

Clearing Land: A Conversation with Jane Brox

Published in *The Writer's Chronicle*, December 2005
by Jenn Dean

Jane Brox's first book, *Here and Nowhere Else*, won the 1996 [L. L. Winship/PEN](#) New England Award. The book chronicled both her return to, and the history of, her family farm in Massachusetts. Her second book, *Five Thousand Days Like This One*, was a 1999 finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award in Nonfiction. The book traced the immigrant life of her ancestors in the farms and textile mills of the Merrimack Valley northwest of Boston. Brox's most recent book, *Clearing Land: Legacies of the American Farm*, was published by North Point Press in September 2004. The last of a trilogy, *Clearing Land* traces the history of human occupation on the land from before the time of the Pilgrims, and it also chronicles her family's painful decision to cut ties with the farm and lease the land. A recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Literature Fellowship, Brox has been a contributor to the *Georgia Review* and other journals and magazines. Her work has been selected for inclusion in many anthologies including *Best American Essays* and the *Pushcart Prize Anthology*. Brox lives in Maine and teaches at the low-residency MFA Program at Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Jenn Dean, a writer and naturalist, has an MFA in Literature and Creative Nonfiction from the Bennington Writing Seminars. An excerpt from her memoir-in-progress was recently published in *Salamander*.

Jenn Dean: Our culture of late seems built on a faux nostalgia of the farm; people buy overpriced fake "antique" items that were never used in a kitchen or a barn. In your second book, *Five Thousand Days Like This One*, you write about being able to purchase from the Williams-Sonoma catalog "a weathered halfpeck basket" of a dozen Baldwin apples for \$32 plus shipping. Each, "polished to a still life, is more perfect than any Baldwins I've ever seen... they seem to say, "see how beautiful the old life was?" Why do you think of late there's so much interest in an overly nostalgic, romanticized past; a sort of past-made-perfect?

Jane Brox: The United States was founded as a country of farmers. The fact that now there are more people in New York City than on all the farms in America doesn't seem to diminish our desire to find

our roots in the farm. People hold nostalgic ideas of the family farm for many reasons--they attach to it a certain idea of togetherness and stability and hominess that's easy to imagine, and so the things of the farm carry those notions with them. I'd read, as part of my thinking for my new book, George Kubler's *The Shape of Time*, where he talks at length about how retaining the shapes of the things of the past allows a certain continuity, allows sense and pattern to emerge. Holding on to the shapes of old things-or replicas of those shapes-is a dream of stability. That stability is imperfect, but a stability nevertheless.

Dean: All three of your books touch on, in varying degrees, the history that infuses the land you live on. Were you always interested in history, even as a child?

Brox: I didn't think of our place in an historical sense until I was older and started reading about the history of the New England landscape. William Cronon's *Changes in the Land* was particularly influential - he traces land management to before colonial times, to the Algonquin tribes. But reading Robert Frost can give you that sense, too, that there are several whole vanished worlds underlying the world we think of as our own. The remnants of those worlds--stone walls and old cellar holes-had been our playing fields when I was a child.

Dean: Your most recent book, *Clearing Land: Legacies of the American Farm*, contemplates, in your words, "the history of human occupation on the land," how small farm life was romanticized. When did the often dangerous lives of early American settlers get imbued with that aura of romance? Was it when people went out and started settling the prairies?

Brox: Probably the romance started even before the prairie was settled. Jefferson believed that the cultivators of the earth were its most valuable citizens-vigorous, independent, virtuous, the ones with the most at stake, so the most invested. He saw the settlement of the prairie, with its seemingly endless frontier, as a way to assure that we would always be a nation of farmers, each family with its forty acres, its hens and chickens and cornfields. Jefferson also knew the expansion into the prairies would be a liability for the Eastern states, but by then the New England soil was already played out, and too many people had tried to settle on marginal lands. The New England soil has always had limited possibilities for farming, it's so rocky, and the terrain is so varied. If you climb any of the small mountains in central Massachusetts or southern New Hampshire, you climb up into old sheep pastures, and you can't

help but wonder what drove people to try to farm there. There isn't any one story of the American farm.

Dean: You also write in *Clearing Land* about the idea of wilderness and how that idea has changed over the centuries...

Brox: Any farmer has a fairly complex relationship with wilderness because cultivation is always a negotiation with the wild-if you stop cultivating land, the wild will come right back on to it within a matter of years, so you're always trying to keep that wilderness at bay. There's a constant struggle to designate the wilderness as something separate and beyond. In a post-agricultural world, I don't think the tension is so keenly felt. Necessity has given way to desire.

Dean: Hasn't it gone back the other way? Now we embrace wilderness.

Brox: Maybe embracing the wilderness goes back to the romantic movement, and a world that has more room for desire. My parents never climbed a mountain! In *Clearing Land*, I write about the Pemigewasset Wilderness in New Hampshire's White Mountains. It had been logged up until it was designated as a Wilderness Area in the early 20th century, and now it is entirely reforested, a maintained wilderness. That transformation is representative of the way our views of the wild have changed, though of course that argument continues, the one between exploiting resources and preserving the wild.

Dean: So how did *Clearing Land* evolve?

Brox: I worked on two essays to start with, one on the salt hay marshes of the New England coast and one on the granite quarries of Cape Ann around Rockport and Gloucester. I had always been curious about those landscapes so I started reading about them. That research gradually grew into a book that came back to the farm to talk about the larger idea of clearing land. There is a personal dimension to this book, also. It really is the last of a trilogy: during the time of its writing I came to see myself as a ghost on the land. Not only do I no longer have anything to do with farming here, no one in my family does; we lease out the land to someone who runs the farm. The personal story within this last book is about dispossession, which fits in historically with these landscapes that have been cleared and abandoned. It was the most difficult book of the three to write, the most difficult to make cohere. That might have to do with my own distance from the land, and with being at the end of the story. In fact, my next project is to move from the farm.

Dean: Your personal story is reflected on a wider scale as development has taken hold, and more and more people in New England live at a distance from the land. As the land has become more built up, cities and towns are struggling to balance development, affordable housing, and natural land preservation. You don't write directly about such things-you're more of a documentarian-but are you involved with the "exploiting versus preserving" issues here in your community?

Brox: Yes, I'm a member of the Open Space Committee in town; we're trying to find ways to preserve the rapidly disappearing undeveloped land in town. This hasn't anything to do with being a writer, it has more to do with being a citizen in a democracy. And there are always the larger, impersonal forces at play that are not working in your interest! If you go up and down the road here, you'll see what has happened to this town. There hasn't been much planning, there's a lot of haphazard industry, the wrong kind of industry for the place. The place as place has been deeply compromised by political decisions. You're not going to win--over the long years, I've learned that you don't win even a small fraction of the time, but you can make it more difficult for those larger forces to gain their control. You can at least try to put bounds on what's going to happen, even though the most you seem to be able to do is mitigate the circumstances, and then life goes on.

Dean: How do you deal with the hopelessness of that?

Brox: Well at some point, when the present moves so quickly you can't retain your own sense of place, your own contract with the place breaks. Thoreau left Walden, he said, because he had other lives to live. I guess I think of it that way, I have another life to live at this point.

Dean: What do you think will be lost if the family farm ceases to exist?

Brox: In the course of a century, farming here has gone from being the common life-one farm connected to the next-to being a rare world among other more predominate ways of life. Our farm is one of the last in the valley, so it's already almost gone. Its larger context is gone. In some ways, if the farm ceases to exist, it will hardly be noticed. I don't think farming lends the community here a true sense of itself anymore-it's too vestigial for that. It lends the community a nostalgic sense of itself. That said, when it disappears, a reminder of the place's past disappears.

Dean: Which brings up my next question: there is a strong undercurrent in your writing, an urgent need to recover the unrecoverable. Your second book, *Five Thousand Days Like This One*, documents the wider history of the Merrimack Valley, but also resurrects the quotidian lives of mill workers and farmers, including both of your grandfathers—one was a textile worker, and the other began your family farm. You write: "At the accumulative end, there should be voices insisting on the worth of all the days..." Why do you feel it crucial for the texture of these lives to be remembered and documented—not just your family's lives but the lives of strangers?

Brox: Bringing in the larger life of the Merrimack Valley was a way to make up for the silences in my own family. The family stories I had to draw on were sparse, not nearly enough for a narrative. When I wanted to know more about, say, the influenza epidemic of 1918, I researched it. The more time I spent in historical archives and libraries, the more buried lives I encountered. They were such compelling stories, especially the mill girls' stories, so full of energy, without complaint—twelve-hour days that would have killed my spirit. Czeslaw Milosz says that "we move in a gigantic labyrinth where the present and past are interwoven." I felt that keenly during the writing of the book.

But we also create a story of the past. I was very conscious of picking and choosing material. Out of the millions of incidents and countless lives, you choose specifics to try to make a coherence out of the seeming chaos. Had my family been here for 400 years instead of a hundred, had their experience not been part of the 19th century immigrant experience, I might have been pulling different elements out of the past to create a different story.

Dean: You also write in *Five Thousand Days* about how the landscape has changed, and you say "the connections between things take so long to become apparent." Are these connections what you hope people will gain by seeing a palimpsest of history beneath the modern landscape?

Brox: I might have been referring to the slow workings of my own mind! I don't know if I brought much intention for my audience to the page. I don't think I ask anything specific of them, though I write these things because they seem essential to me, and I hope that feeling of necessity is conveyed to the reader.

Dean: The book is also framed by the death of your father, but ends on an image of the spring apple blossoms lighting the dusk, an image of hope and renewal...

Brox: Looking back, I can see why my imagination might have landed on the apple trees. My grandfather planted the oldest orchard on the farm, and my father planted an orchard in the 1950s and another orchard in the 1970s. I've seen the trees grow cragged and old—they have this tortured appearance because they are half controlled and half wild. Apples are the eternal crop, a constancy in the landscape. They're the first thing you care for in the spring, and they're the last thing you harvest in the fall. With corn and the other row crops, you plow them under every year and plant again, the fields are rotated, there isn't the same duration in the mind's eye. So I suppose the constant presence of them is what ended up making them the large metaphor for the book, though I wasn't conscious of it, not to begin with. They were what held my attention, where my thoughts landed. I don't think you can will the making of metaphor.

Dean: All three of your books interweave the personal and the historical. How did you get what often must have felt like two different tones to harmonize?

Brox: It was difficult, especially with *Five Thousand Days Like This One*. In early drafts of the manuscript, I could feel two very different 'voices within the narrative—the historical informative voice, and another that was more personal, musing. The solution was given to me in the course of writing the book. Part way through, I decided to quote extensively from voices of the past—those "buried lives" I mentioned earlier—not only writers like Thoreau, but selections from letters of the mill girls and factory workers, real human voices of the times, articulate in a way I could never be about their world. A lucky decision for me; - these more than anything, I think, helped to "warm up" that historical voice so that it dovetailed with the more personal one.

Dean: Let's turn to your early career. You studied poetry, and went on to publish poems in various literary magazines. Yet poetry had its liabilities for you when you turned to prose; you had difficulty writing anything longer than a poem. If that was the case, why did you begin writing prose, and why—and how—did you continue?

Brox: Well, my first book, *Here and Nowhere Else* started as a series of prose poems, which I'd begun while in graduate school. At first I thought of them as fairly straightforward recollections of childhood. Over the years, they took more and more of my attention, and as they piled up, I realized there was a larger story within them that I'd begun to tell, about place and family, and a vanishing world. Though the prose poems were different in form from the lyric poems I'd written early on, they still had a certain

concentration and density. I realized if the book I was to write was to have a certain length and an ongoing narrative, I had to let some air into my prose style. I saw what made one prose poem work standing on its own or standing in a group of two or three might have to be renegotiated to fit into the larger work. I set out to dismantle some of the endings of the pieces, and stitch them together with narrative, that sort of thing. An almost physical hurt accompanied this! I felt I was violating an old practice, that I was forsaking some dream of perfection. But the process helped me realize the demands of the whole are different from the demands of the parts. It was a discovery about the needs of the longer work that I hadn't had to face before.

Dean: Other than the fact that you wanted to tell a larger story, how else did you get the idea to turn the prose poems into a book of nonfiction?

Brox: When I had what I thought was a finished manuscript of about eighty pages of prose poems--I was thinking along the lines of Baudelaire's *Paris Spleen*--sent it out to some publishers. Deanne Urmy at Beacon Press accepted it, and I imagined it would be published pretty much as it was. When we met for the first time she said, "Well, it has to be twice as long as it is now." I was a little stunned, but not stubbornly resistant. I have the greatest respect for her judgment. I went home and thought about it for a long time, and realized she was right in a complex way, that the book could be something else, something larger, and the form I had it in was constricting it somehow--that for this particular book to work it had to take another turn. I felt very fortunate because I was about to go off to the MacDowell Colony for a few months, and I had just received a grant from the NEA, so for the first time in my life I had free time and no need to make money for a while. I could devote myself entirely to the work. That's when I set myself the task of dismantling it, rearranging it into chapters, and writing interlinking narrative in between the more lyrical moments to sew the whole together. So her saying that to me was another turning of possibilities for the book.

Dean: I want to ask about something that plagues almost every nonfiction writer, and that's living family members who may read your book. In *Here And Nowhere Else* you write candidly about your drug-addicted adult brother. He also works on the farm, and becomes one of the reasons why you withdraw from working on the farm. Did he read the book? And what were his-and your parents'-reactions to your writing about such things?

Brox: He and I have never talked about the book; I gave him a copy, and he's never said much about it one way or the other. I was more concerned about what my parents would say. After Beacon Press agreed to publish it, I gave them the manuscript, and I was preparing to leave the farm at the same time--it was such an exposure. I thought its publication would be the end of my place on the farm. When I went back to their house four or five days after handing over the manuscript, all my father said was, "Well, you got us pretty straight, didn't you?" I think they buried some of their real feelings concerning it, and were probably more conflicted about it than they let on, but they let it ride. They were always a bit bewildered by my impulse to write, but they were always very supportive. When I had first given my father the news that my book had been accepted for publication he said, "Well, see, there's more to life than planting tomatoes." Both my parents were first generation Americans, and dreamed of seeing their children leave an old life.

Dean: You said recently you're still conflicted about writing about your brother in that book.

Brox: Yes. I see him differently now than I saw him ten years ago when I was writing it, and I suppose that's part of the conflict. It always is, to some extent, with nonfiction. You fix the story on the page, but the story also continues. I wonder if I gave him his due, fleshed out all the complexities of the conflicts on the farm. I also can't help but wonder if I had the right to expose him. His story hadn't been in the first versions of the book. When I gave an early draft to a friend to read, he said, "You know Jane, this is really beautiful, but the tragedy is at the edges." I sat with his comment for a long time, and that's when I realized I had to tell my brother's part of the story--without it I wouldn't have written any book at all, because there would have been too much unsaid at the center of it. I don't imagine the conflicted feelings will ever really go away. Writing from life has its consequences.

Dean: You wrote all three of your books as you were living in the thick of things on the farm. What was it like to write *Here And Nowhere Else* with so little psychic distance from your material?

Brox: I actually started those prose pieces while living outside of Boston. I moved back to the farm after graduate school, around the summer of 1989. Once I returned here, my year was divided. I'd do farm work for about eight months--helping with the greenhouses and with the planting, then running the farmstand and wholesale business. In late November or early December, I'd sit down and work on my writing for the winter. Sometimes I'd go away, which

gave me some distance from which to write. And the season itself gave me some distance. In the winter the farm disappears. The fields are sown in winter rye or snowed over--more of a meditative landscape because there isn't work to be done out there. When I stopped working on the farm in 1993, at first I felt a lot of discomfort and anxiety-guilt. While everyone else was outside plowing and planting, I was inside writing. I had to redetermine what work was. But those feelings gradually faded as I became more committed to my work, and haven't reappeared since.

Dean: What was the impetus that made you put writing first?

Brox: Writing had been first for years before I returned to the farm. It just was. I didn't come back here to claim the farm. I never thought--for many family reasons, temperamental reasons--that it was going to be my life. I saw my return as a way to help my family, and to also free up some extended time during the winter for my own work. It didn't take long for me to realize how demanding the farm really was--to try to run a small farm successfully is ceaseless work, and to take it on would have meant I could never have had any real ambitions for my writing. There's not world enough and time.

Dean: A different narrator might have brought themselves more into the work, yet you recede into the background of your books to tell a much larger story. Was your authorial distance something that you consciously chose, or did it develop inherently?

Brox: I don't remember consciously choosing to have that distance. I remember thinking, especially with the early prose poems, that what I wanted to do was record a passing way of life. I never thought this was a story about me returning to the farm so much as it was the story about the life of the place, the human life. The story of my own life may have given the book narrative shape, but it was secondary.

Dean: The mill girls you talked about earlier had difficult lives. They suffered crowded living conditions in stacked tenements, workplaces that exposed them to tuberculosis, anthrax, and all manner of lung diseases from the humid cloth dust that would pile up in their lungs. Yet, the language used to describe their lives is so achingly beautiful. Were you aware of this dynamic when you were writing *Five Thousand Days Like This One*?

Brox: I wasn't conscious of trying to use particularly beautiful language to capture a sense of that past life, though early on I had the idea that I would find a different rhythm and syntax to write about the urban world than I had used to write about the rural world, that there should be different sounds for a different

world, but I never found a way to sustain the idea. In the end, it's simply the search for the right words.

Dean: The emotion in your books is often detailed in your observations of the things around you. Disappointments, frustrations, and personal longing are seen in the way a handful of snow swirls across an open field and is tossed up into the night, or in the spaces between the stars, or in the blue shadows among the apple trees. Can you talk about the role of nature in your work?

Brox: The natural world is my given world, the world I grew up in--you can see it here, the cultivated land and then the woods beyond it, the view going from the house to the fields to the wild. And so when I turn to describing things, nature seems to be what I draw on for metaphor and simile. If I had grown up or had lived for a long time in a different landscape, I'd have an entirely different set of references. I think as a writer you build the world that you're going to draw from, or the world is built up around you, and it happens to be the natural world for me. Also, as I said earlier, cultivation is a very specific contract with the land. It's an attempt to control the land, so there are a lot of tensions that go along with the agricultural world, and I think those come out when I write about the natural world as well. I don't see a world that is simply wild; I see a negotiation between the human and the wild.

Dean: Whom do you admire and read?

Brox: When I first started trying to write seriously I was reading Seamus Heaney. His *Field Work* had just come out, so he was a big influence, both for the subject and style, as was Elizabeth Bishop, and the beautiful precision of her poems. During the writing of *Five Thousand Days*, Thoreau was a great influence on me--he broke with agriculture, he was living in a time when farms were being abandoned, and cultivation, in New England anyway, was thrown up against itself. Thoreau was questioning the place of the farmer on the land. The last four or five years it's been W.G. Sebald. The way the narrator's memory takes hold in his books has been something for me to think about. Also, I had read Loren Eiseley in college, and I've recently picked him up again, specifically his autobiography *All The Strange Hours*. The shapes of his essays are remarkable, always surprising in the way his meditations play themselves out--very fluid.

Dean: I want to go back to your most recent book, *Clearing Land, Legacies of the American Farm*, because I was under the impression that it started out as fiction?

Brox: No, it never started out as fiction. I started to write a book of fiction and abandoned it, and I was writing these essays at the same time. They were two different books.

Dean: Was the fiction about the farm?

Brox: Well, it took place on a farm, but not this one. To try writing fiction after writing nonfiction for so long was bewildering to me. When you write nonfiction you begin with some givens, you have a block of material to carve into, to shape. Fiction-you launch your story into air, there's nothing supporting you as you're telling your story. It just became too disconcerting after a while, which is not to say I might not try again. But I think I still have more nonfiction to write.

Dean: I remember hearing you speak on a panel where you said you wanted to write fiction to "finally tell the truth about the farm..." Was that a desire to hide behind a fictional narrator? What truths couldn't you tell in nonfiction?

Brox: I don't know-I think I was just dreaming of freeing myself from my narrative self! After you finish writing a book you dream of a clean start. It takes a while to find the next true start, I think, and you just have to cast around until you find what really is going to take hold. You might make a few false starts to begin with, have a few false dreams. It goes with the territory.

Dean: You've now written three books about this farm, this valley. After you wrote your second book you said it would be your last book about the farm; and I believe you said the same about your third book. How have you been able to pull so much material out of one place?

Brox: In *Regarding The Pain Of Others*, Susan Sontag says "memory changes the image according to memory's needs." My imagination is always rethinking the farm. Quite a few writers dwell on the same landscape all their lives. I think a subject is only self-limiting. I think a writer can imagine endless things out of a certain subject. And the narrowing of focus is sometimes helpful, too. To have your gaze honed in on one place allows for other kinds of expansions.

Dean: Now that you've done it three times, does writing a book get any easier?

Brox: It never gets easier because every book presents its own set of challenges. As a writer, you're always negotiating with the writer you were in the past. You don't want to repeat yourself. And my aims and ambitions are different now than they were fifteen or twenty years ago. Also, how each book gets

put together is so different, the subject matter and the voice within the book make their own demands. The one thing you can say about writing is there are no prescriptions, every book has to be met on its own terms, so to say having written this book will solve certain problems with the next book, I just can't see that happening.

Dean: How would you say your writing has evolved over time?

Brox: I can't articulate how the writing itself has evolved. Something interior pushes it forward. I do know that over the years it's become more and more essential to my life, and I spend more and more time at it. I can't imagine not writing anymore, it's how I make sense of the world. Finishing *Clearing Land* was exhausting. I had to just about shut out the world in order to finish it. Afterwards, I thought I'd give myself a good rest, but no sooner was I done than I started jotting things down and thinking about new things to write for some next book. When you begin writing, you're stealing your time; you have so many hopes, and no idea at all about how to proceed! I don't think you can really grasp at the start how much it will take to continue, or how essential it becomes to your life if you make it your life's work.

Dean: Does the business of writing ever enter into your writing life?

Brox: The business of having a book in the world and the practice of writing are two very different things. I try to never have the two meet. I would like it to be easier for the people who might be interested in my books to know about them. That's very difficult today when there are so many choices for people, so many books and movies, and only a handful of books get the larger attention of the media at any time. Those few take up so much space there's not much immediate room for other books in the general discussion about literature in the country. But you can't really spend too much time worrying about that. It's not anything you have control over.

Dean: You were recently the Visiting Briggs-Copeland lecturer in English at Harvard University, and you taught memoir at the Harvard University Extension School for about nine years. What kind of influence have your students had on you?

Brox: Well, it's funny, I never imagined myself as a teacher. I never thought of myself as being particularly comfortable talking in front of people or taking charge of a discussion for hours at a time. I'm a fairly quiet person. The sheer demands of the classroom have helped me to become more articulate about writing, and when things go well I love the exchange of the classroom, the back-and-forth flow,

the energy and the reaction. I've admired the ambitions and dreams of my students. I've certainly gained a deeper understanding of writing during all these exchanges. And sometimes it's a welcome counterweight to the solitude of the writing life. The year of teaching full-time was too much for me. Like farming, teaching is a whole life if you do it well. I can't do that and write at the same time, and so I don't think I'll ever take on a full-time teaching job again. I like teaching one class a year, or a couple of summer school things here and there, but I need an enormous amount of quiet time around my time at the desk in order to work well.

Dean: What is next for you? What are you obsessing about, thinking about?

Brox: I have three or four things I've started. I want to write an extended piece on solitude, a break with my agricultural themes, but I also want to write about rural electrification in America. It took decades for the countryside to be electrified after the cities were flooded with light: in the '30s, most farms in America still had no electricity because the power companies didn't think it worth their while to invest in the lines, so rural people were living a separate life, and growing more separate all the time. I've also been thinking about glacial things-going back before even soil was on the land! They're separate inquiries at this point. I've only started, so it'll be years before anything specific coalesces for a book. It's a matter of feeling my way through to more sturdy ground.

Dean: Do you think your ancestral farm will be here one hundred years from now?

Brox: Farms are particularly difficult to preserve. One town in central Massachusetts bought the last apple orchard from their last farmer because they wanted to preserve it, then the town couldn't find anyone to run the apple orchard! You can't preserve farmland without farmers. Part of me can't imagine not seeing this particular landscape-it's ingrained in my imagination. I would love to see it saved, to have it continue. But I don't hold out a lot of hope.

©2010 Jenn Dean.
All rights reserved.