

The online magazine for landscape photographers

on landscape

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INTERVIEW

Melanie Friend

The Plain

AN INTERVIEW WITH MELANIE FRIEND

Last Autumn, Neil from *Beyond Words* dropped me an email to say that he'd stocked a new book *The Plain* by Melanie Friend and suggested that it could be of interest to the readers of our magazine. I ordered a copy of the book and, over a cup of tea one afternoon, I took a read. The images drew me in and left me asking so many questions and the essays in the book drew me even deeper into the history of Salisbury Plain.

On the publisher's website, it states "The Plain is both the UK's largest military training ground and also a conservation area shared with archaeologists and dog walkers, larks and corn buntings, wildflowers and rare forms of wildlife." How do these two worlds co-exists or do they?

We are delighted to publish our in-depth interview with Melanie, covering her love of photography, her earlier photojournalist career, her previous books and how the project *The Plain* started and evolved into the book. We hope you enjoy reading this as much as I have researching and publishing it.

Tell me about where your passion for photography came from and why the landscape is important to you?

Recently I've been digging around in my cupboards and unearthed a stash of negatives I didn't know I had. It seems that in the mid-1970s, when I was a teenager, I'd photographed much more than I thought. Judging by the size of the neg-

atives, I must have borrowed my Dad's Box Brownie or my Mum's Instamatic 126 to photograph my friends and family, just larking about, recording moments. Then I began to get more interested in compositions, graduating to owning an Olympus Trip, and eventually moving to SLRs in my early 20s, when I began to see photography in a different way.



Melanie Friend

In the 1980s and early 1990s Melanie Friend worked extensively as a photojournalist; her work was published in a range of publications including *The Guardian* and *The Independent*. From the mid 1990s she began to focus on the wider aspects of war through long-term photographic projects. Touring exhibitions included *Homes & Gardens: Documenting the Invisible* (1996) which highlighted human rights abuses in Kosovo, and *Border Country* (2007), which documented the experiences of asylum seekers detained in the UK's immigration removal centres. Her book *No Place Like Home: Echoes from Kosovo* was published in 2001 (Midnight Editions, USA).

The Home Front (2013), a touring exhibition originally curated by Pippa Oldfield of Impressions Gallery, looked at the links between the military, marketing and entertainment, with a particular focus on air shows; it was published as a book by Dewi Lewis in association with Impressions Gallery. In autumn 2020 *The Home Front* was shown as a solo show at Farleys Gallery, UK, alongside Lee Miller's WWII work *Grim Glory: Lee Miller's Britain at War*.

In October 2020 her latest work, *The Plain*, focusing on the military training area of Salisbury Plain, was published by Dewi Lewis. From 2003 to 2019 Melanie was Reader in Photography in the School of Media, Film & Music at the University of Sussex. melaniefriend.com



Beach's Barn, a FIBUA (Fighting in Built-up Areas) location used for military training. February 2016.

In 1980/81, part of my editorial assistant job at African Business magazine was to organise the picture library, and I was intrigued by both the historic and contemporary photographs in the collection. Occasionally photographers came into the office and meeting them got me thinking; perhaps I could do that too? I saw photography as a way of escaping a lifetime behind a desk. I started teaching myself, and found regular commissioned work for a building magazine, before moving to newspaper work (the Times Education Supplement & The Independent, among others). As I became more politically involved, it was about documenting protest and injustice, seeing photography (at times too idealistically) as a tool for change, and as a way to communicate. The 1980s was the time of Margaret Thatcher's premiership and there was a huge amount to protest about here in the UK – so I photographed numerous demonstrations. And in my 30s I travelled widely because of my work as a photojournalist (after the fall of the Berlin Wall, I focused on eastern Europe: Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Albania, and what is now called North Macedonia), and I met amazing people I wouldn't otherwise have met. So, in the beginning, my love of photography was bound up with the many adventures and friendships it brought me. Along the way, I also took inspiration from photography exhibitions and photographers' monographs.

Open spaces have always been important to me. I was brought up in the countryside in southern England (Hertfordshire, Kent, Dorset), and used to roam across the fields on my own, or cycle around the Kent countryside. Now as a Londoner I don't get out into wilder landscapes or National Parks as often as I'd like, but every summer I walk stretches of the spectacular Wales Coast Path. Like

many, I'm impatient to get away from the screen and be in the elements. I'm also into the urban landscape; lockdown has meant I've paid closer attention to the wildlife here in London, and the street trees.

Through my work as a photographer, I have also spent time in different kinds of landscapes; landscapes which are embedded with the aftermath and traces of war (as in Kosovo), or which are marked out as land under military occupation (as in The Plain). Cloudscapes are hugely important to me and have often featured in my work, particularly in The Home Front and The Plain.

You studied photography at Polytechnic of Central London (1984-1988) and gained an MA from the London College of Printing. How did these experiences shape your photography?

My BA Photography at the Polytechnic of Central London (PCL) pushed me to move away from the relative immediacy of photojournalism towards longer term, deeper projects. That degree was one day a week over four years, so I was freelancing at the same time, alternating between rushing out on assignment for a national newspaper (The Independent) and working away on my longer-term PCL projects. My final project involved working with several teenage mothers, documenting their experiences through portraiture and interviews. In the end, the pull of slower long-term projects won out over daily newspaper work, but I retained a love of documentary, in its widest sense. I started teaching at the PCL the year I graduated (1988), and from then on looked for teaching income as well as the photojournalis-

tic assignments, and commissions which came through Format Photographers Agency, which I joined in 1986. Both through the PCL and through Format, my work was informed by theories of representation. At Format we focused on inclusion and diversity, to try to increase the representation in the press of women, Black, Asian and ethnic minority individuals, people with disabilities and LGBTQ+ people.

The MA Photography (1999-2000) at what is now LCC (London College of Communication, part of University of the Arts London) gave me a great deal of freedom. It was also a part time MA, over two years, so I was again freelancing alongside the studying. I was actually working towards my book *No Place Like Home: Echoes from Kosovo* (although I didn't know that at the time; the book contract came a bit later...). I was far from a model student! I missed quite a lot of the course. That was not my original intention, but the Kosovo war and the refugee crisis meant that I could not stay in London; friends of mine had fled Kosovo to become refugees in Macedonia. I went to see them, and later I spent time documenting and interviewing Kosovar Albanians in the refugee camps of Macedonia. I included this work in my MA assignments; the following year, my final submission focused on the story of a massacre survivor. This comprised just one landscape image, with a 17-minute soundtrack *The Guide*. (I had been inspired to use sound through my earlier work on radio features in Kosovo and Bulgaria). The MA Photography, run by Anne Williams, was amazingly flexible, and I was encouraged to work on this experimental piece and use the sound as I wanted. I later used sound and image in my work *Border Country* (2003-07)



The Water Tower, Tilshead Down. July 2016.

In the mid-1980s you worked as a freelance photojournalist and covered the anti-nuclear campaign (among others). How did this work influence your approach to your current projects?

I think covering so many demonstrations as a young photojournalist gave me a taste for protest, for documenting those challenging authority and questioning militaristic culture.

I also gained a familiarity with the RAF/USAF bases in the south of England, such as Greenham Common, where in 1981 women activists set up a camp, protesting against the storing by the US military of 96 nuclear-tipped cruise missiles on the airfield. The style of the work I did then was very different to *The Plain* – black and white 35mm photojournalism, focusing on the dramatic interactions between the protestors trying to cut the barbed wire with bolt-cutters on one side of the fence, the soldiers the other, the arrests by the soldiers or the police, and the way of life in the camps. It wasn't about the landscape so much when I was photographing there, although I remember the silos in the distance at Greenham. But I think the dramatic change of use of that landscape has stayed with me. At the time the Greenham Common base felt like a permanent structure – but in 1993, after the end of the Cold War, the majority of the airfield was returned to civilian use. Much of it is now common land, heathland, where people walk their dogs. That has fed into my thinking about *The Plain*.

Tell me about the photographers or artists that inspire you most. What books stimulated your interest in photography and did your tastes develop over time?

I think I am influenced at a deep level by the works of many photographers, even if their works are not at the forefront of my mind when I'm working on a project. The following are a few of the photographers who have inspired me, along with one or two of their works: **John Davies** (*A Green and Pleasant Land*), **Fay Godwin** (*Land and Forbidden Land*), **Susan Meiselas** (*Kurdistan: In the Shadow of History; In History*), **Ingrid Pollard** (*Pastoral Interlude; Wordsworth Heritage*). And to include just one writer here, I was very inspired by **W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn***.

Who has specifically helped you in realising your photographic ambitions over the past few years?

Many individuals (curators, radio producers, newspaper editors, academics) have encouraged me during my career, but if we're thinking about realising photographic ambitions in say the past 7-8 years, then **Dewi Lewis**, as publisher of both *The Home Front* (2013, co-published with Impressions Gallery) and *The Plain* (2020), has been a crucial support to my work. I've also had fantastic support from both Dr Pippa Oldfield, Head of Programme at Impressions Gallery, and Anne McNeill, Director of Impressions Gallery, where I had a solo show of *The Home Front* (curated by Pippa) which later toured. Pippa also

wrote the essay for *The Home Front*, putting the work into context. Later on, she worked with me as co-editor of *The Plain* (more on that later).

I also had great support from the following curators: Lucy Jenkins (*The Home Front* at Durham Art Gallery, 2014); Matthew Shaul (*The Home Front* at UH Galleries, 2014/15); Katy McCormick of University of Ryerson, Canada, who in 2010 brought my work *Border Country* to Gallery 44 in Toronto, and in 2018 *The Home Front* to Ryerson galleries. Anne Massoni showed *The Home Front* at the University of the Arts Philadelphia (2017). These Canada/USA exhibitions followed serendipitous meetings at conferences where we were all presenting our work: I met Katy in Dublin; Anne in Margate. I'm also really happy to have worked with Antony Penrose and Elaine Wardekker O'Brien, who in 2020 brought *The Home Front* to the gallery at Farleys (Sussex), the home of the Lee Miller Archives.

I've had several illuminating conversations with Hilary Roberts, Research Curator of the IWM, who wrote the foreword for *The Home Front*. The writer and academic Vron Ware (author of *Military Migrants: Fighting for YOUR Country*) was also very helpful and introduced me to Matthew Flintham, (who then wrote the essay for *The Plain*.) And my previous workplace, the University of Sussex (School of Media, Film and Music) gave me research leave in early 2016 which enabled me to start researching Salisbury Plain and immerse myself in the interviews.



The impact area near the White Horse Trail. Splinter proof observation shelter on the horizon. October 2017.

The exhibition *Homes and Gardens: Documenting the Invisible* (accompanied by a catalogue/book published by Camerawork gallery & F-Stop Media Station 1996) toured till 2001. *No Place Like Home: Echoes from Kosovo* (Midnight Editions, USA, 2001) published portraits of refugees in Macedonia and the visual traces left by the war in Kosovo. Did the process of creating these works change the way you approached your subsequent work?

These works were different in style and execution from my earlier black and white photojournalism. I moved into a different way of working in the mid-1990s for very particular reasons. I had started getting back problems when I was 29, and by my mid-30s, I was in quite serious trouble. Some of that was caused by the requirement, when on commission or obtaining 'file pictures', to work using both colour and black and white film, so carrying heavy camera bags with two camera

bodies and several lenses didn't help! In 1994 I had four months off work, and at least two of those were spent prone on a mattress on the living room floor, doped out on painkillers, with the aim of avoiding surgery. This gave me invaluable time to mull over things.

I would think back to my photojournalistic work in Kosovo when Kosovo was effectively a police state. Trying to represent hidden repression was challenging, and photography on its own inadequate to the task. It could not reveal what was really happening – the violence was carried out by state police behind closed doors of private homes or in police stations. I was working for newspapers, which needed clear representations of the violence, or its aftermath. But the violence was hidden; so, I got into writing as well as photography – several of my photographs from Kosovo were published in *The Guardian* alongside articles I wrote. I wanted to try something different with the photography also, and so I moved into colour, and medium format. My enforced inactivity was pivotal, and it helped me to come up with a more experimental, slower way of working. When I could walk again, I returned to Kosovo, with my cameras no longer round my neck but always in a wheelie bag. I'd had experience of both interviewing and sound through working on radio features. I began to represent the hidden violence using excerpts from recorded interviews with inhabitants (in the gallery space) together with images of interiors, and a few landscapes. Since then, several of my projects have used sound (e.g. *The Guide*, *Border Country*), and/or text (I interviewed local inhabitants for *The Plain*).



Blackball Firs FOB built approximately 2005 to resemble an Afghan compound; the graffiti in Cyrillic script denotes 'Russia'. August 2019.



105mm Light Gun, towed by a 6WD Pinzgauer, in the 'Managed Access' area. January 2020.

As for *No Place Like Home: Echoes from Kosovo* – the long process of making the interviews, of spending time in the camps with refugees, who were often traumatised, affected me deeply, and helped prepare me for the experience of interviewing asylum seekers (often fleeing conflict) for my exhibition and book *Border Country* (2003-07).

My installation piece *The Guide* was translated into image/text as part of a chapter in *No Place Like Home: Echoes from Kosovo*. The making of this work was particularly disturbing. I remember walking in spring sunshine through an idyllic orchard filled with apple blossom to reach the massacre site. The following day the translator (Edita) and I climbed up a rocky hillside path with a massacre survivor, Shefqet, recording his story on the way. The traces of war, and the memories of war embedded in the landscapes in *No Place Like Home*, find some kind of resonance in *The Plain*. All those experiences in Kosovo stayed with me.

Matthew Flintham in his essay in the book “The Plain” writes “In much of Friend’s work, danger is implied, out of frame. It is a foreboding or insinuated presence.” Has this idea of implied danger informed your current work?

In *Homes and Gardens: Documenting the Invisible*, the violence is outside of the frame, and is embodied by the voice, the soundtrack, or the text. In *The Home Front*, I focused on a wide landscape; the military jets were

often pinpricks within the frame, but the blast of their sound is represented by the body language of individuals on the ground. On Salisbury Plain, the danger was mostly within the inaccessible ‘impact area’; smoke from explosives near the horizon, or from soldiers practising live firing in the distance. Sometimes the ‘implied danger’ is there within the photograph, such as the foreboding image of the 105mm light gun (see image below) being towed early one morning in a frosty valley, a transitory presence – but still the landscape holds sway. I had two intense experiences of being there in the peace and quiet, looking at the landscape, listening to the larks and then having that disrupted by the sound of artillery fire, mortars or shells, with the source invisible. (One day I may use the sound recordings in an exhibition of *The Plain*). Sometimes I could hear the sound of mock battles in the inaccessible ‘impact area’ but I could not see them.

Whilst making the work for *The Home Front* and *The Plain*, I often found myself imagining the terror for those on the receiving end of our bombs, in Iraq, Afghanistan, and more recently Yemen (British bombs, and more, supplied to the Saudi Royal Air Force). I thought of the distant real battlefields, past and present. And I also thought of those British and international soldiers who have lost their lives overseas after training on this patch of land for so many wars and conflicts. In *The Plain* there are photographs of structures on Salisbury Plain built to resemble Afghan compounds (see image below). In the 1970s specially constructed buildings at Imber village

were used to train troops for conflicts in urban environments, including in Northern Ireland, Iraq and Afghanistan. At times, when it is quiet up on the plain, in places away from the military signage, you can forget the plain’s purpose as a training ground – but it is a space where soldiers learn to shoot to kill, to use tanks, mortars, shells.

“The Plain is both the UK’s largest military training ground and also a conservation area shared with archaeologists and dog walkers, larks and corn buntings, wildflowers and rare forms of wildlife.” 1. Tell us more about this juxtaposition and how you developed the idea in your work.

Salisbury Plain is a challenging place to get your head around. It is indeed both a conservation area (run by the Ministry of Defence’s DIO – Defence Infrastructure Organisation) and a military training area (and some of the land is let out to farmers). It’s an ancient landscape with tumuli and barrows. It’s multi layered and complex. I was not photographing close ups of butterflies or flowers, but I tried to bring the feeling of this paradoxical space by foregrounding the wild grasses and flowers to show the beauty of this landscape, and its potential (see image below). I also included images of barrows or archaeological earthworks, with the white or yellow posts or signs placed by the military to protect them from tanks or other vehicles.



Tank obstacle course and driver training area, Sidbury Hill. June 2016.

Matthew Flintham in his essay writes ‘the Nugent Report in 1973 recognised a growing sense of public resentment towards such a large defence estate and called for a rationalisation of land assets and a greater coordination of conservation efforts across the estate.’ From your insights into Salisbury Plain, do you think that there is still a sense of public resentment for military involvement in the area?

As one of The Plain interviewees said, the village of Imber is still likely to be a ‘bone of contention’ for some (Imber’s inhabitants were booted out of their homes during WWII to make way for military training, and then not allowed back).

I spoke with a small number of residents living in hamlets or villages very close to the plain, about the sights and sounds they witnessed. A few felt resentment for the noise at times and the way that occasionally the pounding of a shell or a fighter jet too low overhead would shake their house and even things off their shelves. One woman still remembers her fright when (a rare occurrence) a stray shell flew off-course overhead while she was hanging up laundry in the garden.

I heard stories of house-buyers who had not been sufficiently forewarned about the noise from the plain before they moved to live close by. But for another I spoke with, the sound of firing had become so familiar, it was not seen as disturbing; for him, it had become ‘part of the wallpaper of the place’.

One local inhabitant was not happy about excessive numbers of bombs being exploded during practice,

mindful of the waste of taxpayers’ money. Another felt that it was hard to avoid the military presence in Britain; military bases were all over the place.

Several acknowledged the military as good employers, in an area with employment problems, and saw their presence as a boost to the local economy (e.g. village grocery stores, farm shops). Others felt that if the military left, industry or housing developments would take over and spoil the haunting beauty and mystery of the plain. As one interviewee said: ‘the reason we put up with the military presence on the plain is the thought of anything worse that could take over.’

“[the] photographs reveal the military presence as a disquieting feature on the horizon: a rusty tank positioned as a target, a red box used for field telephones in a copse, smoke from an exploding shell.”
What visual (and non-visual) narrative did you want to leave the reader with when you were working on this project?

I hope the work raises questions both through the photography and through the interview excerpts about the effects of the military presence in the countryside, and more broadly the way humans interact with the land, how it becomes demarcated. I want to give a sense of the embeddedness of the military within this landscape and yet also give a sense of its history and its wild beauty which may one day be experienced free of the sights and sounds of imaginary battle. After all, with increasing cyber warfare, drone warfare and other forms of military technology, preparation for land warfare may become less significant. I also like to leave some things to the

imagination of the viewer, who will come to the work with their own perspectives and narratives.

How did the project evolve? Did you have to refine the vision of what you wanted to achieve?

I started out with a larger-scale project; I had also planned to cover the Lulworth Ranges in Dorset, after a thought-provoking coastal walk there in 2014. However, in view of my mother’s illness, my energy levels and the distances and cost involved, I narrowed the project down to Salisbury Plain, half an hour’s drive from my mother’s doorstep.

My first day there I was struck by the quality of the silence (my experience of the firing – and the occasional noisy off-road motorcycles – came later). I was intrigued by the inaccessible, empty, fenced off ‘impact area’. It took a while to get into the Plain as a landscape – it is less dramatic, less immediately visual, than the coastal paths of the Lulworth Ranges, but it’s more extensive, and more challenging. I was working independently of the MOD; I was not involved in photographing the mock battles on the plain to which press photographers were occasionally given special access. I had to really spend a huge amount of time, many days from early in the morning, just waiting on Salisbury Plain (not just for the right cloud, or light, but for perhaps some kind of activity). I loved that. As for what I wanted to achieve – I did not have pre-conceived fixed aims, and often my projects change as they progress. Immersion in the landscape, and curiosity, as ever, were key.



Archaeological site with a sign warning the military not to dig, by the site of the former Carter Barracks. August 2015.

How did you go about researching the locations? Was information freely available and were most of your photographs pre-planned or opportune?

In 2015 I had a lucky meeting on the plain, on the day I took the first photograph that worked for me (now on the back cover, see image below). I wandered up into a slightly restricted area (civilians' vehicles not allowed), and I was trying to work out why there was a void concrete space there in the field (it turned out to be the site of the former Carter Barracks). Suddenly a green sports car zoomed up behind me, and a guy asked what I was doing there. We got talking, and it turned out he was a retired military man, who knew lots about the plain. He went off to walk his dog. After some pondering, I went back to my car to try to find a piece of paper (notebook forgotten at home). I found a tiny bit in the boot, wrote my university email address on it, walked back up to Brian's car, and popped this wee scrap of paper under his windscreen wiper. I wondered if he would see it or if the rain, quite persistent by now, would sweep it away. But a couple of days later I received an email. At this time, I knew nobody living around Salisbury Plain; I was at the very beginning of my project. Brian offered to take me, and an assistant, James, for a 'recce' around the remote spots of the plain, and we talked about the kind of locations that could be interesting. Brian was very helpful in the early stages of the project

Later on, I got to know Nic and his mother Magda, who lived in a tiny village right by the plain. Magda introduced

me to a retired lieutenant colonel, whose love of the plain somehow enabled him to get over my being a Guardian reader... both he and Nic helped me hugely by driving me to off-beat locations.

I also found locations through my own explorations on the plain. I have always loved Ordnance Survey maps, so I didn't use GPS. I studied those paper maps carefully, and also would download regularly the Salisbury Plain Training Area newsletter (SPTA). This seems to be mostly a guide for local people and visitors, who might for example, wish to walk their dogs on the permissive byways on a non-firing day. This gave me a rough idea of on which days and in which zone the firing might take place. The whereabouts of the military is tricky to predict; military plans can change at short notice, and the plain is such a large area. It might be a 'firing' day in one zone, but you wouldn't know exactly where that would be supposed to take place, and or at what hour. After a while, I got a sense for where some of the live firing training might take place. Those photographs were inevitably taken from a distance, as access to the impact area is prohibited. I don't use telephoto lenses, but as time went on, I found the distant view, using a standard lens, worked for me on a visual and conceptual level.

Only a small number of images were actually pre-planned. I did have to plan the Imber visits, of course, as the village is only (partially) open for a few days a year and is completely inaccessible the rest of the time.

Were there many key photographs that you knew would succeed when you took them? Conversely, did some of your pre-planned images fail in execution?

One of my pleasures in photography has been picking up my films from the lab, and nervously skimming through the mini prints on the bus journey home.

Of course, sometimes things don't work out, but more often there is the excitement of an image that does, or a photograph you didn't expect to work actually making it into the final edit. At the point of pressing the shutter, I felt more certain about the unpeopled landscape images. With moving objects/people, I could never be quite sure how they would turn out. I was using medium format and sticking to an ISO of 160, so it was sometimes a bit touch and go, if the light was poor.

With the restrictions on access, and the unpredictability of whether or when the military might make an appearance, I sometimes had to work with difficult light.

Do you see your work developing more toward the landscape or will you return to some of your more photojournalist / portrait-oriented work?

I am very interested in pursuing more landscape/environmental work, but I don't rule out portraiture...

Tell me what your favourite two or three photographs from the book are and a little bit about them



I'll pick out a couple of images that have not been specifically included in reviews. I love the clouds in the frontispiece image, and the sense of something being out of place. At first glimpse the viewer might be drawn to the sky,

the feel of it being a windy day, and the bare branches in the copse – and then perhaps spot the bright red box (used as a connecting point for field telephones), and notice the military vehicle rutted tracks in the foreground. What

seems at a quick initial glimpse to be a natural landscape has been altered by the military presence.



There's a particular personal resonance for me with the second image. On Salisbury Plain, around the back of the FIBUA village of Copehill Down, the remnants of this orchard moved me. Partly because I love orchards (my childhood home in Kent had a small apple orchard at the end of our garden, where I used to while away many an hour). Partly because

I am often reminded of that harrowing walk in Kosovo I described earlier in this interview. It was a beautiful late spring day when I took this photograph on Salisbury Plain and I remember being in that spot for an hour or so, chatting with my friend Nic, waiting for those slow-moving clouds to move into the frame.

I also liked the stile in the foreground – there's this feeling of a country walk, but this land has become fortified; there's razor wire and a watchtower looking over that tiny orchard. So, there are contradictory elements in this image, and it also makes me think of how farms or homesteads are often transformed into battlefields in actual war zones.

Can you give readers an insight into your workflow - which cameras and lenses you like to use, and how you approach post-processing, editing and sequencing?

I use a Mamiya 7, with two lenses: a wide angle 50mm lens and a standard 80mm lens. I love using film, but the costs are high. I get high-res scans and exhibition prints made professionally at Spectrum. And for both *The Home Front* and *The Plain* I needed a set of match prints for the printers in Italy. I've had some sponsorship from Spectrum for both projects, which was really helpful.

In mid-March 2020, because of Covid-19, it didn't feel safe to travel down to Brighton by train, as I'd usually do, so I drove down to Spectrum. I waited in the car in the car park and Paul, the printer, brought out the test match prints for me to see throughout the day – my boot made a handy reviewing space. We were both masked and gloved up – it was the very beginning of the pandemic and felt so strange.

I took 100 films for this project over four and a half years; each film has 10 frames. I used too much film, as I tend to when scenes are tricky to revisit, and far from home. After many months of pondering, I came up with a first edit of about 50 images. In late February 2020 I had a small group of friends round to my place immediately after my last trip to the plain, to give their perspectives on several images I was wavering about. They also responded to the edited texts & potential cover images.

I find sequencing challenging ... That's where Pippa came in as co-editor. Pippa had seen the work in progress at an early stage; later she came up with a great sequence, to which I only made a few tweaks during the final design stages of the book. Her sequencing was key, and she also worked with me on all the texts. Dewi

Lewis, the publisher, and designer Dean Pavitt had crucial input on the choice of cover image. I'd worked with Dewi, Pippa and Dean on *The Home Front*, and it was a really good experience working with them all again on the editing and design of *The Plain*, and to have Matthew on board as essayist.

How did you manage the flow of the book with the images and the narrative?

Early on, I had thought about integrating some of the texts with the images, or at least considering that as an option. (I'd integrated a couple of quotes from asylum seekers in my *Border Country* image sequence). Dean tried a few spreads that way, but I wasn't into it. It confirmed my instinct that I should leave the images well alone and let the viewer engage with them first, free of text. So, there are these different levels of engagement – with the images, with the essay, with the voices of inhabitants, with the captions/notes on individual photographs. The different layers in my view also reflect the complexity of this landscape as a military/pastoral/archaeological space. I am the visitor to the landscape, the outsider; the essayist, Matthew Flintham, is an artist himself as well as a writer, and knows a lot about military landscapes (see his piece he wrote for the *Tate Papers*, *The Military-Pastoral Complex: Contemporary Representations of Militarism in the Landscape*). Matthew has his own take on both the plain and my work in general. And then *Voices from the Plain* hears from a small number of local inhabitants, who have direct experience of this military landscape on a daily basis. Notes on the Photographs add place and date, but also sometimes details about the eerie, often disturbing, structures on the plain.

Pippa Oldfield, Head of Programme at Impressions Gallery and author of *Photography and War* (Reak-

tion, 2019) co-edited the book with you. How did this collaboration come about and how did it work out?

Pippa and I had already worked very closely together on *The Home Front* exhibition and book. I asked her to be co-editor of *The Plain* as not only does she have her own expertise in war and photography, but I really valued her eye on both the image sequence and the texts. And she's always fantastic to work with. It was all remote working of course, as most of the editing and design took place during the Covid-19 lockdown from March to June 2020.

How did you decide on the format of the book e.g. size and paper, print type?

I'd thought about a smaller publication, but in the end decided on the same size book as *The Home Front*. The two works relate to each other, both looking at the embeddedness of militarisation in their different ways, and I wanted the images to be that bit bigger, owing to the small detail in many of them.

Dewi Lewis selected the paper (GardaMatt Art 170gsm); Dean, as designer, the fonts (Scala Sans for text, Trade Gothic No20, for cover/titles). Endpapers can be quite a key decision; Dean sent me endpaper samples and I looked at several different greys, but I didn't like how the greens within the greys clashed with the greens in the book. And neither of us wanted a brash colour. We went for Caffé, a rich dark brown which brings out the mud of the plain, and it was complementary to much of the palette in the images; Dewi was happy with that choice too. It happens also to be the same colour endpaper we used for *The Home Front*! But that was not the reason we chose it...

Are you working on your next project or do you have any future project ideas that you're thinking about?

I always have fallow time between projects, normally around a year or so, or however long it takes. I don't know what lies ahead - but that feels fine. I'm reading a lot at the moment, about land ownership and environmental issues. I'd like to make more landscape work, but

without using a car – so it may be something very close to home. And right now, during lock down, I'm continuing to sort out my 40-year archive (I've already placed almost all my photojournalistic work from 1980s and 90s with the Bishopsgate Institute in London). There are ominous warnings on Twitter here and there about photographers' archives ending up in skips – so I'm on it!

You can find out more about Melanie and buy the book directly <https://melaniefriend.com/>
You can buy the book from the publishers at <https://www.dewilewis.com/products/the-plain>
You can purchase signed copies of *The Plain from Beyond Words*, £30



Interview by
Charlotte Parkin

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on landscape

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Melanie Friend

THE PLAIN



Beach's Barn, a FIBUA (Fighting in Built-up Areas) location used for military training. February 2016.



105mm Light Gun, towed by a 6WD Pinzgauer, in the 'Managed Access' area. January 2020.



Blackball Firs FOB built approximately 2005 to resemble an Afghan compound; the graffiti in Cyrillic script denotes 'Russia'. August 2019.



Tank obstacle course and driver training area, Sidbury Hill. June 2016.



Archaeological site with a sign warning the military not to dig, by the site of the former Carter Barracks. August 2015.



The Water Tower, Tilshead Down. July 2016.



The impact area near the White Horse Trail. Splinter proof observation shelter on the horizon. October 2017.



Copse between Redhorn Hill and Lavington Vedette (guard post). The red box provides a connecting point for field telephones. March 2016.



Orchard at the edge of Copehill Down, a FIBUA (Fighting in Built-Up Areas) village. May 2019.



MELANIE FRIEND
THE PLAIN