A Compendium of Tides

Warren Ellis

Nore

There's a ship full of bombs out here.

The S.S. *Richard Montgomery* went down in the Thames Estuary, on whose banks I've lived almost all of my life, back in 1944. She struck one of the many sandbanks that snake under the Estuary waters, and her back broke as she listed over the hidden curve. The vessel went down with somewhere between fifteen hundred and three thousand tons of live explosives inside it. These were determined to be too expensive to retrieve or make safe. So they sit out there in the water. Some three hundred blockbuster bombs on top of the pile, named for their wartime ability to erase entire streets with their blast waves. Thousands of other

explosive devices underneath it. If the ship full of bombs went off, every window on the Estuary would shatter, we'd score at least a 4.5 on the Richter scale, the sea bed would get a new twenty-foot-deep crater, and a tsunami sixteen feet high would rush to shore and into London.

It'd be quite a sight. The detonation, it's been calculated, would throw a thousand-foot-wide column of water and dirt two miles into the air.

The Montgomery is still ticking out there under the water, shifting and cracking and degrading year by year and yet somehow still dangerously alive. It even gave its name to our local "pirate" station, Ship Full Of Bombs Radio.

There's graves all over the coastline. The Maunsell Sea Forts, barnacled bones sticking up out of the water. Built as stilted towers to defend London from German attack during the war, they were abandoned by the Fifties. Rusting bodies on sticks. Detourned into pirate radio stations or independent principalities. They're a tourist attraction of a kind now, the Estuary toured like a cemetery full of famous corpses.

Haunted coast. It was out here on the Estuary that Nelson's body reached shore after meeting his doom at Trafalgar, entombed in a cask of brandy.

And the guns still fire. I can hear them again now as I write this section, familiar thunder rolling across the sky from the east. The guns east of Shoeburyness are being cleared. Out there along the estuarine coast is Foulness, which is a real place name. Back in the Fifties, Nigel Kneale and his production team scouted locations on the Thames Estuary for *Quatermass II*, the required locale being the site of an experimental moon-base emulator. In the story, the place they found is called Winnerden Flats, because they thought its real name sounded too fictional. The location's

actual name is Mucking Marshes. We are an oddly literal people, out here.

Foulness, east of Shoeburyness is a sealed military test site. It's supposed to be the safest and most peaceful place in the country, aside from the grenades, mines, mortars and missiles – an explosives and firearms proving ground across three centuries. Five working farms, a village, an accidental wildlife preserve, barely changed in over a hundred years, locked up inside the Foulness security ring. Like one of those drowned towns whose rooves and spires occasionally surface from a drained reservoir in summer. Submerged by state security.

It was once known as the Experimental Establishment, trialling "weird and wonderful weapons". I've spent my life listening to the sound of the guns booming down the estuary, fired from a village frozen in time.

Foulness was once only accessible by what is the most dangerous walk in Britain – the ancient track known as the Broomway. The Broomway drifts off the mainland into the mouth of the Estuary for a six-mile loop before touching Foulness. At low tide, it's an extremely disorienting experience, as the mud flats reflect a grey sky almost perfectly. One can suddenly be nowhere, in a floating world almost without landmarks or distinguishing features. Littoral limbo. The tides out there are fast, devious things, and in times past the arc of the track was marked only by tall poles with bundles of sticks lashed to their tops, likened to brooms. These days, we don't even have that. It's still a public byway, but the path is entirely notional now, nothing but a compass heading and an eyeballing of the Black Grounds, the Maplin Sands, the Maypole and Havengore Creek.

People die. People still die, walking the Broomway towards the foul ness where they explode the bombs and fire the great guns that echo down the river.

Seriously. A pathway that kills people which leads only to a military experimental ground on a river that has a ship full of bombs in it. That's where I live.

"I come not from Heaven, but from Essex."

– William Morris

Sunk Head

The first pirate television broadcast that I know of was transmitted from Sunk Head, one of our abandoned and illegally re-occupied Sea Forts.

On 9 November 1965, at around 4:20 in the morning, a hundred-foot aerial atop the four-storey-high Sunk Head tower chucked a signal across eleven miles of water and fourteen miles inland – I like to think that would be the blast radius of our ship full of bombs. The broadcast was reportedly a still image, ghostly and monochrome: a white globe with a star and two Ts atop it, and the name of the nascent pirate TV station: Tower TV.

Sometimes I think that the real world was always moving faster than science fiction: it's just that back then the real future was broadcasting at 4:20 in the bloody morning and no-one was around to see it.

Some say the Mayflower launched with the last of the Pilgrim Fathers from down the road in Leigh-on-Sea. Out here, the future either happens when we're asleep or it leaves on the morning tide.

Thirty minutes' walk from me is the earliest part of my town that I know of. Prittlewell Camp, sometimes known as The Look Out, is a hill fort dating back to around the 8th century BCE. I walk for thirty minutes every day, but in the other direction. The weight of the town has moved, over 2800 years. In the 7th century CE, Prittlewell proper was a Saxon settlement and the seat of kings – a recently-discovered Saxon burial ground has become known as the last resting place of "The King Of Bling", for all his glittering grave goods. It's possible this is Saeberht, King of Essex and the first Saxon king on this side of the country to become a Christian. He went in the dirt with his lyres and Coptic bowls and gold-foiled crosses around 616.

Prittlewell, today, is basically a bunch of supermarkets and a terrible little train station.

The Prittle Brook, which has had people living by it since the Stone Age, rises in Thundersley, the village and one-time Viking settlement where I grew up. It follows me through the West Wood into Southend, where I now live, before striking out for Sutton and Stambridge and finally the river Roach and all its creeks and nesses.

For thirty minutes a day, I run with the river, away from deep time into whatever future tides are waiting.

Coastal experiments.

Sunk Head, by the way, was blown up with more than two tons of plastic explosive in 1967. The light and heat from the blast could be seen and felt more than fourteen miles away.

Knock John

Thundersley began as Thunor's Clearing or something adjacent, a settlement in a grove dedicated to the worship of Thor. There's another Thundersley up in Suffolk, and the story was that Thor would fly over both Thundersleys on Thor's Day, to view these more distant of his sacred places. Any of these Essex villages with -ley or -leigh on the end are Viking settlements, clearings and meadows. Apart from Rayleigh, just to be awkward, which is Saxon for "roe-deer stream". The village next door, Hadleigh,

is “the clearing where heather grows”. There are still patches of heathland scattered around the area, dotted in autumn and spring with marshy pools that were used by the locals for washing water back in the day, and more recently for kids to ride their bikes through or attempt to drown each other in. These are Old English words, speaking to the way Britain assimilates and mutates.

I learned these words from a teacher at my first school in the village – officially, Thundersley County Junior School, but known in the village by the name of the little track it stood at the mouth of Dark Lane School. My teacher, a strange-looking older gentleman called Mr. Lees who had one of those faces that have quite gone out of fashion, spent one long rainy day indoors dripping local history into our heads.

We could see the school crossing from our window. Mr. Lees told us that that thick point in the road used to be a weir. I’m not sure how it could have been – Prittle Brook emerges east of there. Down the hill, of course, there was Rayleigh Weir, source of one of the streams that feed the Roach, long concreted over and turned into a junction on the dual-carriageway A127, which we all know as The Arterial Road. But to think, just out there across the road, there was buried secret water that only ancient people (like my teacher) knew about…

At the ruins of Hadleigh Castle at night, there are strange lights moving under the jagged teeth of the broken tower and around the smashed keep called The Devil’s Chair, the ghosts of smugglers holding their lanterns up to find the secret tunnels between there and the sea.

On Rayleigh Mount, looking down at the Weir, there was a Lawless Court held at midnight, unlit, the names of traitors spoken only in whispers, the loudest sound the scratch of coal on slate.

Rough Sands

Radio and ghosts. Electronic sound, another ghost map laid on top of all the others that make up this city.

The first electrical recording issued to the public, made by the scientists of Bell Labs, was of a November 11, 1920 funeral service for the Unknown Soldier in Westminster Abbey, London. The place where the Abbey sits used to be called Thorny Island, which received its first shrine the year Saebehrt died. Thorny Island was described by the charter of King Offa as “a terrible place”, and is one of the candidates for the spot where King Canute proved that he couldn't do shit about water. Not long after Canute, the island was tamed, and now contains the oldest garden in Britain, founded by monks a thousand years ago. The place sat between two branches of the River Tyburn, one of London's buried rivers that flow into the River Thames. The Effra, which once joined the Thames from the south, is now encased in a pipe. Under the streets, the rivers. All the little rivers where, up until maybe fifteen hundred years ago, Londoners used to place skulls on the banks, as offerings and boundary markers. Maps made of skulls. Under the buildings and flowers, the ritual sites that existed all around the Thorney Island area.

Time and maps.

All places with histories of human use have a sound. Many of them were even chosen for their acoustic properties. And the ground and the rock and the bone absorb sound.

We speak Estuary English, down here on the shore, a softened localization of the east London accent. It all flows back down to us.

Electronic sound is the fabric of the last hundred years. Early film only feels historical in the sense that it's somehow wrong – it runs too fast, it's black and white or the colours are off. Early

sound recording feels like the authentic past – like it's being heard through deep time. It's real in a way that film never is.

Essex is the home of radio. Radio happened about twenty miles from me. Radio was born in a Marconi hut in Writtle, outside Chelmsford. Two Emma Toc, Valentine's Day 1922, right around my (later) birthday, broadcasting music for the first time. When I was young, living down the road from the wellspring of electronic sound, radio came out of wooden boxes, wooden like the early theremins and Moogs. A couple of weeks after Two Emma Toc spoke "Writtle testing" into the air, in fact, Leon Theremin demonstrated the Theremin for Lenin in a private audience. By May he was preparing to take the Theremin on tour to promote the electrification of Russia – much the same time as 2LO, London's first radio station, was launched, from a building that was previously a hotel with a restaurant and a ballroom. The walls still rang with dinner parties and dancing as the new metal cast a new ghost map over the city.

Switches and dials. I liked the way my old radios imposed architecture on a world of invisible waves. A red needle, numbers, a speedometer for signals. Physical switching between Medium Wave, FM and Long Wave. Ramps and streets and windows. To me, it gave radio a structure like the false topology of the Tube map.

Pirate radio had been and gone by then. That was an Essex thing. Sometimes on boats, sometimes on the old Sea Forts dotted around the coast and in the estuary, empty houses standing on stilts in the waves. These were always pirate waters. The creeks of Essex, too narrow for the Inland Revenue cutters to navigate, were the waterways of the classic pirate period. There are still pubs around here that you'd swear somehow remained of that period, that go silent when "strangers" walk into them. Dark-eyed men in heavy boots, reeking of the Blackwater and

Brightlingsea Creek and all the old pirate channels, mud on their soles from Northey, Osea and Cindery Island.

But our radio had moved out of Essex, like anyone else with an ounce of common sense, and floated down the river to London.

Shivering Sands

It was well known, that, on a night when the "atmospherics" were right – that was the term everybody used, whether it was correct or not – strange signals would blow across the water from the continent. If your TV picture fuzzed and prickled a little, some random manual tuning would resolve television from the mainland. Ghostly porn, cop stories that never quite made sense and weird chat shows where everything was black and white and people were still smoking on stage. But, even better, the radio would drift over too, and nights were spent carefully roaming the frequencies, zeroing in on narrow stolen channels of alien music. All imbued with the sound quality of Electronic Voice Phenomenon – the sonics of voices speaking from beyond death. Songs from the Other World. It was a powerfully strange thing, in a time where the informational flow was much thinner and more difficult, on an island country, to receive contextless foreign broadcasts, simply because the sky had aligned itself just so.

'Atmospherics', a new folklore word for a conjugation of natural conditions that nobody really understood. Like "ingine". which was, I learned from certain elder relatives, the word you used when you were talking about broken car engines because it somehow made you sound familiar with their ways. Dad, Grandad and two uncles standing around the big end of a car in the sort of condition that post-apocalypse straight-to-video bad guys wouldn't even have

pulled around the nuclear desert by horses. All leaning under the open bonnet with cigarettes in their mouths. “Well, it’s the ingine, innit?” One of those last vestiges of east London English before the Estuary drowned it, I suspect. “Ingine” conferred knowledge and comprehension. Magic words and words for magic.

The static washed out of the speakers in tides.

It's 1978. I'm at my grandmother's house in Shoebury. The TV picture is all fucked up. My dad says, “the gasometers must be high. The picture's ghosting”.

There was a little road around here called Screaming Boy Lane. The local knowledge has it that some time in the 1700s a young farm boy got himself strangled out there, and for centuries afterwards his ghost would wander the lane and tap on windows. And scream. I don’t think the lane is there any more. The atmospherics changed, and it was washed away.

Tongue Sands

Some of us have taken to calling this littoral space “The Thames Delta”. It’s mostly a joke.

Canvey Island, off the Benfleet coast, is an alluvial deposit, one signature of a delta. It was shored up by the Dutch in the 1600s, which is why something like a third of Canvey streets have Dutch names. I looked it up when I was doing a milk round over there in the 1980s. It was studded with the red hills that denoted Roman salt production, under which were Neolithic axes and Bronze Age bracelets, and the Trinovantes and the Catuvellauni rode around them as a staging point from which to join Boudicca’s Iceni rebellion.

Blues bands howled off Canvey in the Sixties and Seventies. “Rhythm & Blues sells more beer than any other kind of music”, said (I think) Lee Brilleaux of Canvey vanguard Dr. Feelgood. Pub rock. Later on, “Thames Delta” stuck, in reference to Mississippi Delta blues.

Even in the Eighties, R&B bands ruled Southend. I’d go some nights to an underground space between a bar, which would be rammed with bodies dancing to standards – this was the decadent point in the period, where a lot of bands were just playing stuff you knew from the *Blues Brothers* soundtrack album. And I’d stagger outside at some point for air or a cigarette or whatever, and the side door to the steps would open, and a plume of steam would belch out and rise up into the night, and I could pretend that I was in a real place, a real city with real history and culture where that happened a thousand times a night, every night.

Some nights, people would just stand around and watch that pillar of air and heat and sweat and kisses rise into the sky.

For a space that’s been close to a blank slate for as long as it’s been here – nothing but forest, settlements stuck to coasts and creeks – even an appropriated identity is an improvement. And not unsuitable for an island that’s barely even there and a delta that probably isn’t.

Where I’m sitting, in Southend-on-Sea, just used to be the south end of Prittlewell. Not a place at all.

It’s hard to find the spirit of a place when it was never really supposed to be a place at all. Random colony points for Vikings. Royal seats that now no longer exist. Royal forests. Dumping ground for the East End diaspora, commuter-belt feeding systems for the London machines.

It’s south of the Claudian Roman beachhead, the seat of the East Seaxe, a section of Wessex, a package ceded to the Vikings as part of the Danelaw, a Norman park. No broad history happened here until the Victorians shoved a railway line from London to Shoebury.

There is no deep time here. There is just the river.

Or, put another way: where, in your science fiction, would you put an entire moonbase if you wanted nobody at all to pay particular attention to it? In a place with no history and no future. Right here.

Red Sands

Ah, but Cunning Murrell, though.

I've told his story before. I told it on stage at a big tech conference in Brighton, once, to contextualize my relationship with time and technology and spirits and place.

Cunning Murrell was the last of the Cunning Folk around here, the hedge witches of old England. He died in 1860 at age seventy-five, having legendarily predicted his time of death to the hour and minute. The same year Charles Dickens started *Great Expectations*, which contains a scene set out here on the Delta, "where the waterside inhabitants are very few". Legend has it that he wrote much of it at the Lobster Smack, a pub in old Leigh that looks over at Canvey Island.

> It was a dirty place enough, and I dare say not unknown to smuggling adventurers… No other company was in the house than the landlord, his wife, and a grizzled male creature, the "Jack" of the little causeway, who was as slimy and smeary as if he had been low-water mark too… The dismal wind was muttering round the house, the tide was flapping at the shore, and I had a feeling that we were caged and threatened.

Thirty-odd years later, Joseph Conrad, who lived down the coast by Stanford-le-Hope, moored the "Nellie" in *Heart Of Darkness*

around these parts. The last thing he wrote here appears to have been a short story called "An Outpost Of Progress".

At least one of Murrell's many children moved over into Thundersley from the Murrell family home in Hadleigh. When I was a kid, I had a girlfriend who was a redheaded Murrell, and only realized later that she was probably a descendant of Cunning Murrell.

He lived on a lane that's now called Endway, in Hadleigh, a little outside what bare clusters of settlements constituted the village at the time. He was a chemist, and a shoemaker, and a cunning man. A doctor, a magician, a seer – essentially our regional variant of a shaman. If you looked for him at night – and nobody really did because, like all good shamans, he worried the shit out of people – he'd be found with his whalebone umbrella in hand and upended, to carry the herbs and roots he foraged in the dark to make his medicines with. In 1890, a cache of Murrell's effects was dug up. It included letters from satisfied customers, including this classic: "I have took the powder it made me verrey quear in the stummuk pleas send sum more."

In that same box, I once read, were his iron goggles. I've likened them to Augmented Reality glasses in the past, and they served the same purpose as the hagstones of the West Country. They allowed him to see into the Other World. Iron frames with iron slats in them, iron being the famed anathema to the Devil and his troops. Murrell even called himself "The Devil's Master". Satan was real, back then. It was commonly understood that Satan and his department wandered the world looking for people they could tempt into sin, and God just let them. God was a dick, he was feared, and out here on the Thames Delta, forgotten by history and forsaken by England, when there were barely a couple of hundred people living in Hadleigh, what was a simple

person supposed to do when doing any little thing to make your life easier or nicer was a sin that changed your final address to a circle of Hell? Out here in the clearings overlooking the Thames Delta, you went to the cunning man. He was the Devil's Master. He was exactly what you needed when you had to break a deal or put the fix in: a dodgy geezer from darkest coastal Essex, with a copper bracelet on his wrist that was said to detect lies.

Cunning Murrell was a story I didn't find out until I left Thundersley for Southend. Not for many years after, in fact. I wish I'd learned it sooner. If someone had told me as a kid that I was separated by a few miles and barely more than a hundred years from one of the last great wizards of old England, that dismal wind may not have bit as hard.

The first analogue sound recording of the human voice was made in 1860. It was called a phonautogram. It is, punched in paper, the sound of a man singing "Au clair de la lune".

> By the light of the moon,
> My friend Pierrot,
> Lend me your quill
> To write a word.
> My candle is dead,
> I have no more fire.
> Open your door for me
> For the love of God.

Magical thinking is a terrible trap. Murrell's candle goes out, sound is recorded for the first time, Charles Dickens wanders down the slope from Hadleigh to Leigh to write his book, electronic sound recording begins on the other end of the river, radio is launched half a day's walk from Murrell's house on the

Endway. Aha! I've taken the powders, something is queer in my stomach, everything makes an awful sense, please send some more. I gave my tech talk on Cunning Murrell in the same spot that James Burke, creator of the TV series *Connections*, had spoken one year earlier. Connections make everything somehow have mass, and we reach for them, in some rotten, false way, to impose import. Meanwhile, somebody clambers on to one of the Sea Forts and declares it to be The Principality Of Sealand, a fake country on stilts, and an appropriated blues guitar howls out across the Thames Delta, because there's nothing here to hold on to, just tides, and raising yourself up on sticks and making shit up is the only thing that makes sense. Keep taking the powders.

But. Cunning Murrell. Who looked into the Other World through steel shades and saw all the spirits of our place abroad in the clearings at night. In a placeless place, it felt like Cunning Murrell was the story I was waiting for all along. He was science and fiction: a chemical stillman, a man who wore ghost glasses, working from that radical Essex position of esoteric defence against the dark *and* the clergical bureaucracy. A conman and a wizard. A doctor and a weird bastard who planted iron witch bottles all over the place.

A life of fiction fits with a place that made itself up.

Ship Full of Bombs

In winter, foghorns still low across the Estuary at night. In summer, I can hear the rails singing as they cool after the last train docks for the night. The trains still sound their horns as they cross the bridge over the hill road down to the sea, and it always delights me. I spent a period living in America, a few years ago, and was surprised every time by the sounds of their trains as they echoed

up from the river. American train horns are mournful, haunted and wounded. British train horns are still trumpets of triumph, bright and surging – the very sound of an Outpost of Progress.

We could all be vaporized by a ship full of bombs at any time, but fuck it! Race on down the track with Futurist zeal to the last invented place in England and sound the horn!

And after the last stop on the line there's a secret timeless island and a road to nowhere arcing into the mouth of the estuary.

I live out here on the Thames Delta, still, a ten-minute walk from the shore. It's a placeless place that tells stories about itself because it's rarely existed in a dense enough form to generate its own history. It's nothing but time and tides and salt and mud, and sometimes the mud reflects the sky and you just can't see anything.

I tell stories for a living. I sit by the rivers and creeks with the ghosts of my ancestors, the Viking priests and dead writers and cunning folk, and I see the water run by and count the tides. We launch futures from here, but here we stay, as time flows by and the sea becomes the sky and a ship full of bombs ticks away.

Warren Ellis is the award-winning writer of graphic novels like *Transmetropolitan*, *Fell*, *Ministry of Space* and *Planetary*, and the author of the nyt-bestselling *Gun Machine*, the digital single *Dead Pig Collector* and the "underground classic" novel *Crooked Little Vein*.

The movie *RED* is based on his graphic novel of the same name, its sequel having been released in summer 2013. *Iron Man 3* is based on his Marvel Comics graphic novel *Iron Man: Extremis*. He's also written extensively for VICE, *WIRED UK* and Reuters on technological and cultural matters, and is developing his graphic novel series with Jason Howard, *Trees*, for Hardy Son & Baker and NBCU.

His next book is the novella *Normal*, from Farrar Straus Giroux, where he is also working on a non-fiction book about the future of the city.

A documentary about his work, *Captured Ghosts*, was released in 2012.

Recognitions include the NUIG Literary and Debating Society's President's Medal for service to freedom of speech, the Eagle Awards Roll Of Honour for lifetime achievement in the field of comics & graphic novels, the Grand Prix de l'Imaginaire 2010, the Sidewise Award for Alternate History and the International Horror Guild Award for illustrated narrative.

He is a Patron of the British Humanist Association, an Associate of the Institute of Atemporal Studies, and the literary editor of *EDICT* magazine.

Warren Ellis lives outside London, on the south-east coast of England, in case he needs to make a quick getaway.

He can be found on Twitter at @warrenellis.