

# LOCAL LANDSCAPE IN THE NOVELS OF FRANCIS BRETT YOUNG

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When regional novelist Francis Brett Young (1884-1954) received an honorary doctorate from the University of Birmingham, the Public Orator commented: "He has done for Warwickshire and Worcestershire what Hardy did for Dorset and Bennett for the Five Towns."



Francis Brett Young, 1909.

## Regional Contrasts

The borders of Young's fictional world actually extend far beyond Warwickshire and Worcestershire, encompassing all the land visible from the high ground west of Birmingham. Spanning the years from the early nineteenth century to 1939, Young's entertaining stories are set against backdrops which complement character and plot. His novels hold in tension the conflict between the industrial Black Country, the ever-increasing metropolis of Birmingham and the countryside to the south and west. Like Hardy and Bennett, Young adopted the convention of variant names for his literary locations. Thus Birmingham becomes North Bromwich, Wolverhampton Wolverbury, Wednesbury Wednesford, Dudley Dulston and Hales Owen Halesby.



The contrasting landscape which Young describes, ostensibly that of rural against urban, is far more than that. Frequently expressed as green versus black, it becomes his chosen imagery for the struggle between light and darkness, beauty and ugliness, good and evil. Battle lines are drawn in this view from the Tilton escarpment, in reality, Quinton:

'To the north, the Black Country smouldered beneath its perpetual smoke-pall: there lay Wednesford, Dulston and Wolverbury, clasped in the grimy tentacles of North Bromwich itself, beyond which the line of the Clees and the dome of the Wrekin marked the ultimate skyline. Full in front, the spire of Halesby Church pierced the film of smoke that settled in the valley of the Stour, the debatable land between the black and the green. Beyond Halesby rose the undulant line of the Clents... visible from those twin summits all the hills beyond Severn: Woodbury, Abberley, Ankerdine, the Malverns.' (*Mr Lucton's Freedom* – MLF)

### A Cindery Wilderness

Introducing it here in outline, Young develops his Black Country both in general and particular, exposing the unsavoury details of Wednesford, Dulston and Wolverbury that lie beneath the smoke-pall:

'A brick bridge, flanked by the smoke-plumed chimneys of a foundry, spanned a fall of water, tawny and opaque, boiling into a pool of black-slimed sandstone, which once had nourished trout, but was now a depository for tins, broken bottles and rotting cabbage stalks. Beyond this bridge, through the yellowish veil of smoke spread from the spouting foundry chimneys, the roofs of Wednesford rose'. (*My Brother Jonathan* – MBJ)

Dominating the Black Country lies Dudley, its self-proclaimed capital. 'The town of Dulston, a conglomeration of mean dwellings, foundries and workshops, stood at the very heart of the blighted zone, marooned in the midst of a slagged and cindery wilderness' (*This Little World* – TLW). To the north is Wolverbury where 'towering smoke-stacks shook out funereal pennons' and 'the shriek of tortured iron issued from rolling-mills' (*Portrait of Clare* – POC).

Young's Black Country does not exist in isolation, but as a satellite of Birmingham, itself obscured beneath 'the grey clot of smoke that hid North Bromwich' (POC).



The 'smoke-plumed' chimneys of the Black Country. *Illustrated London News*, 1866.

### Birmingham: a City of Iron

This great metropolis, which Young tellingly labels 'City of Iron', is the most thoroughly documented of all his landscapes, appearing in twenty-five of his thirty novels.

This is a city which assaults the senses: 'In the black heart of North Bromwich the air was acrid and volcanic with the smell of fire; noisy with the whirring of lathes, the shriek of high-speed tool-cutting steel, the steady grating of saws, the thunder of sheet-iron, the sighs of furnaces, the thudding of hammers.' (POC)

That the surrounding landscape is 'clasped in the grimy tentacles of North Bromwich' is further elucidated via the uncompromising medical imagery of which Young was fond, making clear the malignant incursion of urban into rural: 'The Iron City had developed the encroaching activity of a cancer cell, thrusting greedy tentacles of brick and mortar and steel and cement into healthy countryside, a red and rodent ulcer eating its way into soft green tissue.' (*Mr & Mrs Pennington* – MMP)

### Hales Owen: a Sordid, Mean Little Town?

Just as Hales Owen lies at the edge of the ten-yard coal seam which usually defines the Black Country, so Halesby, in 'the debatable land between the black and the green,' forms a buffer between urban and rural. As to whether his birthplace, therefore, represents beauty or ugliness, Young remains ambivalent. On the one hand it is:

'...a sordid, mean little town... from the gutters of the steep High Street came the indescribable smell of vegetable refuse left there overnight from the greengrocer's stalls... It called attention to the sordidness of the whole street: the poverty of its grimy brick: the faded lettering above the shop windows: the paint that cracked and peeled from the closed shutters. Halesby was a squalid and degraded little town.' (*Wistanslow*)

Nevertheless, one piece of architecture is redemptive – the parish church: 'The grace and ingenuity of successive ages had embellished its original design with many beautiful features, and the slender spire had imposed an atmosphere of dignity and rest upon the rather squalid surroundings of this last of the black-country towns' (*The Young Physician* – YP).

The transition from urban to rural, from black to green, may also begin on the high ground, this time at Brimsley (Romsley) Hill to the south of Halesby. From this vantage point:

'...stretched the mid-Worcestershire plain, outspread like a time-frayed tapestry in which the dark hues of woodland, hedgerow and meadow merged into one tissue of softly graded green. Only where, here and there, a tall chimneyed farmhouse of

red and black gathered round it a group of barn and orchard and shining duck-pond could any detailed pattern be discerned.' (*MLF*)

On closer acquaintance such patterns acquire greater detail:

'...moated farmsteads and blossomed orchards, straw-thatch and half-timber, tawny-sanded brooks, pastures perpetually green, red-clodded arable, unruly hawthorn hedgerows and minty ditches, blowing banks afire with gorse and foxy coverts, isolated oaks and elms.' (*TLW*)

## West of the Severn

However, the most decisive boundary between the black and the green is the River Severn, the crossing of which is cleansing and renewing. The appeal of this westward journey to Young himself is transposed to a North Bromwich clerk. 'As they crossed Severn above Bewdley, Dick underwent an odd metamorphosis. The passage of that boundary washed away from his mind all the preoccupations of the last months. He expanded and bloomed in this land west of Severn.' (*MMP*)

Beyond Bewdley further high points are reached. Not only is this picture-postcard land, it is music to the ears with its:

'...scattered group of houses above the forest of Wyre, where the highroad from Bewdley climbs to Clows Top. There a narrow lane tumbles between cider orchards to a gate in the forest and there the steep path climbs to a green space. And from this green you can see the comb of Clee, Brown Clee and Titterstone in two great waves; and hear, on a Sunday evening, the church bells of Mamble and Pensax, villages whose names are music in themselves.' (*The Crescent Moon*)

Young leads his readers still further west, beyond 'the serrated shapes of the Malverns, sharp-cut as inky cardboard,' (*MLF*) until the utmost limits of the West Midlands are reached. This is a land of 'hop-yards, of tidy red-brick farms with cowled oast-houses; of infrequent tawny streams and elm-bordered meadows where white-faced Hereford cattle placidly browsed' (*MLF*).

Then come the distant towns. Shrewsbury, where 'lights were gleaming in the muddy streets and in the windows of the tall, half-timbered houses. Above them hung the threatening mass of the castle' (*The Black Diamond*). Through the market square and castle precincts at Ludlow:

'...ivy clothes the patient stone, and grave Georgian houses with windows like the eyes of solemn Georgian gentlemen long since dead, looked half asleep. Along the walls of the castle the heavy trees were as patient and motionless as the ruined stone. Then the sharp fall to the level of the river. The singing of the weir above the bridge.' (*The Iron Age*)

## The Forest of Wyre

What is, perhaps, the most vibrant description of Young's rural Midlands is reserved for that swathe of land which fringes the Black Country and therefore provides the greatest contrast: the forest of Wyre or, as Young also names it, Werewood.

Here is just one example of the lyric and colour to be found there:

'Fern-fronds flamed, then faded to brittle gold under pallid November skies whose searching light beat down through an



Wyre Forest in Autumn by Gwen Wardle.

© Gwen Wardle

inky filigree of bared branches on to the forest's russet floor. Every path was spanned in the early morning with gossamer that sparkled in the light that glistened from sodden leaves, illumining, too, grotesque forms of night-born fungi – ashen white, or pale amber or scarlet blotched with ivory – sinister shapes compared with those of the milk-white mushrooms that studded the kindlier green of meadow and orchard.' (*Far Forest*)

## A Lost World

The West Midlands' contrasting landscapes of which Young wrote have changed. Hills and forests may remain, but chimneys and blast-furnaces are largely gone. As he foresaw, the demarcation between black and green has been progressively blurred. His novels offer an insightful portrait of a lost world, and for that he deserves his place in the list of outstanding twentieth century authors. ●

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### Further Reading

Michael Hall, *Francis Brett Young* (Seren, 1997).

Michael Hall, 'Francis Brett Young's Birmingham: North Bromwich – City of Iron' [Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Birmingham, 2008].

Jacques Leclair, *Francis Brett Young: Physician – Poet – Novelist* (Dulston Press, 1986).

E.G. Twitchett, *Francis Brett Young* (Wishart, 1935).