back into the sand, in an eerie reenactment of the first calamity a hundred and thirty years ago, when a storm drove her onto a treacherous sandbank called Mad Wharf.

I'm not a native of this part of England. I grew up in a landlocked town, and to me the coast has always meant excitement, escape, otherness. I was a blow in, intending to live here a year or two, but stayed for twenty. I didn't fall in love with it straight away. It doesn't advertise its charms; there are none of the picturesque cliffs or rockpools or crashing surf I remembered from the seaside holidays of my childhood. It can look empty: nothing but huge skies, broad expanses of sand, gleaming wet or windblown and racing, and the sea, two miles distant at low tide. An austere palette of greys and blues, lit up by flocks of sandpipers and oystercatchers. You are always aware, walking here, that you are close to the edge of the world.

It all began for me with the Natterjack Toad, and my discovery of its two evocative local nicknames: the 'Bootle Organ' and the 'Birkdale Nightingale'. When I learnt that the Sefton sand-dunes are one of the natterjack's last strongholds, I knew I had to go and hear it for myself. Being out in the dunes at night was a revelation—the scale and sheer wildness of the terrain was acutely apparent, now I had only the stars to guide me. I stumbled up and down hill, sensing every change in the texture of the ground beneath me—dry and sandy, wet and springy, thick and spiky with marram grass. The air was full of enigmatic scents. And the toads, the cosmic sound of them clamouring all around me. I knew it was the males calling the females to the mating pools, but it seemed, as I stood alone in that vertiginous darkness, that they were throwing their voices into the sky, a sound as timeless as the stars themselves.

The next morning, I went back in daylight, hoping to find a fragment of prehistory. I had read that the footprints of people, animals and birds who lived and hunted on the muddy foreshore at Formby Point had survived for five thousand years, and that it was possible to visit them at low tide. There's a bittersweet flavour to the excitement of these discoveries, because you know they will be washed away by the next tide and erased forever. The processes are natural and explicable—a combination of certain weather and tidal conditions—but it is nevertheless miraculous. Our connection with the people of that remote past, before there was written language in which to communicate experience, is generally limited to artefacts and to images painted on the walls of caves. But to see the indentation a human foot has made, and to put your own bare foot right inside it, is to experience a real physical connection.

That was the start of my obsession. One discovery led to another. As I walked this place again and again, its emptiness—the simplicity of the space, its elemental qualities—became essential to me. I began to notice change, to see how the apparent uniformity of sand, water and sky varied with the effects of wind and rain, the seasons, tidal rhythms. It was impossible, too, to predict what freight of things, manmade and natural, the tide would have brought. My heart would beat faster as I took the last fifty yards of the path through the dunes and out onto the beach. It was as passionate as any love affair, and I've been haunted by it ever since.

Jean Sprackland

Author of *Strands: A Year of Discoveries on the Beach* (Cape, 2012)