**Kentish literary landscapes and *pays***

*‘I went mooning, more and more moodily, about the looming landscape, with its creaking-cowled hop-kilns and whirring flocks of starlings and hop-poles piled in pyramids like soldiers’ tents.’*

Siegfried Sassoon, \_*Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man\_*

Kent landscapes have inspired numerous authors although with the possible exception of Sheila Kaye-Smith (Kent and Sussex) none have been labelled as a ‘regional author’ in the same manner as Hardy is associated with Wessex or Catherine Cookson with the North East. Specific Kent landscapes however, always evoke certain writers; [Dickens]( /dickens/dickens-biography) and the north Kent marshes; H.E. Bates and the Chartland; Jocelyn Brooke’s Elham Valley; and Siegfried Sassoon as the so-called ‘Proust of the Weald’. Recent writers have also used Kentish settings, but often with a darker tone, for example, Nicola Barker’s \_*Wide Open\_* set on Sheppey.

Kent is a county of diverse landscapes - inspiring evocations of both rural idyll and horror - from its wild coastal marshes (where Pip is terrified by Magwitch in [\_Great Expectations\_](/dickens/great-expectations-curated-walk)) to the uplands of Down and Weald, from the heavily wooded Blean complex above Canterbury to the bleak, windswept chalklands of East Kent. As Alan Everitt has noted, this diversity often goes unnoticed:

The modern motorist following the main roads to Thanet, Dover or Folkestone scarcely notices the diversity because he [sic] is following the grain of the country. But take one of the old droveways across Kent from north to south and you will traverse half a dozen distinct types of landscape within the space of 30 or 40 miles: cornland, downland, chartland, clayland, woodland, and marshland.[[1]](#footnote-1))

The grain is provided by the varied geology that Everitt’s transect crosses, from the relatively young Tertiary deposits at the coast to the Cretaceous Hastings beds of the High Weald – a journey of a few dozen miles into ‘deep time’ representing some hundred and thirty-six million years! Kent’s topography reflects the fact that the geological strata of its sedimentary rocks have been uplifted to form a dome (anticline) of which the older geology has been exposed rather like the layers of an onion as the centre of the dome has eroded. This has resulted in alternating upland of more resistant rock (chalk, sandstone) and low-lying vales of clay. The south facing edges of the more resistant formations give the characteristic scarp of the Downs and high Wealden ridge.

The varied physical geography of the county led to distinct phases of settlement and evolution of land use. The later history of this process is played out in novels such as Kaye-Smith’s \_*Joanna Godden\_*, in which the eponymous heroine experiments with agricultural innovations on the Walland Marsh in the early 1900s – in an entirely human-made environment claimed from the sea.

Everitt adopted the French term \_*pays\_* to describe the regional divisions he identified. A \_p*ays\_* is a distinctive physiographic region (based on its physical geography) whose inhabitants often share common social, economic, and cultural characteristics, for example settlement pattern and agricultural practices. Everitt’s \_*pays\_* follow the geological sequence, from the ‘Marshland’ on the north coast via the ‘Foothills’ (tertiary deposits), ‘Downland’ (chalk), ‘Holmesdale’ (gault clay), Chartland’ (sandstone), and ‘The Weald’ (clays and sandstones). Kent Archaeological Society’s \_*An Historical Atlas of Kent\_* adds a further ‘physiographic region’ by distinguishing between the High and Low Weald. The ‘Three Marshes’ (Romney, Walland and Denge; often collectively known as Romney Marsh) are recognised as a very distinctive region within the ‘Marshland’ category. But of course, the Three Marshes have, according to Thomas Ingoldsby (Rev. Richard Harris Barham*),* always been a world apart - the ‘fifth continent’:

‘The World, according to the best geographers, is divided into Europe, Asia, Africa, America, and Romney Marsh.’ Taken from Mrs. Botherby's story - The Leech of Folkestone; \_The Ingoldsby Legends\_.

**Article by Prof Peter Vujakovic**

**Bibliography**

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1. 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)