

**Katie Ritson, *The Shifting sands of the North Sea Lowlands: Literary and Historical Imaginaries*. Routledge, London, 2019. 180 pp., 4 figs.**

Floor Huisman<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Wageningen University, Wageningen, Netherlands

Corresponding author: Floor Huisman (floor.huisman@wur.nl)

Received 24 September 2020 | Accepted 25 October 2020 | Published 17 December 2020

The impact of human activity on the earth, atmosphere and environment is becoming increasingly clear all over the world today. To emphasise the central role that people now play in geology and ecology, Crutzen and Stoermer<sup>1</sup> coined the term ‘Anthropocene’ for a new geological epoch. Whilst the effects of human action on our environment tend to be the reserve of the natural sciences, the Anthropocene has also sparked a lot of debate in the Humanities.<sup>2</sup> In the book *The Shifting Sands of the North Sea. Literary and Historical Imaginaries*, Katie Ritson uses a set of disparate literary texts to explore key aspects of the Anthropocene, clearly demonstrating how literary scholarship can provide useful insights into human-environment interactions and people’s place in a rapidly changing world.

Ritson is well placed to do so as a scholar of comparative literature with an interest in Northern Europe. She studied German, Comparative Literature, and Nordic Philology at the University of Cambridge and Ludwig-Maximilian-University Munich and completed her doctorate in 2016 whilst working as senior editor at the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, LMU Munich, where she currently works as a research fellow. She also serves on the executive boards of the European Association for the Study of Literature, Culture, and the Environment (EASLCE) and the International Consortium of Environmental History Organisations (ICEHO), and is a coordinator of the Ecocritical Network for Scandinavian Studies (ENSCAN). She is interested in ecocriticism and environmental humanities and the disciplinary interfaces between environmental history and environmental scholarship more broadly.

In *Shifting Sands* Ritson aims to demonstrate how the North Sea lowlands feature as a site of human imagination and how “these watery places” allow us to think

with and about the past and future in the context of the current uncertainties of the Anthropocene.<sup>3</sup> She does so through a literary exploration of this landscape, comparing a set of texts from Norway, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK. Rather than focussing on one genre, Ritson uses different types of texts, ranging from novels and prose to short stories and poetry. They are linked through their geographical setting in the North Sea lowland landscape, which as an “active driver of the plot” is used to “express and explore particular ideas about humans and nature in the Anthropocene”.<sup>4</sup>

In an excellent introductory chapter Ritson clearly outlines the book’s aims and her novel approach, introduces and defines key terms like ‘landscape’ and ‘the Anthropocene’ and summarises the book’s contents. In the six chapters that follow, each of which focus on one or two works that represent “particular themes or modes of reflection on the landscape”, Ritson then demonstrates how literary imaginations of the dynamic North Sea landscape are held in common.<sup>5</sup>

In chapter one, Ritson discusses Hans Kristian Andersen’s novel *De to Baronesser* and Arthur van Schendel’s *De Waterman*, both of which look at how the history of the dangerous North Sea coastal landscape with its regular floods and disasters shapes narratives of nationhood and national development. Whereas the first book firmly claims the southwestern edge of Denmark as Danish (rather than German), the Dutch’ inability to fight against the water in *De Waterman* undermines the nationalist cause.<sup>6</sup> In a final section, Ritson discusses several literary responses to the 1953 storm surge, which demonstrate how human confusion and trauma undermine narratives of progress.<sup>7</sup>

The second chapter explores how people attempt to control the hazardous environment of the lowland

coasts through dyke and drainage technology through a close reading of Theodor's Storm's *Der Schimmelreiter*, and Jim Shepard's 'The Netherlands Lives with Water'.<sup>8</sup> Whilst *Der Schimmelreiter* is set in the past and contrasts technological progress with supernatural superstition, the second story is set in a future Rotterdam threatened by high water levels.<sup>9</sup> Here technology has not brought security, but risk.<sup>10</sup> Both texts question the narrative of progress behind land reclamation and the protection of urban settlements, demonstrating that this progress can incur high costs.<sup>11</sup>

Chapter three explores sense of place in the Anthropocene in W.G. Sebald's *Die Ringe des Saturn: Eine englische Wallfahrt*. In this text the English lowlands are embedded in their larger global context. It demonstrates how human behaviour is entangled with and impacts the wider environment and how this in turn will return to haunt humanity.<sup>12</sup>

The fourth chapter discusses several examples of 'new nature writing', including works by Robert Macfarlane, Richard Mabey, Helen Macdonald and Mark Cocker. These authors respond to the threatened landscape of the East Anglian Fens and coast by describing the complex relationship between humans and the natural world, portraying people as no longer separate from nature but depending on it.<sup>13</sup> The landscape is seen as a palimpsest where different timescales, including the lifespans of people and other animals, are linked to geological changes over millions of years.<sup>14</sup> This landscape perspective moves beyond the anthropocentric worldview that "cannot meet the demands imposed on it by the threat of climate change and environmental crisis".<sup>15</sup>

In the fifth chapter, two contemporary works of fiction, Meg Rosoff's *What I Was* and Kjersti Vik's *Mando*, are discussed. In both, the history of the coastal landscape is key to understanding its future.<sup>16</sup> Whilst the inhabitants of the coastal landscape are very aware of this, urban visitors are not as environmentally aware and have a much more human-centred worldview. The failure to successfully connect the fragile, marginal coastal natural world with the inland, mainstream urban culture that we associate with the Anthropocene symbolises the relationship between the fast-eroding landscape of the past with the environmental crisis of the future.<sup>17</sup>

The sixth chapter discusses two works that look at the presence of oil in the imaginary space of the North Sea. In 'Covehithe' by China Miéville oil rigs come alive and breed on the shore, whilst the long poem 'Solaris Korrigert' by Øyvind Rimbereid is set in a high-tech future in which the natural landscape has almost disappeared and the development of the Norwegian city of Stavanger is closely entangled with the petroleum industry. In both works, humans are technological masters, but equally ruled by the technology they once thought they controlled.

The concluding chapter demonstrates how Ritson's inter- and transdisciplinary approach, which focusses on the analysis of literary texts but discusses these within a theoretical framework that draws upon a wide range of

disciplines such as philosophy, ecology, history and geography, allowed her to identify commonalities in the way that the North Sea landscapes are imagined in the context of environmental change. This includes the importance of 'amphibious cultures', or the particular ways that people live with water in this region, and the importance of being able to read the landscape as a palimpsest as we head into the uncertain future of the Anthropocene.

Ritson's original approach, which compares a corpus of very different texts from the same topographical area, demonstrates how the North Sea lowland landscape is imagined in the context of global environmental change. Using this region as an example, Ritson clearly demonstrates that the way a landscape is portrayed in literary form can provide a critical understanding of and reflection on human-environment interactions in the past, present and future, which help us think through the challenges posed by the Anthropocene. Thus, this book convincingly demonstrates how literary scholarship can contribute to debates about the Anthropocene in the Environmental Humanities and beyond.

Ritson provides her own original readings of the texts but refers to a wide range of sources drawn from various disciplines, including secondary sources, other literary texts and interviews with authors, to support her interpretations. Good plot summaries and frequent quotes from the wide variety of texts discussed help to support the argument and draw the reader in. Although each chapter explores a different topic through discussing disparate texts, there are a number of shared themes throughout the book which connect the chapters, including human-environment interaction, the intersection between people, nature and technology, the connection between past, present and future and the impact of environmental change on landscape and people. These themes are introduced in the first chapter and returned to in the last, resulting in a logical structure for the book.

Ritson's inter- and transdisciplinary approach combines "literary close reading with a broader approach to literary texts" which explores shared themes across different genres, languages and countries.<sup>18</sup> This breadth is one of the main strengths of the book and ensures it is of interest to a wide readership. Anyone interested in the Environmental Humanities, and especially human-environment interaction, landscape perceptions and climate change, will find something in this book. As a landscape archaeologist for instance, it is interesting to see how the North Sea lowlands were and are perceived and presented by various people in different contexts. The important connections between the past, present and future, and the way that past landscapes, perceptions and human-environment interactions may influence those in the future, is equally fascinating. Finally, Ritson's nuanced discussions on the blurred boundaries between people, nature, the environment and technology help to break down a number of unhelpful dichotomies (e.g. between nature and culture, people and landscape etc.), which is key if we are to find solutions to the challen-

ges that the Anthropocene brings. By helping us think through these issues, the book clearly demonstrates the contribution that literary studies can make to debates about the Anthropocene.

Although the content of the book is very good, it is not very well printed, with several blurry pages and unclear images. Moreover, whilst most chapters have a concluding section in which the main themes from the works discussed are summarised, some chapters do not have this section, or it is replaced by a section which

discusses another, related theme. Whilst clearly relevant and of interest, this does mean that some texts (e.g. *De Waterman* and 'Covehithe'), are perhaps slightly less well contextualised than others. However, the final chapter, which draws out key themes across all six chapters by referring back to most of the works discussed, easily makes up for this. Overall, this is an original book with much to offer to anyone with an interest in landscapes, the Anthropocene, climate change and the Environmental Humanities.

## Bibliography

Crutzen, P.J. and Stoermer, F. "The Anthropocene." *Global Change Newsletter* 41 (2000) 17–18.

Ritson, K. *The Shifting Sands of the North Sea Lowlands. Literary and Historical Imaginaries*, London: Routledge, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429490644>

## Endnotes

1. Crutzen and Stoermer, The Anthropocene, 17–18.
2. Ritson, *Shifting Sands of the North Sea Lowlands*.
3. Ritson, *Shifting Sands of the North Sea Lowlands*, 2–3.
4. Ritson, *Shifting Sands of the North Sea Lowlands*, 15.
5. Ritson, *Shifting Sands of the North Sea Lowlands*, 17.
6. Ritson, *Shifting Sands of the North Sea Lowlands*, 41.
7. Ritson, *Shifting Sands of the North Sea Lowlands*, 46.
8. Ritson, *Shifting Sands of the North Sea Lowlands*, 20.
9. Ritson, *Shifting Sands of the North Sea Lowlands*, 55.
10. Ritson, *Shifting Sands of the North Sea Lowlands*, 57.
11. Ritson, *Shifting Sands of the North Sea Lowlands*, 20, 69.
12. Ritson, *Shifting Sands of the North Sea Lowlands*, 21, 85.
13. Ritson, *Shifting Sands of the North Sea Lowlands*, 21, 96.
14. Ritson, *Shifting Sands of the North Sea Lowlands*, 99.
15. Ritson, *Shifting Sands of the North Sea Lowlands*, 109, 112.
16. Ritson, *Shifting Sands of the North Sea Lowlands*, 117, 121.
17. Ritson, *Shifting Sands of the North Sea Lowlands*, 115, 130.
18. Ritson, *Shifting Sands of the North Sea Lowlands*, 161.