

# A WRITER'S DAY-BOOK

RONALD BLYTHE



TRENT EDITIONS

# A WRITER'S DAY-BOOK

By the same author

A Reasonable Growth

Immediate Possession

The Age of Illusion

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The View in Winter

Writing in a War

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First Friends

The Assassin

The Wormingford Trilogy: Word from Wormingford,

Out of the Valley, Borderland

The Circling Year

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## FOREWORD

A day-book is a document showing the profits and losses of every twenty-four hours. A poet friend advised me to keep one when I first encountered the bewildering economy of the writer, and so I have. 'Put everything down', he said. 'The total will surprise you.' And so it does.

But other things add up and the following pages are but a fraction of the total. They reflect the kind of working life created over many years by reading, writing and solitude. Reading, even for research, has never quite become work. Writing has been a compulsion and never been Philip Larkin's toad, and solitude has long been the norm. Had I lived earlier I suppose a collection such as this would have been called 'Fugitive Pieces'. But I see them plainly as part of the whole, and a sum of sorts.

R.B.

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For Michael and Alison Mayne





I.



## TAKE A FRESH VIEW

Does any doctor prescribe landscape nowadays? Until recently, for certain ailments of body and mind, tuberculosis or depression, it was all that could be prescribed. There are, wrote Richard Jefferies, 'three potent medicines of nature', the sea, the air and the sun. And he might have added the scenes which these elements both create and contain, for if anyone set out for a thorough self-prescribed landscape cure, he did. A long time ago I read an essay of his called 'The Breeze on Beachy Head' and at once recognised in it a correct phrasing of what must be a common experience of perfect wellbeing. I am walking, climbing, or lying on grass, and not necessarily high up, and filled with a great view, and suddenly all that I can see, hear and smell amalgamates and becomes a kind of landscape laser which passes right through me, healing me totally. Never having been ill, I must ask myself, of what? I suppose, in my case, of dullness, of that reduction of my senses brought on by not getting out. For Jefferies and all literary consumptives it was a very different matter, of course. They had to get out—doctor's orders. For a while the three potent medicines of sea, sun and air worked wonders, as a wide literature reveals, And then the healing had to stop. Some became reconciled to this fact, Jefferies did not. He turned on 'Nature' and said he hated it. Its indifference to whether he lived or died appalled him. Although what was really appalling him was that never again would there be such a fully alive day as that, for instance, which he spent on Beachy Head. 'Discover some excuse to be up there always ... go without any pretext ... it is the land of health'.

My initiatory heights of what we called 'High Suffolk' were little more than half a dozen steps upward in comparison with Beachy Head, but there the countryside would unroll and any such tensions which I might be feeling with it. This release and revitalisation were not just the products of my native view, as I soon found out when I began to cycle further afield, or make long train journeys to Cornwall and Scotland. Or even, recently, when I walked the hilly outskirts of Sheffield. The landscape cure, originally discovered as a child in Suffolk, usually when I was sulkily in flight from the incessant tasks of goat-milking, brother-keeping, wood-chopping, errands to far-distant shops, etc. which hanging around the house entailed, worked anywhere. 'Where have you been?' they would ask, and I would give the classic answer,

'Out'. In the long run, perhaps, this could be the only answer to 'why does scenery do you good?' Because it takes you out of yourself into its out-ness, It can be a heady business, as Jefferies was to learn, but one which does not necessarily require a numinous vocabulary to describe it. Very much the reverse, in fact. I am transported by 'The Breeze on Beachy Head' because it *is* so brilliantly down to earth, and with not a yard of its natural geography smudged. Spray, jackdaws, brambles, plough-teams, the immense cliff, the liner *Orient*, Australia-bound, flaking chalk, bees on the furze are seen with intense clarity. It is an accurately recorded view which always reminds me of an incident in the life of the Victorian photographer P. H. Emerson, when the poverty-stricken Norfolk labourers saw their wetlands landscape miniaturised in a camera lens for the first time and were amazed that this beautiful place was just their poor old familiar marsh!

High Suffolk was often similarly perplexing. Distant flint towers gave nothing away about the villages which they marked and the widely stretching scene was, for a boy, too broad to be local. And so the curative properties of landscape must have something to do with travel, and thus exertion. But I would personally put these things low on the list, for what toned me up all those years ago ('You need toning up', people would say), tones me up still, and I need only to stare from the window to the steep Stour-side fields to set this desirable process in motion. Never having needed to test the healing quality of these East Anglian scenes against disease, I can only say what they have done for me in terms of stimulus, hedonism and imagination, and while it isn't everything, it is quite something.

I realise now that my first scenery-seekingings were deliberate excursions to find the drug. What I liked, and still like, is the way in which the panorama dominates me. The land is all view and I am all viewer, and soon the ecological patterns and colours not only spread before me but permeate me, and I become part of what I am seeing. I can see patches of medieval forest here and there among the corn, and although I know that 'the woods decay and fall', I also know that in comparison with human flesh they takes ages to do so. Thus its ancientness must be one of the healing factors of landscape. High Suffolk tells me that the foundations of my view were laid in the ice-age, and the shape of almost everything which covers its surface was fashioned centuries ago. But simultaneously with its antiquity it presents its very latest seasonal crop of flowers, birds, insects and sounds. And so I too, wandering on to Monks Eleigh, have a nice sense of being just born and everything before me. Landscape certainly provides most of us with a lift and although I know it won't keep me buoyant for ever, or maybe for very much longer, I shall go on absorbing all I can of it. When you think of the world's literature,

what other cure-all (or at least make it possible to endure-all) medicine has received such thankful testimonials?

Once it had to be taken quite literally. Both doctor and patient accepted that it was a gamble to go off in search of beneficial air or a change of surroundings, and it was a poignant moment when the sick in body or mind set off for the prescribed spring or climate. Naaman the leper testily to a foreign holy river, the medieval hordes to their shrines and John Keats to the Mediterranean, And then there were those like the exile in Robert Frost's poem 'New Hampshire' who knew that they would never get better until they got home:

I met a Californian who would  
Talk Californian—a state so blessed  
He said, in climate, none had ever died there  
A natural death.

From Eden on we have been convinced that Earth has a state of health running right through it, and that there are salubrious geographical spots where this healthiness can be tapped. Or so it was until yesterday and the dawn of antibiotics. One consulted the physician, and he consulted the map. It did not necessarily mean going off into the wilds. Illness often demands good company, and the lady in Henry James's novel was right: 'She was all for scenery—yes, but she wanted it human and personal, and all she could say was that there would be more in London—wouldn't there? More of that kind than anywhere else?'

The history of landscape and its elements as cure is a mainly social history. One gets the recluses and the solitary searches for healing, but the main pattern is of those in trouble following the steps of where those in trouble went before. Medicine, even landscape-medicine, has always been the practice of fairly rigid rules. Thus a scattering of attested health centres developed and were called 'resorts' because the sick, and old, and worried resorted to them, either for curative air or water, or for the recreational activities which they offered. Anne Brontë resorted to Scarborough, not in any expectation of a cure but in all probability to save her poor father from having a third of his children's deaths in the house in less than a year. Her illness, tuberculosis, involved more people in landscape as a regime than any other right up until the last war, and the almost hour by hour account of it gives an exact description of what must have happened to countless other men and women—and children—for whom the resort was the last resort.

Branwell, ‘t’ Vicar’s Pat’, had died in September 1848. Three years before, he had written a curious landscape poem entitled ‘The Emigrant’ in which he compared waking up on an Australia-bound ship which is still in sight of the blue hills of England which he has taken sad leave of, to a loved one’s voice distracting the journey which a dying man needs to make from time to eternity. Branwell signed his poem ‘Northangerland’. No sooner was he in his grave, which was just a few yards from his bed, than the health of Emily and Anne began to decline with devastating speed. Emily, typically, refused to do a thing about it and, three months later, died lying on the downstairs sofa, sewing, and dressed as for an ordinary day. It was dreadfully cold and the moor winds filled the house the moment a door was opened. She had what was then called ‘galloping consumption’, a disease which made it pointless for her to take any notice of what was passing. Charlotte attempted to slow down the pace with books and love, and flowers from the hillside, but it was all no use. Emily’s last words were, ‘No, No!’ to attempts to get her to bed. A fortnight later, Dr Teale, a specialist from Leeds, examined Anne, who immediately dealt with her shock in a poem, ‘A dreadful darkness closes in / On my bewildered mind’, although, unlike her sister, she had no intention of letting the consumption gallop off with her if she could prevent it. She did everything the doctor told her to, and this, of course, included seeking sea air. Her’s was the classic death via landscape route, and one taken by countless TB sufferers in particular before the advent of modern medicine. Anne Brontë decided to die in a boarding-house, rather than a lodging-house, because it would be livelier. She left home on 24 May 1849 and died four days later. It was glorious spring weather and she behaved as though she were on holiday, sightseeing in York en-route, buying clothes, hungrily taking in all the scenery she could on the hour’s train journey from York to Scarborough, driving herself up and down the sands in a donkey-cart when she arrived, insisting on her companions, Charlotte and Ellen Nussey, seeing the elegant new spa salon and appearing to be very happy. On Monday morning Charlotte found her standing uncertainly at the top of the boarding-house stairs, unable to descend them, and drew her back into their shared bedroom. Anne sat in the window while the doctor told her she was about to die. After they had buried her within full view of the sea, Charlotte did not hurry back home to Haworth but drifted slowly through the countryside for a month, taking in Filey and Bridlington—and the onus of her position. When at last she did reach the Parsonage, she closed its doors on all that lay outside and used *Shirley*, the novel which three deaths had interrupted, as a therapy to help her come to terms with what had happened.

As the nineteenth century wore on, and indeed right up unto the 1930s,

the custom of prescribing places for various illnesses intensified. The tubercular rich thronged the Mediterranean and the Alps, and the tubercular poor East Anglian sanatoria, where they could be seen lying outside in pram-beds in all weathers, sometimes with snow covering the mackintosh aprons which kept the blankets dry. Sea trips were also recommended and by the late 1920s no great liner set sail without its quota of convalescents and the spiritually low. Much of the action in the novels and drama of the period is geared to the convention of people having to go somewhere special to get better, and much of the mood of this literature is created by a writer being able to invent a sick man's view of the world. But there were, of course, non-invented sick men's views of a usually dearly loved natural scene, and all the more adored because it was fleeting. Bruce Cummings ('Barbellion'), a brilliant young naturalist who died when he was in his late twenties in 1919, from disseminated sclerosis, wanted to 'swallow landscapes and swill down sunsets, or grapple the whole earth to me with ropes of steel', and in his *Journal of a Disappointed Man* the reader is made to watch the landscape of southern England being prised from him. Talking of London, he said, 'I live in a bigger, dirtier city—ill-health', and it was because of this that he constantly plunged himself into a cleansing countryside.

It is fine to walk over the elastic turf with the wind bellowing into each ear and swirling all around in a mighty sea of air until I was as clean-blown and resonant as a sea-shell. I moved along as easily as a disembodied spirit and felt free, almost transparent. The old earth seemed to have soaked me up into itself, I became dissolved into it, my separate body was melted away from me, and Nature received me into her deepest communion—until, UNTIL I got back on the lee side of the hedge where the calm brought me back my gaol of clay.

That we should not resort to the earth's scenes for comfort, if not a cure, when our own clay begins to crack or warp is foolish, for as Wallace Stevens says of the earth 'Our nature is her nature', a concept he must have got from Pope, who was acknowledging holism as long ago as the 1730s when, in his *Essay on Man*, he states, 'All are but parts of one stupendous whole, / Whose body Nature is'. But what exactly takes place it is easier to be poetic than scientific about. The actual exercise of a long walk will be beneficial and yet frequently we know for certain that it is more than just this which has revived us, killed a pain, healed us without a fuss. The land itself seems to have laid its hand on us. Dr Johnson, that very sick man, to whom Hawkstone had offered 'a kind of turbulent pleasure, between fright and admiration', was so



put to rights by his long trek through the Highlands that no sooner had he got home to London than he had to set straight off for Wales, saying, ‘The longer I walk, the less I feel its inconvenience—as I grow warm, my breath mends, and I think my limbs grow pliable.’ Goldsmith had told young Boswell (aged 33) that the Doctor (aged 64) would be a dead weight for him to carry all the way to the Hebrides, and when Voltaire heard of the plan, Boswell said, ‘He looked at me as if I talked of going to the North Pole’, but go they did and that great travel book is nothing less than a learned testimonial to the curative properties of a superb landscape. Johnson was indifferent to weather. He refused to believe that it was the sun which made one of Boswell’s friends reluctant to return to England and insisted that it must be a woman.

For centuries healing was most sought after in water, spasmodically recognised as emanating from the sun and vaguely discovered in a change of air. But those in search of health rarely attempted to find it by some kind of deliberate intake of scenery. When the latter did improve the spirits, and subsequently the flesh, as the sick travelled to distant wells and better climates, few seemed to realise it. Yet the beneficial effect of varieties of landscapes on pilgrim and patient alike must have been enormous, and often those who thankfully attributed their cures to certain springs and wells would have been on the road to recovery long before they drank from them or bathed in them. Exercise and that most exquisite—and taken for granted—of pleasures of having a rich sequence of near and distant hills, fields, woods, skies, buildings and landscape features of every hue and form fed through one’s heart and mind, as it were, day after day as the journey progressed, had performed the miracle.

But holy water is not to be dismissed. To our ancestors, local water had something of the same reputations and distinctions as local wines have for us. Among the countless sources of domestic water all over Britain there are a great many springs and wells containing waters which did wonders for aches and pains and skin diseases, chalybeates (iron), sulphurous, lime, thermal, soda and other mineral-filled special waters, most of which had long been placed under the protection of saints. Seeking a cure from sun and air was altogether more problematical, and their recent elevation, really from the late eighteenth century onwards, as health-givers owes as much to the Romantic Movement as to science. When the Shah of Persia was visiting Edinburgh during the mid-eighteenth century, a Presbyterian lady accused him of worshipping the sun. ‘So would you, Madam,’ he said, ‘if you had ever seen it.’

What we appear to demand of landscape generally in health-giving terms is what soothes us at home and what stimulates us abroad.

## YOUNG MR KILVERT

Perhaps as with so many diaries Kilvert's was a gesture against oblivion. It is certainly an outlet for longings and emotion. V. S. Pritchett saw it as a deliberate work of art—of literature. No scribbled account of the day before the candle was snuffed, the wick turned low. For it holds the kind of information which takes time to select, order and craft. There is a noticeable care in what had to be put in and what must be omitted. Kilvert comes across, often helplessly, not only as a young clergyman with strong pastoral gifts which are modestly handed out to whoever is in need of them, but also with observations and complexities which might better serve a poet or novelist. The fact is that in his diary he intended to be—and succeeded in being—a good writer. Although he wrote for himself alone, and out of the necessity, as with all diarists, to say, 'I was here', one senses an unconfessed hope that other eyes will read him. Even a remarkable literary neighbour of his, Thomas Traherne, though one he did not know existed, wrote a masterpiece for a single reader, his friend Mrs Hopton. Indeed, Francis Kilvert admitted the half hope that, long after he was no more, another would open his private book and wonder about him. What *we* wonder is what the rest of it contained, for his widow destroyed a large part of it and then, as late as 1938 and after William Plomer had made his classic selection from what was left, a Mrs Essex Hope who had inherited the manuscript, 'had done away with it', believing it the right thing to do. William Plomer said, 'he could have strangled her with his own hands'. Mrs Hope, under her maiden name Essex Smith, wrote and published romances. For her the strange romances and real story of Kilvert's short life should never have appeared on the page.

E. M. Forster liked to describe his friend the poet Cavafy as 'A Greek gentleman standing at an angle to the universe'. Francis Kilvert is an English gentleman who is decidedly standing at an angle to his, though without knowing it. His vision of the parish is he believes quite normal and ordinary, and he himself an ordinary country curate, a quite usual member of a race which over-manned the nineteenth century Church of England. Yet how could he not have seen, working so creatively at his diary for hours on end, that he was also an artist? The entries are finely fashioned and the gradual exposure of himself on the page no ordinary self-portrait. He is class-

confident yet somehow cut off from the warmth and protection of orthodoxy.

Kilvert's close yet unaware near encounters with two great writers, Thomas Traherne and Thomas Hardy, have always intrigued me. One bitterly cold March afternoon we find him in Credenhill church, looking around, and then looking out onto the 'lovely views of the Black Mountains with snow patches, the Golden Fawr and the Skyridd ... Little Brinsop lay peacefully below among the meadows of Brinsop Vale.' It was the view which another young priest saw as he wrote the masterpiece now called *Centuries*, a book which lay hidden for over two hundred years until it was found on a London bookstall in the 1890s. Traherne and Kilvert, waiting-to-be-read geniuses in the same country church one Victorian afternoon. Two hundred years earlier, during the 1650s, Traherne said that being alive in the world was such a beautiful fate that he wished he could lie under a tree all his life and just take it all in, the shade, the sunshine, the God who made it, this earthly paradise, this Herefordshire. And the Reverend Francis Kilvert who, when he left his parish, felt that he must pay homage to it in the local paper, the *Hereford Times*:

Oh, Clyro Water! ceaselessly  
 For seven sweet years my lullaby;  
 My life, my love, my footsteps free  
 For seven sweet years have been by thee ...

Sweet Clyro Water! Oh let me still  
 By thy banks remembered be,  
 And keep yet as thy grasses, green,  
 The love for me that once has been!

Well, his wish has been amply answered. Traherne died aged thirty-six and Kilvert aged thirty-nine. Their life here lay buried but now spreads before us in dewy freshness in works of literature which must be reckoned among the highest kind of serendipity. Winter or summer, we feel their weather on our faces, their thankfulness for nature.

Kilvert's unaware brush with Thomas Hardy is even more intriguing. During a visit to Dorset the Rector of Fordington, the Reverend Henry Moule, took him to meet William Barnes. It was May-day eve 1874. Kilvert had already written a Traherne-like description of the county:

The pimpernel blazed in the grass with wide open scarlet eyes, and the woods were lighted in their dark green depths by the scarlet bunches of

rowan berries. The scent of hay came mixed with the aromatic odour of the fir trees drawn out by the sun ... In a field among the woods the flax sheaves stood in shocks like wheat, the fine-hung bells on their wiry hairy stalks rustling and quaking in the breeze like wag wantons ... In the afternoon I went to pay a visit to the lime avenue. It looked more like a vast church than ever and the strong low sunlight which came up from the green isle seemed to be pouring through a great distant window.

He called Barnes ‘the great idyllic poet of England’. We have no idea whether Barnes or Moule told Kilvert of their connection with a neighbour who was exactly the diarist’s age, Thomas Hardy. Barnes had taught the young novelist—he had just published *Far from the Madding Crowd*—and so in a different sense had Horace, Mr Moule’s son who only a few months previously had committed suicide at Cambridge. Kilvert was profoundly moved when Mr Moule sat at Barnes’s piano and sang ‘with a sweet melodious voice’ a tragic song he had composed for his poor son, ‘Lord I love thee’. We don’t know if Kilvert had read *Far from the Madding Crowd*, his diary shows little interest in books. We know that he read Keats’s *Hyperion* to his mother and Trollope to himself, and that typical of Victorian parsons he was not above doling out moralising slush to the villagers, and even writing embarrassingly about the virtue of honest toil for the working class:

Honest work is always holy,  
 Howsoever hard and lowly.  
 Envy not the rich, the great,  
 Wealthier in your low estate,  
 Nobler through your workful days,  
 Happier in your simple ways,  
 Well beloved of God must be  
 Holy men of low degree.

What a distance this is to George Herbert’s still acceptable:

Teach me, my God and King,  
 In all things thee to see ...  
 A servant with this clause  
 Makes drudgery divine;  
 Who sweeps a room, as for thy laws  
 Makes that and the action fine.

But being a parson, Kilvert was to take every advantage of the entrée he had to this world of ceaseless toil. In his handbook for the country clergy, George Herbert had long ago laid down the laws for visiting even the worst of hovels. Never mind their stink—and always wear a clean cassock. Kilvert was doubly drawn to this duty to visit the poor, first by a sincere desire to bring what he understood to be heaven into their lives, and by something even more powerful, a writer's keenness to witness what human beings got up to. He was more class-aware than conventionally class-conscious. He was good and kind, physically attractive and helpful, and—welcome. It is the latter quality which shines in the diary, his own welcome to everything he saw or did. His diary is the most open account of the priest as visitor which we have. Kilvert might now and then out of curiosity go in search of a character but usually his mind works best when he is doing his humdrum duty. He invades cottage rooms at some intimate moment, but stays. It is as though their inhabitants need his close attention. If he was now and again hustled out and told to come back in an hour, or tomorrow, he doesn't say so. Whatever it is that is going on when he opens the door—goes on. Poverty and pain as well as private matters go on, as do mad customs. And tall stories. And how at ease he was. 'Mr Kilvert! Mr Kilvert!' shouted the children when they heard his knock. Some of the houses were bursting with health, others stale with misery, and with death hanging about them. Nobody knew that he was saving up what he saw and heard for his quiet study and the lamplight, every precious scrap. The entries are compelling:

Visited Edward Williams, the man ill of rheumatic fever at the Swan. He said he was better. We talked of the extraordinary wet weather and floods. He said the Wye was a very 'wild river' some years ago and all the valley was frequently flooded in the winter and under water from the Hay up to Llyswen ... Perhaps on account of the cutting of the horseshoe lower down the river at Letton or Stanton ... he recollected the fearful flood at Hay at 8 o'clock in the morning after the waterspout had burst in the night, the furniture whirling down the river with trees, bushes, beams and fragments of the cottage, and the one-armed body of Mrs Lawrence being taken out of the river.

The Swan inn at Clyro was a nuisance, being so near his house, but, 'Last night was very quiet, marvellously quiet and peaceful. No noise, no rowing or fighting whatever and no men, as there sometimes are lying by the roadside all night drunk, cursing, muttering, maundering and vomiting.' We have a tendency to read Kilvert's Diary as an idyll, but it is in many ways a shocking

and unsparing description of the Victorian village. There is a slum near his lodgings where sordid women lean from doors and windows and momentarily cease from yelling to listen to a bit of gossip. He sees degradation, ignorance and filth. He calls on Mrs Parker and her 'dwarf' child Emily who is an object of local mockery, telling the little girl 'not to mind' and that she has a beautiful noble spirit caged in a poor deformed stunted body. He walks on to old Laver in his den who is 'unkempt, unshaven, shaggy and grey like a wild beast' and reads to him Father Faber's hymn about the Good Shepherd. Then on to Mrs Thomas 'still on her feet' but in daily expectation. Her children come trooping in from school and are hungry for their tea. Then on to his 'little darling Polly Sackville' to hear news of Mary of Penhan, 'only nineteen last August' but dying from TB. On and on he strides, with Wales rising up before him, energetically passing from wit to horror, from lovely girls to old hags. Girls give him kisses, boys a bit of cheek. 'At Newgate an urchin three feet high was swinging a gate. "Well," said I, "and how are you?" "Pretty well, thank you, how's yourself?"' But painful snubs are too interesting not to be recorded.

During his Cornish holiday in 1870 'the youngest girl, Agatha, I think, planted herself before me and demanded impetuously and imperiously in a loud voice, "What do *you* want?" "A kiss", said I mischievously, whereat she flung off in high disdain without a word.' Something 'knowing' in the Henry James sense is happening and the thirty year-old Kilvert speculates uncomfortably on what he calls 'young lady affectations, peculiarities, vagaries, &c., &c.' being 'unintelligible'. The Cornish schoolgirls he chats to at the forge whilst the carriage tyre is being mended do not have these affectations 'and reminded me of some of my Clyro pets'. The Cornish holiday itself is the sum of every Cornish holiday starting with the thrilling sight of the cliff-hung railway at Dawlish and continuing with a glimpse of what will be Virginia Woolf's lighthouse at Godrevy, the wretched sea fogs, the terrifying cliffs and the curious feeling of being abroad whilst still in England. Frederick Grice, Kilvert's biographer, lamented a little that Kilvert did not accept the living at Cannes, for then we would have had an account of the Riviera in its British heyday. As it was, his acceptance of Bredwardine and Brobury in 1877 seems to his readers a fatal move towards extinction. He was prophetic about his death at the very start of the Diary, when a parishioner dies instantly from a burst stomach ulcer and he says, 'how absolutely unconscious one may be of carrying one's death warrant about in an unsuspected disease that may bring an end at any moment.'

But two days later Kilvert is all life and vitality as he creates one of his fine set pieces, rural writing which can claim a place beside that of Dorothy

Wordsworth, Flora Thompson and John Clare. Such extended essays are frequent in the Diary. It is as if he has put aside the daily task of putting down what happened to him as faithfully as he could, and moved on into the writer's craft proper. Now and then he could be working on a short story. Now and then he dashes off a series of brilliant notes. Here he is on 22 March 1870:

The Clyro women stride about the village like storks. The industrious blacksmith chinks away at his forge night and morning late and early, and the maidens and mothers go up and down the water steps with their pitchers continually. Heavy loads of timber, large long trees on the timber carriages grinding through Clyro village every evening from Cross Ffordd and Cabalva.

It is the setting for some drama, some revelation, but it is left to the reader what to put in it. Here is a passage like the opening of a novel, written when he was thirty:

Faint sunshine on Bryngwyn Hill and a cold cheery gleam of water from the great peat bog below the edge of which stands the grey cluster of buildings and the tall dark yew of Llanshifr. I went down there and waded across the yard to the house through a sea of mud and water. The kitchen was very dark, the bank rising steep in front of the window. Mrs Morgan gave me some tea and cake. On the settle sat a man perfectly still, silent and in such a dark corner that I could not see his face. Morgan showed me the remains of the moat, where the Scotch pedlar was hidden after being murdered for the sake of his pack while lodging in the house and where his skeleton was found when the moat was cleared out. The moat that is left is a broad deep formidable ditch and a rather long pond at one end of the house and full of water. Llanshifr a fearfully wet swampy place, almost under water and I should think very unhealthy. One of the twin yews was lately blown down and cut up into gate posts which will last twice as long as oak. The wood was so hard that Morgan said it turned many of the axes as if they were made of lead. I wonder in which of these yews Gore hid the penknife before his death which made him restless as hidden iron is said to do, and caused his spirit to come back rummaging about the house ... It was getting dusk as I left Llanshifr and after I had plunged about for some time in the swampy Wern up to my ankles in water I lost my bearings and the welcome clank of plough chains on the team came down home

and Joe the Llanshifr ploughman directed me up to Holly House. Struck over the top of Vicar's Hill and as I passed Cross Ffordd the frogs were croaking, snoring and bubbling in the pool under the full moon.

Violence, rough farming, ignorance, with just a veneer of church teaching, this is what Kilvert sees. In contrast there is the culture to which he belongs, the rectories and big houses, the parties and the ladies. Where the latter are concerned—and their mothers—curates are two a penny and he may be handsome but he cannot get very far. So what his Diary famously reveals is a strong sexuality without an outlet. Writing it down is a help. And when at long last he does marry, he dies. The Diary reveals him as a conventionally religious person whose work takes him into wild situations. He calls it 'villaging'. He becomes the determined intruder, an adventurer along the footpaths, a watcher of lives which fascinate him but which he instinctively realises are beyond his jurisdiction and outside his experience. He is no reformer and he shows no indignation at the plight of so many of his neighbours, only a tenderness and a pity. The beauty of the young, boys and girls, overwhelms him and he adores their hair and eyes, and shares to an alarming degree their innocence and vulnerability. It makes them easy with him. He could be called a traveller in a barbarous country, a holy man protected by the heavy respect of the parish for the clergy.

V. S. Pritchett says that 'One likes him in the end ... because, entirely without self-importance or self-consciousness, he is serious about himself. That supremely difficult art! It is the special triumph of Kilvert's sincerity that he has conveyed and made credible *his* kind of feeling and whose notions of love are totally alien to those of a bubbling young mid-Victorian curate ... We have lost the art of rendering pure sentiment and the feeling for such a tenderness as Kilvert's. When we contrast the note and rhythm of our lives with his we see there is more than a change of fashion between the generations. We perceive with a shock that it is we who are unnatural.'

I quote Pritchett because he, more than any other good writer who has been drawn to comment on Kilvert, and including William Plomer himself, saw that the supreme accomplishment of this diarist was to recognise the quality of his seriousness. What Kilvert seriously tells us, we have trouble in accepting. His being so young yet so complacent about the degradation on his doorstep, his religion which has no intention of moving mountains, his eroticism. Yet the truthfulness of it all! Would all those destroyed notebooks have provided another Kilvert? Those about his marriage to Elizabeth in particular? Almost certainly not. The marriage lasted a little over a month before peritonitis bore him away to a spot he had chosen himself in



Bredwardine churchyard. There was no singing at the funeral. It was rainy and dark. Boys and girls dropped flowers into the grave. Robert Francis was thirty-eight. His widow returned home to Oxfordshire in 'overwhelming and inexpressible sorrow'. An anonymous poem appeared in the *Hereford Times*:

The Marriage feast was spread. With his fair young wife,  
The joyous Bridegroom sat, while each young heart  
Look'd forward to a long and happy life,  
To which true love should fragrant bloom impart.

The Marriage feast was spread in Courts above.  
'Let him I love be with Me where I am!'  
The Saviour said. He pass'd from human love  
To share the Marriage Supper of the Lamb.

Bredwardine Rectory was filled with wedding presents and the village itself with dismantled triumphant arches.

In the study in its completeness lay a masterly revelation of a curate's soul. Diaries are among the most censored forms of literature. Those who bring the scissors to them leave spaces in which imagination and conjecture thrive. Kilver's has us peering into his personality but finally into his world, of which he gives as full and satisfying picture as we can desire. It is a diary to read beside old photo albums and nineteenth century memoirs and novels. And the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins.

On Tuesday 3 November 1874, after a brilliant entry on the sounds of the countryside as he walked near Langley Burrell, from 'the strange hoarse belling of the buck' to 'the merry voices of the Marquis's children at play', Kilver wrote, 'Why do I keep this voluminous journal? I can hardly tell. Partly because life appears to me such a curious and wonderful thing that it almost seems a pity that even such a humble and uneventful life as mine should pass altogether away without some record ...'

Once on the Longest Day, whilst on a visit to his birthplace Hardenhuish in Wiltshire, he reflects on his life as he stands by the font for a christening. Outside 'lay the wide fair plain smiling in the summer afternoon sunshine, as I used to see it from my nursery window, looking southward to the tower of Colerne Church on the windy hill, and the long faint blue line of Salisbury Plain. I thought of my own christening on that mid-winter day January 3rd 1841, more than thirty-five years ago. As I left the churchyard and crossed the lane to the stone steps which led up to the little green wicket garden gate between the twin elms there came from the Rectory to meet me a pretty

bright-faced, bright-haired girl, the Rector's daughter, sweet Gertrude Headley ... We took no kiss, only she gave me a bright glance ... The "Kiss at the Gate"\* is a sweet delicious flower but it is old fashioned now and does not grow by the green wicket. Yet I know a gate by which that flower still blows, and by that gate I once did pluck that flower.'

This is an example of that sentiment which V.S. Pritchett says we have lost—which is beyond us, but which is so surely Kilvertian. Kilvert has been seen as one of those parish-trapped people but he was in fact a constant traveller. Train and carriage journeys, roads and scenery, and walking, keep his Diary always on the move. Compared with today's clergy with their united benefices, his church duties were minimal. He wrote his sermons and they must have been delightful to listen to. He witnessed the effect of the 1870 Education Act and he visited the terrible workhouses. He was officially concerned with the local bank. He was kind and intrigued where vagabonds, gypsies and wanderers were concerned, and we have glimpses of homelessness and Dickensian fates.

\* eartsease = *Viola arvensis*

## GOOD TO BE ALIVE: THOMAS TRAHERNE

Thomas Traherne's world could not be in greater contrast to that of George Herbert's. But they were one in their gratitude for just being alive, Herbert ill, Traherne we may assume blooming. Death took them off before they were forty, which was thought a good age then. Herbert was a tall aristocrat from the Welsh border and Traherne a shoemaker's son from the English border. Traherne went to Oxford and Herbert to Cambridge. Traherne wrote a masterpiece for a single reader, Susanna Hopton, and Herbert trusted his entire poetry to the judgment of his schoolfriend Nicholas Ferrar. Neither would have had the least notion of their future place in English literature. Traherne called Susanna 'the friend of my best friend'—Christ. Herbert told Nicholas to put a match to his poems if he thought they were no good. No one would have heard of Traherne for hundreds of years. Herbert became famous the year he died. Traherne wrote to Susanna because he had moved from his Herefordshire parish and was no longer able to talk to her. Herbert wrote out of minute Bemerton a personal language for everyone to learn and use

My copy of Traherne's *Poems, Centuries and Three Thanksgivings* was left to me by the poet James Turner. Like Herbert, he was consumptive, and there are snapshots of us both sitting in deckchairs on the lawn at Belchamp Walter, and later in Cornwall, one of them showing this book in James's hand. And he showing a white face and frailty after an attack. He also left his different sounds in my head, the rattle of his typewriter, which was like that of a tiny concrete mixer, the crash of his spade—he was a constant maker of gardens—and his beautiful voice. We both admired Anne Ridler's Introduction to Traherne and parts of it entered our vocabulary. We very much liked her discovery of his lack of emphasis on sin, I remember. She calls him 'the master of the affirmative way which pursues perfection through delight in the created world'. She goes on, 'Every emphasis in his writings is on inclusive love' and that 'one has only to read the *Centuries* alongside other religious writings of his time to see how unusual he was in the lack of emphasis on sin. The affirmations of the *Centuries* may seem to diverge from the central theme of mysticism, as expressed by St John of the Cross, that the soul must free itself from the love of created beings, for Traherne boldly says, "Never was any thing in this World loved too much". But he continues, "Many things have been loved in a false way and in all too short a Measure".'

Throughout Traherne we catch the voices of earlier and future poets. It is strange and delightful. There is no exactly making him out. Where has he come from? Where is he going? To use a sensuous Herbertian noun he is an enticer. He precedes Wordsworth when he writes, 'A meditative inward eye / Gazing at quiet did within me lie' and Blake when he says, 'You never enjoy the world aright, till you see how a sand exhibiteth the wisdom and the power of God'.

I find him the supreme poet of childhood. He is at play all his life. Boys and girls run through his theology as they ran through his Hereford. His work is actually a playground for his beliefs. It is tumultuous with Christians bursting from the schools and into the countryside, there to collect anything that nature offered. The first half of the seventeenth century was the time to make a collection. It was the fashion for connoisseurs to turn their rooms into what they called 'cabinets of treasure'. George Herbert, a botanist, was more a collector of 'my stock of natural delights' which included 'Lillies on the Rivers side' (flags on the Nadder below his garden?), 'The crown Imperiall' and the tricky 'Sycomore'. But especially herbs.

Herbs gladly cure our flesh; because that they  
 Finde their acquaintance there.  
 For us the windes do blow,  
 The earth doth rest, heav'n move, and fountains flow,  
 Nothing we see, but means our good,  
 As our *delight*, or as our *treasure*.  
 The whole is, either our cupboard of *food*,  
 Or cabinet of *pleasure*.

Traherne's *Centuries* is such a cabinet. It contains all creation and everything given and possessed in love. Critics used to prefer his prose-poetry to his poems and even Anne Ridler denies the latter 'a complete formal perfection'. But this to me is their enchantment. She adds that he has 'an honourable place in the line of poets, from Dante to Edwin Muir, who have held and renewed the vision of childhood'. Traherne dislikes to find manufactured objects in his Eden—'those little, new, invented things which all our happiness destroys' because 'nor Saints, nor little Boys, nor Angels made them, only foolish men'. He himself was a child with very little so he had to fill the spaces with his imagination. 'Once I remember, I think I was about four year old, when I reasoned with myself sitting in a little obscure room in my father's poor house, that if God is the source of infinite riches, and loves me, how comes it that I am so poor?'

Still a boy, he experiences the kind of wretchedness which overcomes us when we are young, the kind which John Bunyan felt when he wrote, 'Another time ... there fell upon me a great cloud of darkness'. 'Another time', says Traherne, 'in a lowering, sad evening, being alone in the field, when all things were dead and quiet, a certain want and horror fell upon me, beyond imagination. The unprofitableness and silence of the place dissatisfied me, its wideness terrified me as from the utmost ends of the earth fears surrounded me ... I was a weak and little child, and had forgotten that there was a man alive in the earth. Yet something also of hope and expectation comforted me from every border. Soon, comfort of houses and friends, and the clear assurance of treasures everywhere, God's care and love, his goodness, wisdom and power, his presence and his watchfulness would be my strength'. Later, Traherne would list his childhood possessions, a drum, a fine coat, a penny, a gilded hook, adding, 'the glass of imagination was my only mirror'. But what an imagination. It is unique among Christian writers. What Traherne saw in the Herefordshire countryside, in Oxford, in London and finally at Teddington was God with boys and girls, love in the trees and meadows, and beneficence in the universe. His fancifulness halts the learned reader:

If that be all, shine forth and draw me neigher;  
 Let me behold and die, for my desire  
 Is phoenix-like to perish in the fire.

Long before either George Herbert or Thomas Traherne had so intensely sought the face of the Lord, a little much-imprisoned Spanish priest had written:

Oh lamps of fiery blaze  
 To whose refulgent fuel  
 The deepest caverns of my soul grow bright,  
 Late blind with gloom and haze,  
 But in this strange renewal  
 Giving to the belov'd both heat and light.

What peace, with love enwreathing,  
 You conjure to my breast  
 Which only you your dwelling place may call:  
 While with delicious breathings  
 In glory, grace and rest,  
 So daintily in love you make me fall!

It was unlikely that Herbert or Traherne would have heard of St John of the Cross, who died in 1591, but his modern translator Roy Campbell would protest how their contemporary theologians would exclude mysticism, and how many Roman Catholic divines would prefer the practice of virtue than that of searching for Christ as a lover, and to *enjoy*—a favourite word of Traherne's—everything which told of this love. The Spanish poet had quite extravagantly enjoyed his Christ in the woodlands of Baeza and by the River Guadalimar. George Herbert wrote many of his poems on the Wiltshire plain and by the River Nadder which flowed through his beloved garden. And Traherne wrote his amazing love-letter to God wherever his brief life took him, famously beginning it with that stunning piece of prose:

The Corn was Orient and Immortal Wheat, which never should be reaped, nor was ever sown. I thought it had stood from Everlasting to Everlasting. The Dust and Stones of the Street were as Precious as GOLD. The Gates were at first the End of the World, The Green Trees when I saw them first through one of the Gates Transported and Ravished me; their Sweetness and unusual Beauty made my Heart to leap, and almost mad with Extasie, they were such strange And Wonderful Things: the Men! O what Venerable and Reverend Creatures did the Aged seem! Immortal Cherubims! And yong Men Glittering and Sparkling Angels and Maids strange Seraphick Pieces of Life and Beauty! Boys and Girles Tumbling in the Street, and Playing, were moving Jewels. I knew not that they were Born or should Die. But all things abided Eternally as they were in their proper Places. Eternity was Manifest in the Light of the Day, and something infinite Behind every thing appeared: which talked with my Expectation and moved my Desire. The Citie [Hereford] seemed to stand in Eden, or to be built in Heaven. The Streets were mine, the Temple [Hereford Cathedral] was mine, the People were mine, their Clothes and Gold and Silver was mine, as much as their Sparkling Eyes fair Skins and ruddy faces. The Skies were mine and so were the Sun and Moon and Stars, and all the World was mine, and I the only Spectator and Enjoyer of it. I knew no Churlish Proprieties, nor Bounds, nor Divisions: but all Proprieties and Divisions were mine; all Treasures and the Possessors of them So that with much more adoe I was corrupted; and made to learn the Dirty Devices of this World. Which now I unlearn, and become as it were a little Child again, that I may enter into the Kingdom of GOD.

enchantments of physical nature. Travelling through the home scenery presents them with the metaphors for what they must eventually come to after mortality. The Church has been scandalised or bewildered by earth-lovers and earth-appreciators, and by a companionable Christ who steps it out with his friends on their way to work or play. The critic Peter Malekin put it like this:

Traherne's *Centuries* are a series of meditations turning on the recognition that as God's child he has the access to all the riches of God manifest throughout creation, his conscious enjoyment of these being the fulfilment of their purpose, an expression of the mutual love between him and God, and the key to an unbounded felicity, itself the gift of God ... The *Centuries* are written in a strange and manly but curiously worked prose which conveys a vivid sense of illumination and peace. It deals with the unadulterated joy in the world which he experienced in childhood and which he has refound in his mature vision of the world as the gleaming manifestation of God.

Traherne in fact has to be read now in tandem with our concern for nature.

Sometimes I walk in a great meadow near the Essex-Suffolk border where many thousands of green-winged orchids are in bloom and are hedged in by may blossom and young oak leaves, and over which the larks sing all day long, and I think of Traherne as well as my old friend Richard Mabey. The two of them join hands here.

*Centuries* is made up of five meditations on the divine love of all that God has created, on ordinary human love and on the adoration of the natural world. It is today's environmentalist's Book of Psalms. It says what we walkers of the earth cannot or dare not say. Running through them is Traherne's active pleading for leisure. Given a chance he would have done no work at all, life being so brief and nature so enchanting. He would have liked to spend all of it lying under a tree gazing through its leaves at the sky, listening to birdsong, smelling the crushed flowers under his body, spreading his fingers in the surrounding grass and just dreaming. But as we know, as well as writing the strangest holy love letters to Mrs Hopton, he toiled hard as a theologian and as secretary to Sir Orlando Bridgeman, Lord Keeper of the Great Seal. And even when he no longer served as a parish priest he continued to be a 'minister' wherever he went. The swiftly advancing science of astronomy fascinated him and, looking up as he always did, he remarked, 'The world is not this little cottage of heaven and earth'. Rome was at that moment prosecuting scientists for insisting as much.

Traherne detested what we call consumerism, though not for the same reason. He liked to quote Socrates in the market-place at Athens—‘Good gods, ... who would have thought there were so many things in the world which I do not want!’ Traherne admired the simplicity of man’s first home and objected to its being cluttered. Was not the world but ‘a beautiful frontispiece to eternity’? Yet he has his wants and makes long lists of them, like a boy at Christmas. He justifies them because God himself wants. For one thing he wants Thomas Traherne. God wants ‘Angels and men, images, companions—all the joys of the Tree of Life’. Therefore, he tells us via Susanna Hopton, you must want like a God. ‘Be sensible of your wants, that you may be sensible of your treasures.’ He adds, ‘It was his wisdom made you need the sun. It was his goodness made you need the sea. Be sensible of what you need ... wants are the bands and cements between God and us’. ‘I want, I want’, says the Creator, ‘I want, I want!’ says his child. It is in the first *Century* that Traherne venerates the Cross, man’s chief possession, the thing that he must have, must want above all else:

The Cross is the Abyss of Wonders, the Centre of Desires, the Schole of Virtues, the Hous of Wisdom, the Throne of Lov, the Theatre of Joys and the Place of Sorrows; it is the Root of Happiness, and the Gate of Heaven.

In the second *Century* the poet’s imagery runs even more riot as he analyses and catalogues the divine love. ‘It is the true Means by which the World is enjoyed. Our Lov to others and others Lov to us. We ought therefore above all Things to get acquainted with the Nature of Lov ... You are as prone to Lov as the Sun is to shine ...’

But it is in the third *Century* that Traherne reverts so movingly to his innocence, a little Herefordshire boy who was entertained like an Angel with the Works of God ... [Nature] could not make more Melody to Adam than to me’. ‘And what Rule do you think I walked by? Truly a Strange one, but the Best in the Whole World. I was Guided by an Implicit Faith in Gods Goodness: and therefore led to the Study of the most Obvious and Common Things ... Air, Light, Heaven and Earth, Water, the Sun, Trees, Men and Women, Cities, Temples, etc.’ He writes a poem for the psalmist David, his chief mentor, because he sings nature, and he paraphrases his favourite psalm for Susanna. David’s songs were the holy pop of the mid-seventeenth century. Their Middle Eastern imagery was easily translated to the British countryside. The army sang them, the Scots rhymed them and children were made to learn them by heart. They would stream through literature feeding



the imagination of Christopher Smart, John Clare, Thomas Hardy and W. H. Auden, as well as becoming a hold-all of words for every occasion. Traherne decided that David 'had a Deep and Perfect Sence', a king-poet-shepherd-warrior who lived in a real place, such as the Welsh border. Traherne had what he modernly called a 'thirst' for news from David's land.

News from a foreign Country came,  
As if my Treasure and my Wealth lay there:  
So much it did my Heart Enflame!

And it was David who began to bring it to Herefordshire in his poetry. Traherne's own poems, only moderately liked by Anne Ridler but loved by me, are the kind of writing which keeps one on the edge of the seat. My favourite is 'Shadows in the Water', an *Alice Through the Looking-glass* contemplation. Tom stands by a puddle looking down 'Where Skies beneath us shine':

O ye that stand upon the Brink,  
Whom I so near me, through the Chink,  
With Wonder see: What Faces there,  
Whose Feet, whose Bodies, do ye wear?  
I my Companions see  
In You, another Me.  
They seemed Others, but are We;  
Our second Selvs those Shadows be.

About the same time that Traherne was being intrigued by puddles, John Bunyan, a decade or so older, and going through the religious crisis which would produce that masterpiece *Grace Abounding*, was testing God with them:

Wherefore, while I was thus considering [whether he had true faith] and being put to my plunge about it, for you must know, that as yet I had in this matter broken my mind to no man, only did hear and consider, the tempter came in with his delusion, That there was no way for me to know that I had faith, but by trying to work some miracle; urging those Scriptures that seem to look that way, for the enforcing and strengthening his temptation. Nay, one day as I was betwixt Elstow and Bedford, the temptation was hot upon me to try if I had faith, by doing some miracle; which miracle at that time was this, I must say to

the puddles that were in the horse pads, Be dry; and to the dry places, Be you the puddles. And truly, one time I was a-going to say so indeed; but just as I was about to speak, this thought came into my mind, But go under yonder hedge and pray first, that God would make you able.

Traherne's God, by contrast, offered a little boy a puddle of delights.

Of all the Play-mates which I knew  
 That here I do the Image view  
 In other Selves; what can it mean?  
 But that below the purling Stream  
     Som unknown Joys there be  
     Laid up in Store for me;  
 To which I shall, when that thin Skin  
 Is broken, be admitted in.

In another childhood poem, 'On Leaping over the Moon', it is Tom's brother Philip who must take care not to 'drop through that thin Element / into a fathomless Descent', he being far above the earth's sky. The brothers have been brought to Hereford from Lugwardine by their prosperous uncle the innkeeper and are comforted to discover that their home moon has come with them.

Brought home from Nurse, going to the door  
 To do some little thing  
 He must not do within,  
 [Philip] With Wonder cries,  
 As in the Skies  
 He saw the Moon, *O yonder is the Moon*  
*Newly come after me to Town,*  
*That shin'd at Lugwardin but yesternight,*  
*Where I enjoy'd the self-same light.*

The fourth and fifth *Centuries* are about active happiness and enjoying God. Traherne might be thought prophetic when he writes, 'My love is a spring shut up, a fountain sealed. It is shut up like letter, and concealed, yet in the kingdom of heaven its contents and secrets shall be known'. One has only to alter the address from heaven to a second-hand bookshop in the Farringdon Road where his work had indeed been a fountain sealed, and shut up like a letter for two hundred years. Bertram Dobell 'opened' Thomas Traherne to

an amazed literary—and religious—readership in 1903, and the beneficent dictums tumbled from it with more optimism than anyone had dared to imagine, let alone to advise. A question which may well be asked of us when we leave this scene is, ‘Why did you not more enjoy the natural world?’ At the very least, says Traherne, ‘Love is a phoenix that will revive in its own ashes, inherit death, and smell sweetly in the grave’.

## THE GREEN ROUNDABOUT

Ted Hughes and I met now and then. Once was when we gave a reading at the Roundhouse to help raise funds for the Wordsworth Trust. Ted read from his own work and I read from Thomas Hardy's. We went to the Marine ice-cream shop afterwards, Ted in his bomber jacket. It was a black, cold night. And we met again at Westminster Abbey in 1989 to put John Clare in Poets' Corner. I had brought a Midsummer Cushion, a turf stuck with wild flowers, all the way from our Stour Valley meadows and ditches, carrying it on buses and trains. It weighed a ton. Ted read Clare's 'The Nightingale's Nest'—unforgettably—and I gave a talk. The Corner was packed with poets and Clare's neighbours from Helpston. We sang his sad autobiographical hymn 'A Stranger once did bless the Earth' and the Abbey choir would have sung Benjamin Britten's setting of 'The Evening Primrose' but we couldn't afford it. Children from the John Clare Primary School in Helpston had brought wild flowers from the fields where Clare worked. Long before either of these events I had been given Ted Hughes's *Season Songs*.

And now it is yet another New Year. The jaded calendar revolves, as Louis MacNeice said it would long ago. Yet, all things considered, the seasons' greetings continue to be most welcome, and their rotating sights and sounds persistently affecting. The repetition of their wonders, the surefire message in their growing up and dying back, and the quarterly pull at the heart-strings annually charge the imagination, and no mistake. And so it is not surprising that poets should see in them an ideal format for containing all kinds of messages, and that words made to circle round in monthly patterns should prove to be so accessible to their readers. It is said that the most famous of *Seasons*, James Thomson's, was among the civilising factors of the eighteenth century. But long before this poem writers had been driven to 'take the measure of the year', as John Keats put it.

Ted Hughes began to take his when invited to write words for the composer Richard Drakeford's *Five Autumn Songs*, to be sung by children at Little Missenden harvest festival in 1968. Two years later, with *Crow* out of the way, he could add spring, summer and winter for these boys and girls. Children, he knew, are able to retain more of the old seasonality than grown-ups. Their year is very, very long and its changes remain heavily incised with the old metaphors. Hughes allows all the traditional treats, but typically sets

these on edge with shots of acid. Life is sweet but death is likely. As Beatrix Potter said, when telling the truth and not one of her tales, 'Every lamb that is born is born to have its throat cut'. Spring lambs. There speaks the shepherdess.

For Ted Hughes too, from January to December there is plenty of murder about, and don't let the idyllist tell you otherwise. Yet, he adds, watch, hug to yourself the glory of beast and plant before the knives come out. Although:

Hungry people are getting hungrier,  
Butchers developing expertise and markets,

do not miss a March calf on his birthday,

Staring from every hair in all directions,  
Ready for the worst, shut up in his hopeful religion  
A little syllogism ...  
Soon he'll plunge out, to scatter his seething joy,  
To be present at the grass.

Nor miss grass as an event. Walt Whitman believed that a leaf of grass was nothing less than the journey-work of the stars, and Andrew Marvell that country comets shone to no higher end than to presage the fall of grass. For Hughes too grass was a great happening. In 'Hay' the blade slips under it like a lover. The grass is happy:

When the spinner tumbles her, she silvers and she sweetens.  
Plain as a castle  
The hare looks for home  
And the dusty farmer  
For a hand-shaped cloud and a yellow evening.

Hughes's songs are cheerfully agrarian. An agricultural clock rotates his vision, keeping nature in check and seeing that it makes a profit. Animals and shoots grow up in order to be mown down, but all around there are insects, birds and weeds which are caught up in a different action. All is fair but nothing lasts. For so much and so many there is no second spring. His rural detail is often similar to John Clare's in his *The Shepherd's Calendar*, the reality of which was too much for the country life reader of Clare's day. Take Clare on sheep-shearing:

When from the timid sheep  
 The fleece is shorn and wi a fearfull leap  
 He starts—while wi a pressing hand  
 His sides are printed by the tarry brand  
 Shaking his naked skin wi wondering joys  
 And fresh ones are tugd in by sturdy boys

And Ted Hughes a century and a half later:

She trots away, noble-nosed, her pride unsmirched.  
 Her greasy winter-weight stays coiled on the foul floor, for  
 somebody else to bother about.  
 She has a beautiful wet green brand on her bobbing brand-new backside,  
 She baas, she has come off best.

To use Clare's fine description, 'young things of tender life' enter Hughes's west country acres much as they have always done. It is their exits which have a twentieth century difference. Abattoir, sprays, combine harvesters and the genteel brutalities of the Exmoor Hunt now attack plant and flesh. Once past it all begins again. Children reading his pages might well blanch at the thought of their own lives having to whizz along to the rhythm of this ancient roundabout. Do they:

Stand stupid with bliss  
 Among the first miraculous foal-flowers?

Are they really part of that entrancing minutiae which the poet finds in 'A Craneffy in September', when that supremely awkward insect is seen:

...blundering with long strides, long reachings, reelings  
 And ginger-glistening wings  
 From collision to collision.  
 Aimless in no particular direction,  
 Just exerting her last to escape out of the overwhelming  
 Of whatever it is, legs, grass,  
 The garden, the county, the country, the world—?

Well, quite possibly when they are adolescent.

In 'The Golden Boy', Hughes's Frazer poem, the poet is wicked like a boy. He enters the dancing ruthlessness of the child as he tells again the great corn myth:

With terrible steel  
 They slew him in the furrow  
 With terrible steel  
 They beat his bones from him  
 With terrible steel  
 They ground him to powder  
 They baked him in ovens  
 They sliced him on tables  
 They ate him they ate him  
 They ate him they ate him

Thanking the Lord  
 Thanking the Wheat  
 Thanking the Bread  
 For bringing them Life  
 Today and Tomorrow  
 Out of the dirt.

A juvenile pragmatism is made to work throughout *Season Songs*. Words such as cronks, wobbles, buzz, skid, bang, goggles, honked, lobs, bulges and—frequently—bounce abound. And such things as a child’s ennui in a car, either when it is jerking along in the car-serpent after a day by the sea, or after it is made to follow a stag-hunt in the pouring rain, or simply the hell of a country holiday when one is small. The book ends elegiacally and magically. Conkers are ravishingly elevated:

The chestnut splits its padded cell.  
 It opens an African eye.

A dreaming boy’s skies are ‘the vast soft armistice, like an Empire on the move’. Everything makes way for what is to come and says what is to go. Leaves first. (“O leaves” Crow sang, tremblingly, O leaves ...) Soon ‘Carols shake your television’. Everyone except children goes to sleep:

The flies are behind the plaster  
 Like the lost score of a jig.  
 Sparrows are in the ivy-clump  
 Like money in a pig.

## MISS MITFORD AND THE CRICKETERS

With Mary Russell Mitford it is hard to know what to praise most, her style or her spirit. Both rise to heights rarely found either in the women's journalism of her day or in a woman who by every law of the time should have been crushed by adversity. Yet the most obvious aspect of her life and her writing is a kind of thrusting joy, a lack of complaint, a particular type of female sturdiness which pushed on, and against the odds. The odds should have been her own plain, dumpling person and one of the worst fathers in English literature, financial, and thus social ruin, old maidism when she had such an eye for beautiful men, and many other handicaps. Instead she soared and left us, almost by default, one of the best of all village histories. Had she not come down in the world money-wise, had she not been obliged to leave the Big House for the cottage in the street, had not the deplorable Dr Mitford her father needed every penny she could earn for his gambling (whist), she would no doubt have continued to write plays or finish her novel. But having run through two fortunes he needed even the small sums paid by the *Ladies' Magazine*, and so the wonderful little essays about Three Mile Cross near Reading had to be written, eventually five volumes of them. Far from blaming Dr Mitford for being the most selfish parent alive, his daughter dedicated *Our Village* to:

Her only surviving relative and most cherished friend, her beloved and venerable Father, these volumes full of endearing recollections of the beautiful scenery where they have so often wandered, and of the village home where for so many years they have dwelt together in weal or in woe, are affectionately inscribed by the Author.

Nor is she being polite according to the traditions of her day. She adored George Mitford just as her mother had done and she wrote her fingers to the bone to supply him with funds for the card-table and hare-coursing. Youthful and very good-looking Dr Mitford had arrived from Hexham, Northumberland in Alresford, Hampshire about 1785 and by October that year he had courted and married an heiress ten years his senior. It has since been disputed that he had the right to call himself a doctor at all, although he was indisputedly a member of the distinguished north country family, although



not a close one. He was attractive, good natured, idle and the complete Georgian wastrel. Mary Russell his wife brought him a splendid town-house with grounds, plus a fortune of £28,000, an enormous sum then. Their only child, born 16 December 1787, inherited her mother's squat body, beetling brow and prominent eyes, and none of her father's beauty, yet her enchanting voice, her warmth and dazzling intelligence, courage and absence of vanity, at once dismissed all that was unprepossessing about her. Unfortunately, Alresford was far too close to Reading for a man with Dr Mitford's weakness. Due to raffish French *émigrés* and their followers, and the stationing in the borough of dashing regiments such as the 15th Light Dragoons (in which in 1793 the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge hid under the pseudonym of Trooper Silas Tomkyn Comberback), Reading was full of gaming-tables. And thither drifted George Mitford with his wife's capital where, and in London, he lost it all. The family fled penniless to Lyme Regis and from thence to Blackfriars where, on 16 December 1797, the most amazing luck befell it. Dr Mitford had taken his daughter Mary, aged ten, to the Irish Lottery office and told her to pick a number. She picked number 2224 and won £20,000. So the Mitfords returned to Reading, in funds and in triumph. Dr Mitford then bought a nice old farmhouse three miles out of town, demolished it, and erected on the site a handsome Georgian residence, laid out a park, acquired servants, horses and hounds, and launched himself into Hampshire and Berkshire society. And there his loving, though presumably uncritical wife, for they never seemed to quarrel, watched the lottery money dwindle and run out. After some years of financial muddle to which only a Charles Dickens could do justice, total ruin repeated itself.

Between these two disasters Mary received what for her would be the perfect education at M. de St Quentin's girls' school, 22 Hans Place, Chelsea. Dr Mitford had made friends with this aristocratic schoolmaster when he was teaching in Reading and it was at his establishment that Mary was taught English literature, taken to the London theatre and introduced to European culture. At seventeen she returned to live with her reckless father and complacent mother in their debt-ridden mansion. In April 1820, broke once again, they moved to a small, rented cottage only a mile down the road. There George and his wife lived until they died, and from there Mary gradually assembled, month by month, her rural masterpiece *Our Village*. Grand recluses such as the Ladies of Llangollen and other refuges from the hurly-burly of life had made 'retirement' fashionable. The genuineness and simplicity of Mary Mitford which was such a dominant factor in her work, plus her robust personality, soon turned the poor cottage on the side of the Basingstoke-Reading highway into a famous address. To be accurate the

cottage was as the ever-truthful Mary wrote, ‘a miniature house, with many additions, little odds and ends of places, pantries and what not; all angles, and of a charming in-and-outness; a little bricked court before one half, and a little flower-garden before the other; the walls, old and weather-stained, covered with hollyhocks, roses, honeysuckles, and a great apricot-tree; the casements full of geraniums, the closets full of contrivances and corner cupboards; and the little garden behind full of common flowers, tulips, pinks, larkspurs, pionies, stocks and carnations, with an arbour of privet, not unlike a sentry-box, where one lives in a delicious green light ...’ It was in fact a house not all that dissimilar to that lived in by Jane Austen until only three years previously, and Mary Mitford’s mother belonged to that same rural gentry which Jane described. Mary’s special genius was for accurately and affectionately describing an English village which, on the whole, Jane Austen avoids. There is no need for blame. Both women were artists, not social historians, and artists are selective. Though what they choose to write, and because of their unique vision and literary power, becomes a form of social history in its own right. Had Mary Mitford stayed on in Bertram House (Dr Mitford could scarcely have invented a more Austenesque name for his mansion), she could never have come close enough to the ordinary folk of Three Mile Cross to know and admire them so intimately. But then, had not her father lost every penny he had for the second time she would never have tried her hand at writing little articles for the magazines. She would have pressed on as a not unsuccessful dramatist, and as a hopeful novelist. At no time was ‘Miss Mitford’ the lady-amateur scribbling away; she was a serious professional writer whose career was both jeopardised and eventually assisted, though no thanks to him, by her father’s ceaseless cry for cash. It was not easy for her. She wrote her eyes out, often late at night when the crowded little home was quiet. A barrier of silence was put up, and great care was taken not to allow the Doctor’s weaknesses to become the talk of the town. People were puzzled to hear his daughter speak of him with such love and respect, that is until they realised she meant it. Now and then the facade cracked, as when she wrote to her friend Elizabeth Barrett, another father-burdened writer:

I may truly say that ever since I was a very young girl I have never, although for some years living apparently in affluence, been without pecuniary care—a care that pressed upon my thoughts the last thing at night, and woke in the morning with a dreary, heavy sense of pain and pressure of something which weighed me to the earth—which I would fain cast off, but could not.

Dr Mitford would even go to London sometimes to collect small sums like £19 from the magazines that published the pieces—which would eventually make up the classic *Our Village*—and lose them at cards. He took to seeing Mary as provider, and she herself harboured the notion that, like the winning of the Irish lottery, her plays would bring a windfall of royalties which would restore the family fortunes. These plays were originally inspired by her seeing William Macready in a popular history-drama entitled *Wallace*. Due to twenty years of war, history-drama and history-painting and poetry were all the rage, and money and reputation was to be made out of all three. John Constable's rural masterpieces stood no chance against Sir Thomas Lawrence's heroic portraits, and failed to sell. At Christmas Mary Mitford wrote in her diary, 'Began *Fiesco*. God grant we may make money of it.' She did not. Two years later, however, the irritable Macready was playing the lead in her play *Julian*, and the royalties from this and other work has been estimated to have been bringing her some £500 a year. These were solid professional earnings for a woman writer and they should have brought comfort to the small house at Three Mile Cross but the appalling Dr Mitford gambled them away. Mary's nickname for him was 'Drum'. Filial declarations in her letters are scarcely credible—'It is not fame or praise that I want, but the power of assisting my dearest and kindest father.'

It was while she was making her first attempts to conquer the London stage that she began to write the modest sketches which, all unknowingly, would make her immortal. The early nineteenth century saw the birth of women's magazines, pocket-books and annuals. On 37 March 1821 Mary wrote in her diary, 'Went violeting. Worked at my sketch.' Was this *Wild Flowers*, the first of the many and inimitable contents of *Our Village*? If it was, she could never have guessed it. At this moment she had no idea that she had begun one of the greatest country-books. All that she was conscious of was that a magazine was accepting her work and that its decidedly unheroic subject was conveniently near—just outside her front door. Not even when, due to her sketches, the circulation of the *Ladies' Magazine* soared from 250 to 2,000 copies a month did it occur to her that she was engaged on something unusual, an affectionate yet authoritative account of the common people such as no woman of her position had written before. She sent the sketches off one or two a month for the next ten years and gradually accounts of her neighbours, and those of other nearby villages, and occasionally folk from Reading, made her readers see rural England in a new light. She was neither radical nor particularly questioning but she was warm-hearted and because of this social difference gave way to ordinary human closeness in her view of things. No park, no crested gates held back the farming populace, it

toiled and played within her hearing. Her habit seems to have been to walk around for copy and to shape her impressions—in her execrable hand—by candle-light. Though each essay is short it reveals the most careful construction and art in the writing.

Another remarkable village chronicle was being created at the time, the 1820s, John Clare's marvellous *The Shepherd's Calendar*, in which village England speaks with its own voice. To read Clare in tandem with Mary Mitford is a startling experience, the one illuminating the other. The first of the five volumes of *Our Village* was published in 1824 and swiftly went into three editions, and soon the astonished author found herself, not only the favourite contributor to an undistinguished periodical but admired by Harriet Martineau, who regarded her 'as the founder of a new style'; Felicia Hemans, who placed *Our Village* among her 'green books'; and Elizabeth Barrett Browning who, although declaring that her old friend tended to see the world in stripes of black and white, recognised that her prose was like the interiors painted by the Dutch masters, accurate, pure, satisfying. There was then nothing like it.

*Our Village* is introduced to the reader as 'a little world of our own, close-packed and insulated like ants in an ant-hill, or bees in a hive, or sheep in a fold, or nuns in a convent, or sailors in a ship; where we know every one, are known to every one, interested in every one, and authorized to hope that every one feels an interest in us ... Even in books I like a confined locality.' Mary Russell Mitford then proceeds to do the honours of Three Mile Cross, walking the reader from cottage to cottage, garden to garden, occupant to occupant, to make sure that he knows his way around before she begins on the full story. She warns from the start that her preferences will be for plants, cricket and handsome country boys so that one is not to expect a genteel point of view. The effect of her observation is frequently like being able to glimpse village scenes photographically before the camera was invented. People are caught at work, at play, or just coming out of a gate or up a lane, and it is indescribably moving. *Our Village* is a kind of antidote to the tragic anonymity to be found in the 'annals of the poor' school of rural literature. It allows the sun to shine through the rural economy of a decade which contained particularly difficult hardships for country people. They are there in the background, the workhouse, the monotonous toil, and especially the physical handicaps for which there was no cure, and which bred a philosophy of life which is now quite gone. It drew the peasantry and the upper classes together in a common plight. Mary Russell Mitford needed to look closely at the village street for the sake of her art, and in looking she came closer to its inhabitants than any woman writer of her time. She was absolutely at ease

and her drastically altered circumstances never for one moment gave her the feeling of having come down in the world. It was this ease which allowed everyone around her to be true friends and intimates if they so wished. Although now and then she strikes a note of caution in what she can write about her neighbours—her readers sometimes wondered how she got away with some of the things she said—the keynote of *Our Village* is that of open affection, a keen ear and an honest gaze. The sights and sounds of Georgian England could not be clearer.

Mary Russell Mitford had a gift for forgiving. She could forgive anything, or almost. Her tolerance must have reached epic proportions in Three Mile Cross, for boys and young men, usually the most intolerantly observed section of any community, found to their astonishment that she liked them as they were, and not as most people wanted them to be, subdued, respectful, quiet. 'I pique myself on knowing by sight, and by name, almost every man and boy in our parish, from eight years old to eighty—I cannot say quite so much for the women.' And in another frank passage she admits to being guilty 'to a strong partiality towards that unpopular class of beings, country boys. I have a large acquaintance among them.' These lads rollick through her pages, Joe Kirby who works from five in the morning until seven at night, and then plays cricket, 'batting, bowling, and fielding, as if for life'; Jem aged thirteen, 'ugly and stunted' who rushes from school into the field, 'fresh, untired, and ripe for action'; George Coper the ploughboy 'singing "Home, sweet Home" at the top of his voice', and most of all the incomparable Jack Hatch who is like an early version of Alain-Fournier's mysterious hero Meaulnes:

I seemed beset by his name, and his presence, invisibly as it were ... He haunts one in dark places. The fiddler, whose merry tones come ringing across the orchard in a winter's night from Farmer White's barn, setting the whole village dancing, is Jack Hatch. The whistler, who trudges homeward at dusk ... is Jack Hatch ... the indefatigable learner of the bassoon ... is Jack Hatch. The name meets me all manner of ways. I have seen it in the newspaper for a prize of pinks; and on the back of a warrant on a charge of poaching ... Everywhere that name meets me ... Can Jack Hatch die? Yes! there is the coffin and the pall—all that I shall ever see of him is there!

Just as Mary Russell Mitford understood village men with a completeness which would have made most women authors of her day blush, so her 'A Country Cricket Match' reveals a totally unfeminine knowledge of the game.

This is cricket's first great essay and it deserves to stand alongside those of Neville Cardus and the famous chapter on the cricket-match in L. P. Hartley's *The Go-Between*. Its zest and expertise also reminds us of Hazlitt's sporting essays which Miss Mitford could have seen in the newspapers and journals. Should there still linger in the mind of today's reader the notion that she is a lady-like commentator on life in Three Mile Cross, this marvellous piece of writing will drive it away for good.

She is severe and comical in turn when it comes to her own sex. It irritates her that girls should waste time making samplers or be forced to play musical instruments when they clearly could not. She believed that 'poverty and finery were the twin pests of the age' and throughout *Our Village* there are pleas and demands for women from every background to exert their intelligence and to brush aside the convention of fripperies and tedious 'accomplishments', and to get out into the countryside to breathe the woodland air and walk through the meadows. To be like her. The female fault of compulsive chatter receives a devastating blow in 'The Talking Lady' which must rank as one of the most cruelly accurate accounts of a woman who never draws breath ever written. Jane Austen was more charitable with Miss Bates—'I am a talker, you know' in *Emma*. Mary Russell Mitford never trivialises any of her characters but presents each one as biography. She foregoes politeness where certain things must be said but is on the whole good-natured, even if wit occasionally gets the better of her. Her outspokenness is that of the eighteenth century and although she was to live until 1855, there would never be anything Victorian about her. The Queen herself was not 'Victorian' and the slow pace of the nineteenth century countryside carried along with it all kinds of rough Georgian values which contrasted greatly with 'progress'. There is little sense of progress in *Our Village*. The seasons and the hours of the day follow each other. The harvests come and go, as do the feastings. The church is no more than a pretty building. The field-work is back-breaking as it always was and always will be. Now and then a coach rattles through. People are young and play a lot, then old and do as best they can. Beauty is concentrated in flowers, children—and dogs. Miss Mitford immortalises her greyhound Mayflower and gives her friend a cocker spaniel. Elizabeth Barrett Browning adores Miss Mitford's present and calls him Flush. Later on, Virginia Woolf will write his biography. In this and other ways, *Our Village* can be seen as the foundation of all kinds of later books, especially, of course, the ever-popular genre of rural life, nature and customs.

It is not possible for a writer to work over so many years in such a small space without revealing almost as much about herself as those about her.

Except where her father's disreputable affairs are concerned, Mary Russell Mitford is lacking in caution and about the world knowing her own feelings. Her history of Three Mile Cross is also very much her own history—her autobiography. We see a deeply affectionate, clever and rather isolated woman who pays little attention to appearance, who is grossly over-worked by having to look after her invalid parents and at the same time run a professional career, and who seems to have gained the love and respect of her intellectual equals, plus—which was enchanting for her—every young villager in sight. Having an entire population to write about allowed her to vent her private emotions. Residing in the street and not in the park, created intimacies which held exciting ambiguities for a writer, and she was very conscious of them. All these years later we can still detect her liberated spirit and feel the fresh air which she breathed, and, what is as important, shared. Her countryside was a commonwealth.

Nothing is ignored or neglected, even if her distance from large parts of the common experience can only make her take stock of it from afar:

Jem and Mabel have been parted: they are now at opposite sides of the field—he looking very angry, working rapidly and violently, and doing more harm than good—she looking tolerably sulky, and just moving her hoe, but evidently doing nothing at all. Farmer Thorpe, on his part, is standing in the middle of the field, observing, but pretending not to observe, the little humours of the separated lovers.

This is what Thomas Hardy would see, and what few village watchers will ever see again, courtship among the crops.

II.





## A CRAVING FOR THE POST

The 700 or so letters belonging to the war and peace decade of 1912-22 constitute the spring-tide of Virginia Woolf's flooding correspondence. While it seeps into all levels, and can spread itself out in huge, flat puddles reflecting the Servant Problem, or trickle along with train times, or even suddenly run dry when madness dams the flow, for the most part it presents an hypnotically interesting ocean in which can be discerned many of the artistic and social currents of the 20th century pushing their way to the surface. Its big fish, too, also announce themselves. 'We've been having that strange young man Eliot to dinner' (November 1918). 'Never did I read such tosh [*Ulysses*] ... merely the scratching of pimples on the body of the bootboy of Claridges ... and this is what Eliot worships' (August 1922). 'Proust so titillates my own desire for expression that I can hardly set out the sentence. Oh if I could write like that! I cry. And at the moment such is the astonishing vibration and saturation and intensification that he procures—there's something sexual in it—that I feel I *can* write like that, and seize my pen and then I *can't* write like that. Scarcely anyone so stimulates the nerves of language in me: it becomes an obsession' (May 1922).

In *Jacob's Room*, published at the end of this period, Virginia Woolf wrote, 'Life would split asunder without letters,' and whatever one may think now about her prevaricating attitudes toward the collapse of the old order, it is impossible to come to the end of this huge pile of correspondence without concluding that it proliferates with those binding qualities which civilisation still demands.

She would write as many as six letters a day. The number was not all that extraordinary for the time, when etiquette prohibited the use of the telephone for most social and business arrangements, even where that still rare instrument existed. But it certainly was, given the strength and brilliance of her letters on the whole, a great achievement, by an often ill woman, who was continuously engaged upon a form of novel-writing which demanded the heights of feeling and imagination, a vast quantity of mainly unsigned literary journalism, running two houses, and running a press. Clearly, there was more than a need to just correspond in any ordinary sense, in this regulated activity. She evidently found it steady; and when she stated 'Life would split asunder without letters,' she might have been saying: 'I know I shall get

through this day if I get through my letters.'

They show that, although she was pathologically condemned to an ineradicable solitude and aloneness so dreadful that every now and then her mind buckled under the pressure, she was also vitally cliquish, and driven to putting in a lot of very hard work to keep her coterie intact. Both serious and riotous notions chase across the pages, as she trapped the group soul in a web of its own intrigues and affirmations. Now and then, however, instances arise in which fractions of the coterie displayed an awkward independence, or a wish for privacy which broke the rules. There are hints of this at 'the mill on the Pang', for example, where Lytton and Carrington occasionally seemed to be downright defensive about their bit of backwater.

This brings one to the business of Virginia Woolf as scandalmonger, something for which we, her readers, if not her friends, can be grateful. Nigel Nicolson has quite a lot to say about her celebrated bitchiness and her 'scatological jokes of a shocking nastiness', and yet when we close the volume at '29 December 1922', her bursts of cruelty and tastelessness seem to be little more than the familiar old period vulgarity, while her words for the most part declare a passion for literature, for her husband and for her sister, which is profoundly moving. The Bloomsbury Group itself provided her outer bulwarks, and she deliberately kept it up to the mark with wit and gossip. But what drove and preserved her was her art, Leonard and Vanessa. The Group was her periphery; beyond it lay the abyss.

The letters begin immediately after Virginia's marriage in August 1912. It was done 'in a Registry Office, in the intervals of a thunderstorm', she told Lady Ottoline Morrell from the honeymoon inn down in Somerset. A few days later, in Spain, she is pouring out its intimacies for Lytton's benefit, and kindly adding a few things which are more up his street. While he reads Pope and 'waits for when the bell rings and the sandy haired girl, whom you wish was a boy, says, "Dinner on the table",' she will be walking by the Mediterranean to a military band playing Hoffman's Barcarolle and watching 'the naked boys run like snipe along the beach, balancing their buttocks in the pellucid air'.

To Ka Cox, herself recovering from her affair with Rupert Brooke, she is less fanciful, 'Why do you think people make such a fuss about marriage and copulation? Why do some of our friends change upon losing chastity? Possibly my great age (30) makes it less of a catastrophe; but certainly I find the climax immensely exaggerated. Except for a sustained good humour, due to the fact that every twinge of anger is at once visited upon my husband, I might still be Miss S.' A confession of another sort clinches the new situation: 'My God! you can't think with what fury we fall on printed matter!' There lay

their true lust till death did them part.

Yet, from the very beginning, Leonard's contribution to her physical and intellectual survival was immeasurable, and she adored him. He was her 'Mongoose' and her 'Jew'. He was 'beautiful and indispensable' and she loved his 'little ribby body'. When they were apart, she would write daily. A few months after the honeymoon, his devotion was put to the test when she became insane, and swallowed 100 grains of veronal. A grim letter-less gap in the correspondence sixteen months later witnesses to an even worse attack. In one of the finest letters, written to Gerald Brenan on Christmas Day 1922, Virginia challenges his beginner's envy of the established writer, and says outright that there still were times when she would rather be dead than go on:

You said you were very wretched, didn't you? You described your liver rotting, and how you read all night, about the early fathers; and then walked and saw the dawn. But were wretched, and tore up all you wrote, and felt you could never, never write—and compared this state of yours with mine, which you imagine to be secure, rooted, benevolent, industrious—you did not say dull—but somehow unattainable, and I daresay, unreal. But you must reflect that I am 40: further, every 10 years, at 20, again at 30, such agony of different sorts possessed me that not content with rambling and reading I did most emphatically attempt to end it all; and should have been often thankful, if by stepping on one flagstone rather than another I could have been annihilated where I stood ... we live, all of us who feel and reflect, with recurring cataclysms of horror ...

At the end of this remarkable letter, she tells Brenan: 'I was wondering to myself why it is that though I try to limit myself to the thing I do well (writing), I am always drawn on and on, by human beings, I think, out of the little circle of safety, on and on, to the whirlpools; when I go under'.

Millions were going under as she wrote, and the Great War, as they called it, can never have been more slightly treated, more ignored, more reduced to 'noises off' in an extensive contemporary correspondence than it was in hers. The most that one gathers is that Bloomsbury, which was feminist, anti-imperialist, socialist, elitist and (most important) extremely busy with books and paintings, found it the limit. Just when the despised Victorians were receiving their *congé*, and the twentieth century was showing its progressive paces, along comes the old male guard with its patriotic cant and mystique, followed closely by the mob, and both sections rowdily orchestrated by the

yellow press, the Church, etc. to spoil everything. It was unspeakable—certainly not worth putting into letters to friends.

By 1916, Virginia Woolf says that any news of the war-men puts her in mind of an African tribe and that she cannot understand how 'this preposterous masculine fiction keeps going a day longer'. The only time she gets in any way caught up in the engagement is when conscription threatens Bloomsbury. 'The whole of our world does nothing but talk of conscription and they're all taken up with different societies (the No Conscription Fellowship) and wire-pulling.'

Friends and relations perished, but often do not get a mention; and the letters surrounding the time when Leonard's brothers, Cecil and Philip, are respectively killed and wounded by the same shell are tremendously animated and high-spirited. When it was all over, she is disparaging as her servant hangs a flag from every window, and Lady Ottoline puts a lighted candle in each one of hers. 'Peace seems to make much more difference than one could have thought possible,' wrote Virginia to Vanessa, 'though I think the rejoicing has been very sordid and depressing.'

Her resentment of the war—'I'm beginning to think that I'd better stop writing novels, since no one cares a damn whether one writes them or not. Do you ever feel that your entire life is useless—passed in a dream, into which now and then these brutal buffaloes come butting?'—was the familiar one for the dedicated artist. Yet, where her life's work was concerned, there had been no stagnation and no interruption, save her insanity.

In 1915, she published *The Voyage Out*, settled in Hogarth House, Richmond, and Rodmell, Sussex, and in 1917 was dividing her time between writing *Night and Day* and setting-up type. 'The work of ages, especially when you mix the h's with the n's, as I did yesterday. We get so absorbed we can't stop; I see that real printing will devour one's entire life. I am going to see Katherine Mansfield, to get a story from her ...' The pattern is set for the next quarter-century, and there would be no further madness until the attack which took her to the river in 1941.

At this point in the correspondence, the novelists and poets of the inter-war decades push forward. While Lytton is writing 'like a snake insinuating himself through innumerable golden rings' in order 'to bring us down such rare fruits from the poison tree', Mr Eliot from Lloyd's Bank insists on something quite different. So does Joyce. So does 'a man who is dead called Gerard Hopkins'. Publishing some of the new promise requires certainty, and Virginia and Leonard have it. 'We are becoming rather full blown and important,' she tells her old socialist friend, Violet Dickinson. The letters to her and to Janet Case reveal Leonard's exhausting involvement in left-wing

politics under the auspices of the Webbs, and Virginia's sincere, if unsuccessful, attempts to give more than lip-service to the Co-operative movement.

She is far more practical about getting Eliot out of the bank and into a country cottage to write poetry full-time, and there is a mass of detail about the Tom Eliot Fellowship Fund, which failed. Eliot, whose wife was mentally ill, and whose *Waste Land* was being read aloud to Bloomsbury but not yet in print, demurred at the £300 a year which the Fund set out to raise, and said that he must have £500 before he would leave the bank.

The glimpses of him in the letters are obscured by his own personality, not by Virginia's reticence. She likes him, but cannot quite reach him, although the silhouette holds the gaze. Myriad other portraits, some full oils (Ottoline), other pastels (Forster), offer no such resistance, with the result that they loom out at us as entertainingly as she can make them.

As with all letters, the virtue is in the immediacy. With her famished eye glutting itself on interiors and her ear for an inimitable word (of Ottoline: 'She always hangs to "wonderful" like a rope dangling in her vacuum') and the poise of news against reflection, Virginia Woolf is magnificent on writing-paper. The kernel—it is a fat one—is the portrait of Vanessa, the earth-sister, with all its mocking, loving homage.

In *Letters, 1936-1940* we see Virginia Woolf finding it increasingly difficult to write books. Revision of *The Years* had turned into a drudgery which brought her close to collapse, and she told Jane Bussy: 'In another life there'll be another Virginia who never writes, but always talks and talks and talks and talks.' In 1941, due—Nigel Nicolson thinks—to an overwhelming but mistaken conviction that she would never be *able* to write any more, she took the short walk from her house to the Ouse. This tension between the compulsion to work, the dread—and even the hatred—of the toil involved, and the fear of having nothing left inside is, of course, a common one to writers, probably the most common. However, during the five years separating her own extreme bouts of such a tension, write she did, with a vengeance and excellently. Played too. Readers expecting to trace a line of sad clues from page one to the river bank are going to be surprised to discover themselves being taken off, for the most part, in a completely opposite direction. To robust encounters of the publishing kind, to newsy and courageous reports from the home front, to much delight and pleasure, and to a vehemence of living which conceals, almost to the final week, that the depression which blackened it would not lift like all those which preceded it, and let her resume what has always sounded like a very wearing domestic and social regime for a writer. Her voice doesn't gradually fail, it cuts out abruptly

like the hit plane above the downs which one minute is flashing along its route, and the next is spinning out of control to death and silence.

Was it the war? Most people thought so at the time. Leonard, recalling how ill finishing *The Years* had made her, blamed it all on the strain of completing *Between the Acts*. But Nicolson suggests this deeper motive for her despair—her being convinced that she had lost the art of writing. Was it an insane act? ‘No, it was a combination of fantasy and fear. She would have recovered, as she had before. She was not mad when she died.’ Since suicide is tentacular, reaching backwards and forwards for decades from the day on which it happens, and feeding friends with the most unhealing form of sorrow, it created fertile ground for speculation and signs. But such detection is pointless in this case. One must not read into such statements as ‘I can’t moon off to the river and let head drift on the stream’ (letter to Ethel Smyth in 1938) anything more than that, although Virginia has been writing *Roger Fry* all day and would be the better for a stroll along the footpath, she can’t because it’s raining.

On the contrary, throughout this correspondence there are signs everywhere which reveal her desire for more time. She was fifty-four in 1936, a successful and distinguished woman of letters with a perfect husband and a remarkable group of close companions, and her letters glow with undisguised satisfaction in all these assets. Although they slip into occasional profundity, their main note is a sustained cheerfulness. Without ever being shallow, they are surface communications to people who understand the depths of their particular mutual situation and don’t need them spelt out. She wrote, too, to receive letters, often pleading for them and sometimes seeming to find in them a more supportive quality than if the friend himself had arrived in person. Or the friend herself, as it mostly was.

The chief topics covered here are the political situation from the Abdication to the Battle of Britain, literature to the birth of *Horizon* and the first of *Four Quartets*, the deaths of Julian Bell in Spain, Lady Ottoline Morrell and Ka Arnold-Forster, a more cautiously continuing fascination with Vita Sackville-West, a positively all-caution-to-the-winds development of the friendship with Dame Ethel Smyth, who was one of those bulwarks of Sapphic constancy and sound sense which only England knows, and the beautiful florid epistles which she needed to rain down on her sister Vanessa.

To take the times first. The Abdication crisis gets short shrift, and she is cynical about ‘the lovers’, as she calls them, having been told that Edward is ‘a cheap second-rate little bounder’. She declines Vita’s invitation to meet Mrs Simpson. Leonard fills their house in Tavistock Square, and later Monk’s House, with political meetings which distract her, sympathetic though she is

to their pacifist and socialist causes. She tells Victoria Ocampo, the Argentinian founder-editor of *Sur*, that they are living under the shadow of disaster—‘I’ve never known such a time of foreboding’—and Julian Bell, who is in China, that she has never dreamt so often about war—‘It’s rather like sitting in a sick room, quite helpless.’ But when Ethel Smyth protests about Virginia’s husband dragging her into his activities and making it hard for her to write, she swiftly replies, ‘Oh dear me! I entirely misled you—about L. and politics. He never made me go to a meeting in my life.’

In April 1937 she writes to Stephen Spender and asks him to have a talk with Julian Bell who wants to drive a lorry in Spain, and tells Spender that a disillusioned letter from his friend Jimmy Younger has arrived ‘in the nick of time to set him against the CP—we of course kept your name and confidence intact: it was most interesting.’ Julian was driving an ambulance when he was killed a few weeks later. The letters say little more than that it was ‘terrible’, the main pendant to this great tragedy being the generous literary advice she gives to Ling Su-Hua, a Chinese friend of Julian’s. Contrary to what one might have expected, her spiritedness and gaiety even increase as the war approaches.

When her Tavistock Square house is destroyed in the blitz, she and Leonard base themselves permanently at Rodmell and show no panic at all at the constant raids and the threat of invasion. But at the beginning of 1941 her mood changes. The village bores her and she often craves for London. She feels that something is happening to her imagination—nothing makes it ‘flash’. ‘I read and read like a donkey going round a well; pray to God, some ideas will flash’ and she asks Ethel, ‘Do you feel, as I do ... that this is the worst stage of the war? I do. I was saying to Leonard, we have no future. He says that’s what gives him hope.’ In March she tells Elizabeth Robins, the American novelist and actress who is now almost eighty:

It’s amazingly peaceful here, you can almost hear the grass grow; and the rooks are building; you wouldn’t think that at 7.30 the planes will be over. Two nights ago they dropped incendiaries, in a row, like street lamps, all along the downs. Two hay stacks caught fire and made a lovely illumination—but no flesh was hurt. Indeed, every bomb they drop only casts up a crater so far. It’s difficult, I find, to write. No audience. No private stimulus, only this outer roar.

She had accomplished much before this hollowness overwhelmed her—enough, one would have thought, for her comfort in a barren spring. *The Years*, begun in 1932, had at last been published and had become a bestseller



in the United States (25,000 copies), and had fairly quickly been followed by *Three Guineas* and *Roger Fry*. Although she had sold her half-share in the Hogarth Press to John Lehmann in 1938 in order to rid herself of much tedious work, she still continued to read and advise for it. She wrote her diary and her customary amount of exhausting literary journalism. While researching *Roger Fry* in 1938 she had a sudden 'longing to be off on fiction' and by that autumn had rushed 'headlong into a novel' called *Pointz Hall*. This was the future *Between the Acts*, which Leonard believed literally worried her to her death.

Both her *Letters* and her *Diary* show a quite burdensome amount of literary toiling and moiling around Virginia Woolf's central and finely-sprung creativity, much of it no more than a part of a way of life which belonged more to her father's day than her own. Young authors pursued her, old curmudgeons laid into her. Nobody suggested to her a considered change of the entire pattern, and she herself admired the driven-hard personality.

Finally and ultimately there are the celebrated friendships, each one fuelled regularly at her desk with what she knew would make it glow. For Vanessa, who shrank from her demonstrativeness unless it arrived in the post, there are the best letters which Virginia can devise, letters of genius, and written as though she knew that they were her only access to the core of her sister's being. For Dame Ethel there was a bluff wit and sometimes a moving kind of dependency, like a yacht signalling a Dreadnought. When Ethel's memoirs are published, their excellence staggers Virginia. Her letters to the composer are intriguing as she attempts a matching bluntness, prods Ethel into declarations—'Do love me'—drops all her guards in plain admiration of her so unexpectedly splendid writing, or tentative break-out from feminist movement language into that of homosexual women.

Having Dame Ethel for a bosom friend presented difficulties about which Virginia was obviously aware, for she was a great figure of fun in the world. It is touching to see Virginia getting beyond this comedy, especially as it was of the kind which appealed to her cruelty, and during the last years of her life drawing from the relationship a quality which Ethel would have called fortitude.

On 1 March 1941 she told Ethel that she was trying to write a new *Common Reader* but was glued on a fly-paper and couldn't move backwards or forwards. On 4 March she told Vita that her orchard is 'one of the sights I shall see on my death bed'. On 8 March Eliot sent her his *The Dry Salvages*. On 10 March she was spring-cleaning Monk's House. On 14 March she consulted John Lehmann in London about the typescript of *Between the Acts*. On 18 March she may have tried to kill herself. On 27(?) March she told the

recently widowed Lady Tweedsmuir that 'you have a great deal more than most of us to look forward to.' Vanessa, worried by her breakdown, was now telling Virginia, 'You *must* be sensible' and Leonard was taking her to Brighton to consult a doctor. On 27(?) March she told John Lehmann that *Between the Acts* had to be revised and must not be published as it was. On 28 March she wrote to Leonard, 'I shall never get over this,' filled her pockets with stones and threw herself into the river. Children discovered her body nearly three weeks later.

## LETTERS FROM JOSEPH CONRAD, 1898-1902

There is an acute species of melancholy attached to the early days of authorship which is often all too lightly dismissed by biographers as teething pains. The worried Conrad of *Youth*, *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim*, etc. could not have imagined the Conrad of *Chance* and its revered and lucrative successors. The letters of the new man of letters are those of risk and loss, the familiar concomitants of the first freelance years. His very blessings, a wife who could type as well as create the high standard of domestic order he needed, their first son and, from the very beginning, the inestimable friendship of Edward Garnett, prince of publishers' readers, were themselves a reproach, for they had to be justified. Worst of all there was the new and still strange vacuum of the study which he had to enter each morning—or each midnight often enough in his case. This and the incredible absence of the sea. Instead there were the horrible Essex marshes, dank and crime-ridden. Eight months into the letters, Ford Madox Hueffer was to rescue him from the latter by installing him at Pent Farm near Sandgate, and within a stone's throw, comparatively speaking, of the current Olympians, including Henry James, Galsworthy and H. G. Wells. Such proximity was apt to be more crushing than anything else. There was too Conrad's natural grandeur as a Polish gentleman and incipient genius, the effect of which on others often disconcerted him. From the first he knew he was isolated and that every now and then he would need to make simple and direct statements about himself—'I have never fostered any illusions as to my value. You may believe me implicitly when I say that I never work in a self satisfied elation ...' He is remonstrating to Blackwood the publisher who, like his agent Pinker, goes a bit too far with his advice. At this moment both these men are hopefully thinking of Conrad as a superior yarn-spinner for boys.

He had joined the French merchant navy at sixteen, wild about the sea—some said because of reading Victor Hugo's *Toilers of the Sea* in his father's translation—but it wasn't until he was in his early thirties that he began to write what would become after some years and much shaping (and getting lost on voyages) *Almayer's Folly*, having taught himself English by reading east coast newspapers and talking to his East Anglian shipmates 'each built as though to last for ever, and coloured like a Christmas card.' He was thirty-seven when he gave up the sea as a career and retained it as a force for an entirely new kind

of 'action' fiction, psychologically profound and stylistically sumptuous. It was hard to write, and hardest of all when these letters were sent.

They are chiefly to his first literary friends R. B. Cunninghame Graham, the socialist grandee who was thought by some to be the rightful King of Scotland, the wise Edward Garnett, H. G. Wells (the friendship did not last), the much-tried literary agent, J. B. Pinker (Conrad's blast to him on the ubiquitous business of not delivering on time deserves a place alongside Dr Johnson's thunderclap against patrons), William Blackwood, Ford Madox Ford and Stephen Crane. There are also many letters to the generous Galsworthy, a rich and practical friend, and an exchange of mutual appreciation with Arnold Bennett. All these writers in particular are clearly aware that a novelist who is quite unlike any other novelist is emerging, and, in their different ways, are giving support to the tortured tenant of Pent Farm. Conrad's response is open and passionate. His loneliness shows. There is dawning respect and success, but a later reader would find that 'the letters abound in unhappiness'. But it is not the life-lasting gloom of some writers but the sadness of a stage of development which writers, and artists of all sorts, will recognise.

Family life itself is still odd to him. He has known nothing since he was a boy except ship's crews and their mixture of reticence and emotion, but on vast voyages he has witnessed everything, most particularly imperialism in motion. His is not an innocent's eye. In the farmhouse there is neither closeness nor space. Jessie Conrad is accorded dutiful courtesies, though once she is described as 'my wife, a person of simple feelings guided by the intelligence of the heart'. She was a bookseller's daughter, a large, capable woman on whom he depended for his spick and span home, secretarial requirements and punctual routine.

During these crucial four years, Conrad did all he could to understand what was happening to him. The hugeness of what he had seen, and maybe of what he had done, in comparison with his novelist contemporaries, plus the amazing use of a foreign language, made the usual literary placing impossible. Where was he? Who and what was he? The big first batch of letters do not wholly answer these questions but they are satisfyingly informative all the same. We do come much nearer to Conrad because of them. He made little up. Cunninghame Graham, writing to Edward Garnett about *Heart of Darkness*, said that it was written 'in the fervent contemplation of his tracks', and this masterpiece and all the rest of the work relied upon old sea-lanes re-travelled, old companions rejoined. But this kind of passage, often by pencil, was harder toil than sailing and he was constantly 'so weary, deadly weary of writing'. There was never a moment's let-up. Fresh tales

pushed their way forward before he could find structures for them. 'My head is full of a story, I have not been able to write a single word—except the title which shall be I think NOSTROMO; the story belonging to the "Karain" class of tales ("K" class for short—as you classify the cruisers.)' Like many stylists he was sometimes unnerved by the possibility of losing 'myself in a wilderness of endeavour' and of 'verbiage', and to this day we read him and are foxed by his artistry and his daring. He is lastingly mysterious. Seeing so many words, we think he has told all, but he never does. Explaining the deliberately bald ending of *Lord Jim* to Blackwood, he says, 'The reader ought to know enough at that time.' Will we know enough from these turn of the century letters to know how the patrician merchant seaman from Poland stepped straight into the centre of English literature? No—but they help.

## BAUDELAIRE TO HIS MOTHER

In *L'Albatros*, Baudelaire wrote that a poet in his true element could ride out storms and scorn those who tried to bring him down, but if grounded, could not escape insult because his giant's wings would prevent him from walking. When he died from syphilis at forty-six he had no reason to believe that the world would one day look up in admiration to his special place in the literary firmament and not, as did so many of his contemporaries, down towards the unspeakable. He was baffled by the violent reaction to his poetry.

'I thought I was creating a fine work, a great work, above all a work that was clear,' he said to the Empress Eugenie after *Les Fleurs du Mal* had brought about his prosecution for offences against public morals. Almost immediately after being fined three hundred francs for this, he was summoned to court again for reviewing *Madame Bovary*, and was from then onwards labelled as scandalous. Little worse can happen to a great writer than to be criminalised by the prurient. In life Baudelaire was never allowed to soar, and, as he bitterly admitted in *L'Albatros*, stuck in the gutter where penury and prejudice had taken him, he was too big to dodge what the little men aimed at him.

Like Verlaine, Wilde and Rimbaud, Baudelaire's was the kind of literary life that attracts the biographers, except that in his case they at once encounter a packet of letters which make any further penetration of his triumphant tragedy either irrelevant or daunting. These wonderful letters were never intended to be an artistic revelation such as Hazlitt's in the *Liber Amoris*, or Prosper Mérimée's, but were Baudelaire's extraordinary 'ordinary correspondence'.

They admit us to his innermost presence, and neither literary critic nor psychologist could take us much further, even now, with his reputation high and secure, and after more than a century of getting to know him. It took ages, for example, for it to be accepted that the creative artist, and not the academic, could be the ultimate critic, which was what Baudelaire taught, and his letters to Gautier, Flaubert and Hugo, as well as to the literary journalists, prove his point.

But it is through the letters to Caroline Aupick, the poet's mother, that we draw closest and are shaken by what we see. No Lawrentian bond of tenderness and preference, but a bond which is like a double manacle chafing

them both and from which there is never any attempt to escape. Madame Baudelaire was twenty-six when Charles was born, and he was still a small boy when she was widowed. The following year she married Lt. Colonel Aupick, and there, some might say, the trouble started. For the child, from his dreadful boarding schools, set up passionate claims for her love.

These early letters are pitiful, begging them both to visit him—‘I want to persuade you that there’s no reason to give up hope for me ... don’t lose faith in me ...’ Write to me, he implores his mother. ‘M. Zinse told me he had seen you out riding, that you were enjoying yourself and were very happy. Oh, how lucky you are to be able to enjoy yourself! As for me, it is the exact opposite, I’m so bored I cry for no reason.’ (She advises him to read, but he is fed up with books.) ‘You at least are a perpetual book, one can chat with you, one can busy oneself loving you ...’

The Colonel offers to pay somebody to teach him to ride and fence, but Charles asks him to pay a coach to teach him Greek. When he is twenty-one, parent and step-parent do not see genius, only instability, and make swift arrangements to protect his inheritance of a hundred thousand francs. A *conseil de famille* named Ancelle is to administer it, and so the disastrous future is assured, the lack of independence, the borrowing and despair, the hideous poverty which prevents him from writing, the squalid digs, the cold. The Colonel, now a General, has no patience with him, and thinks he should get a proper job. It is all so commonplace, the youthful rebellion and the reaction to it. The General sends him off to India, but he jumps ship at Mauritius and returns to France.

There is confusion, but he begins to write. He has discovered his hero Edgar Allan Poe, and it is like discovering himself already in print. He tries to kill himself—‘My mother ... has ... unwittingly poisoned my life.’ Yet the letters to her grow longer and longer, and soon it is apparent that in her helpless way she actually nourishes him, she and no one else. There is another woman, Jeanne, his black mistress, immortalised in his banned poetry, dissolute, part-essential and part-burden.

He carries another weight, his ‘old wound’, as he calls it, his early-caught, recurring syphilis. He has a dream of living in pretty Honfleur and writing novels. His letters to his mother run straight from adoration to accusation—‘You know what an horrendous education your husband inflicted on me.’

But the disorder and suffering are an adjunct to the brilliant work, a dreadful shack propped against the beautiful house of art. His worst hurt is that his mother cannot share this house, cannot recognise either it or his legitimate tenancy. Her husband dies, she grows old and becomes enclosed in the letters. Baudelaire’s life, despite its brevity and all its difficulties, can, on

the contrary, be seen moving outwards via the just honour in which he is held by friends such as Manet, Sainte-Beuve, and de Vigny, and the early discoverers of his poetry.



FROM MY SICKBED—LETTERS OF KATHERINE MANSFIELD,  
1918-1919

Between January 1918 and September 1919 Katherine Mansfield's brief life entered upon all its major events and opened towards both destruction and a modest, though certain, place among the best short-story writers of the twentieth century.

It was during these months that her tuberculosis was confirmed and she set out on the classic route of the incurable. It was then that her embarrassing husband for a night, George Bowden, at last divorced her and she was able to marry her lover, John Middleton Murry; it was then that the war which had claimed her brother ended; and then that her mother died. It was at this time, in a world so utterly transformed and sharpened, that she began to write those New Zealand via Chekhov tales contained in *Bliss*, *The Garden Party* and *The Dove's Nest*, which were to make her name.

As so frequently happened with consumptives, the illness weakened her and yet gave her increased creative energies: 'Darling Life is still here—waiting to be lived—not merely frowned at from a sofa. So I shall shut myself away. After all, six months' hard should be an amazing opportunity for work.' She had in fact a little over four years in which she half succumbed to the conventional treatment of the day and half resisted it, dying at last while undergoing Gurdjieff's alternative medicine.

Her fate, as with all the mortally sick, was to find herself—immediately her tuberculosis was diagnosed—on some kind of ledge outside ordinary, normal existence. While she resented this position, she recognised that it did give her a privileged view of the loveliness of the earth, and these letters contain long and grateful descriptions of what the healthy fail to see. Although she struggled hard 'not to cut the malade off from life, neither in a sanatorium nor in a land of milk rivers, butter mountains and cream valleys', as she told Murry, the disease itself forced her to accept its own indifference to what was happening beyond its sphere.

Friends were sensible and kind, and one or two of them were devoted. Murry himself, who was only twenty-eight, took the line of supporting whatever it was that would make her content, if only for the time being. He was up to his ears in work at the War Office and editing the *Athenaeum*. There is much anxious talk about money, but between them they had over

£1,000 a year, a considerable income then. Each of them dreamt of Arcadia, a cottage in the country and simple everything. As it was, they got no nearer to this retreat than Hampstead.

Almost the worst thing about her disease is the way it keeps her from him, either in cold hotels in the South of France or Cornwall, or in a separate bedroom. Instead of the closeness of his body she has to endure the 'virgin' closeness of Ida Baker, which she loathes. She is charming in her letters to Ida, who doubles as nurse and companion, but cruel about her in letters to others.

The celebrated treacherous aspect of Katherine Mansfield comes across in many other ways and, making allowances for her tragedy does not exactly excuse it. More justifiable and understandable are her periodic spurts of anger and disgust for the boring, rather horrible hotel-lounge world her TB has levered her into, a world of guzzling old folk and hideous furniture. She writes longingly of colour schemes and pretty rooms. She is a symbolist, investing, like Chardin, good everyday objects with a spiritual power.

The illness letters open in midwinter Paris. She is on her way to Bandol and has to admit to Murry: 'It has been a bit of a bang though, hasn't it?' She means having to face up to their separation because of her symptoms. Bandol is icy. They write to each other daily. She will get better and come home in the spring to marry him just as soon as she gets her decree absolute. 'Until I get back to you and we are safe in each other's arms there is only one thing to do and that is to *work, work, work.*'

When she does manage to return to London it is only after getting caught up in the bombardment of Paris by Big Bertha and, nearly as bad, in visa red tape which delays her for weeks. Murry and she are together for less than a month, which includes their wedding, when it becomes obvious that she must travel south once more—and urgently—this time to Looe.

The remote, pre-tripper climate of Cornwall is wonderfully evoked. She is funny—something Murry never is—and irritable, full of plans and protestations. It is at this point that she appears to recognise without hubris or hopefulness that she is a true writer, even an important one. Now and then her letters become mannered and even a bit play-acting, but her situation is a dramatic one, it has to be acknowledged, and not one of her own choice.

The flow of flowers from Garsington are those to a difficult but now dying friend. Katherine's response to Lady Ottoline Morrell appears to take stock of this factor and is so passionate that one senses it would not have been acceptable in different circumstances. The letters to Virginia Woolf, on the other hand, whose brilliance privately awes Katherine, go out of their way to avoid the perils of openly displayed feeling. Virginia never really liked or trusted her.

A serious rift with the Lady Ottoline camp had to be healed when Murry dared to give Siegfried Sassoon's war poems a bad review. Not the least fascinating content of these letters is the insight they provide on a group of young writers at the outset of their careers who are as yet without 'reverence'. There is more spite than exists now—maybe.

The mass of letters that are to follow will all have been written 'within' Katherine Mansfield's illness and during those four last years when she was at her creative height. They are the letters of a young woman under notice of death. With a 'flat-iron' where a lung should be, and smoking heavily, she accepted what after all was in her day a dreadfully ordinary fate. All she asked in return for enduring it was to complete what she had begun: 'How unbearable it would be to die—leave "scraps", "bits" ... nothing really finished.' Her wish was granted.

## LOVE LETTERS FROM EZRA AND DOROTHY, 1901-1914

The courtship letters of Ezra Pound and Dorothy Shakespear have all the playful erudition and passion directed into language of a tale by Meredith or Henry James. They are also cloudless and, strangely, since Modernism advances through them in clear and recognisable bounds, seamless. Neither extremely well-read lover is concerned much with breaking an old culture in order to replace it with something fresh. And there are all kinds of instances where Pound is quite unaware of who and what he is, and where he and his friends are going. Drunk with the study of Romance languages, all he wishes to proclaim to the world is that he is a poet. Impossible to take from this stylish exuberance the seeds of the tragedy to come; there is no evidence that such things could ever happen to him. When Pound celebrated his pre-1914 universe in the *Pisan Cantos*, he was like Adam staring back over flaming swords to where he began from East of Eden.

Pound was drawn to England, partly in quest of his hero Yeats and partly because he was finding America untenable. Travel presented no overwhelming problem; he had already lived in Idaho, Pennsylvania and New York, and had been to Europe three times. The last visit had unsettled him and at twenty-two he had been sacked from a lectureship at an Indiana college for his 'Latin Quarter' conduct. He was, he said, in a poem, 'homesick after my own kind'. These were then, as they are still to many twenty-five-year-old writers, in 'deah old Lundon'. With his intriguing bearing, his thin beautiful face, his gold-wire hair and beard and single topaz earring, he was not at all the usual type of young man tentatively eyeing the Edwardian literary ladder. Behind him stretched friendships with William Carlos Williams and Hilda Doolittle, the publication of his first book, *A Lume Spento* (1908) and years of immersion in his beloved Romance languages, whose delights he began to expound at the Regent Street Polytechnic within weeks of his arrival.

The exact date of his first meeting with Dorothy Shakespear, his future wife, is unknown; but it was probably in January 1909. A year Pound's junior, she was still in the position from which he had escaped of having to balance the standards of a liberal culture with those of bohemia. Her parents, especially her mother Olivia, who was one of Yeats's dearest friends, maintained a position of social correctness alongside their devotion to

literature and art which irked Ezra and amused Dorothy. The latter's manner of dealing with the conventions of the Shakespear household is entrancing and obviously stoked Ezra's feelings for her. Throughout the courtship Dorothy wittily observes a kind of tongue-in-cheek obedience towards both her lover and her mother, to their common bewilderment at times. One senses that lessons have been taken from the best fiction. But Ezra himself never wished to be taken for other than a gentleman, nor could he be, the earring notwithstanding.

The joy of these letters is that the lovers are still far distant from Henry James's 'country of the general lost freshness'. Ezra's letters may have been more erotic, but Dorothy's lifelong habit of chopping from her post only the bits she needed to keep leaves this aspect of them inconclusive. Her device for dealing with such matters is to confine them to her notebook, telling pages of which interleave the 220 letters which passed between them from the winter of 1909 to the spring of 1914, when 'Mr and Mrs Hope Shakespear' were 'At Home' 'on the occasion of the marriage of their daughter, Dorothy, to Ezra Pound'. Three years later Dorothy's bosom friend Georgie Hyde-Lees was to marry Mr William Butler Yeats. In the comic Meredithian sense this book could be the story of genius and its handmaids. As well as revealing the emergence of Pound, clever, intricate, colour-filled and tricky, like one of those Japanese flowers which burst open when dropped upon the surface of water, it also reveals a delightful kind of 'learned' idling girl which the First World War swept away, with so much else. Now and then Pound puts her to work devilling for him in libraries, although pleased that she has all the time in the world to become something like his equal when erudition demands it. When she rises to his often still boyishly extravagant display of linguistics and Europe-searching allusions, it is never with a hint of pretentiousness. As he writes and studies, she paints Suffolk fonts and bathing-huts in water-colours, washes her hair in Harlene, dances the tango, consults a clairvoyant, reads Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism*, and occasionally demands of him some plainer speaking—'I believe you have a most unconquerable aversion to simple statement.' Ezra is aghast at some of her activities—embroidery, for instance, which to him is as trifling as smoking. She adores him serious but not sententious—'Meanwhile, your mouth, dear—smile!

Once settled in London, Pound made rapid progress. On the allowance of £200 a year sent by his father, and with his looks, confidence and genius, he made these early years spin. In May 1910 he met Yeats, the 'Eagle', and so began the famous friendship in which the business of who was master and who was disciple was soon obscured. During the winters they lived together in Stone ('Cold') Cottage in Coleman's Hatch, struggling and cutting their

very different ways out of limp but entangling 19th-century prosody. Just before the introduction to Yeats, Pound and Dorothy had been in Italy together, she accompanied by her mother, on whom it had begun to dawn that her daughter and this odd American were much more deeply involved than they should be, considering their circumstances—his particularly. After two years of parent-ignoring courtship, Olivia explodes and writes to Ezra:

You *ought* to go away—Englishmen don't understand yr American ways, & any man who wanted to marry her would be put off by the fact of yr friendship (or whatever you call it) with her ... Dear Ezra—I'm sorry for you—really—but you are a great trouble, & my anxiety about her is always there. Tomorrow is her birthday, & all I can feel is that I wish she had never been born. She chose her parents very unwisely.

Such 'cartels and protocols from your mother', as he calls them, do little to dent his insouciance. In any case he is by now utterly absorbed in and an important part of the new movement. Even when, later, Dorothy tells him, 'I cannot marry you' and he replies

you can not.

you can not.

you can not.

Subsequent letters reveal that these are no more than holding statements from which her parents would be wise not to draw any comfort. The close friends now are Hilda Doolittle and Richard Aldington, brought together, and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska in his railway-arch studio in Putney, upon the double doors of which is painted a phallic monogram six-foot high. Dorothy is frequently at the studio, and a fascinating aspect of the letters is her gradual free and intelligent emergence from her Victorian literary-salon-like home and her entry, fairly ruthlessly engineered by Ezra, into the hub of their generation's literary and artistic discovery. Ezra's tutelage is often the most beguiling part of his lovemaking.

When at last not even her mother can stop a marriage so clearly made in some Dantean paradise, Dorothy, exasperating to the last, correctly plays the role of the helpless bride-to-be as her father investigates Ezra. Considering that he has been in all their lives for four years, it is remarkable how little they know about him. Before the couple stretch sixty years of letters, a great many of which will be written in times of great darkness. But here it is bright day from start to finish.

## ARNOLD BENNETT TO HIS FAMILY

Arnold Bennett's letters allow him the title of master of home truths. His celebrity had arrived early, bringing him a fortune, and it had been sustained right up to the moment of his somewhat mysterious death from typhoid in 1931. Then, almost at once, came the remorseless decline of reputation to make him, now, among the least regarded of all the famous novelists of his generation. The critic Angus Ross summed up this decline: 'His qualities of craftsmanship strengthen rather than offset the failure of his art, the failure of imagination.'

Yet the letters confirm what one has always suspected, that Arnold Bennett wanted to be an artist more than anything else in the world, and certainly more than either a popular novelist or a celebrity (although he did adore being the latter and knew how to make the most of it).

What is indisputable, and contrary to Bloomsbury's bitchy comments on him, is his kindness and decency. 'I don't care what anybody says,' he was heard to remark whilst staring at his portrait, 'I am a nice man.' And it was true.

But where women were concerned he was not a wise man, landing himself with a couple of hussies who should have been mistresses, maybe, not wife and common-law wife respectively. Their antics drew from Bennett a vast flow of domestic remonstrance which can have few equals in literary annals.

Stammering too badly to take part in verbal battles, he rowed on the page. How Marguerite, his wife, and Dorothy, his mistress, must have quailed when the postman arrived. 'You have got yourself into the clutches of an uncompromising realist with a startling faculty for detachment.' This went for both of them.

Neither could understand or accept that he was wedded to work. He was in fact a workaholic, intoxicated with output. When it was all over, weary and triumphant, he needed luxury, good food (no drink) and a bit of peace. After all, as he repeatedly told Marguerite in particular, he had paid for these things.

He also needed a little fantasy, his *Cherissime* in chic lingerie and kisses all over. Many of his letters to her are in French. Not that she is to get immortal notions, she is no Odette and he is no Swann: 'Let me suggest that you read "Swann in Love" to the end. It will give you something to think about. For it is one of the most ruthless and just attacks on woman that I have ever read.'

Bennett is, of course, a Francophile. Only such a man would have set up house on the Essex coast among the yacht-clubs with a girl from a Paris dress-shop and expected the delights of both worlds. She was bored and took it out on the servants. The letters are laden with the old servant-problem chatter.

Eventually, having been given great licence where other men were concerned, Marguerite went off with Pierre Legros, a lecturer at London University—and with £2,000 a year from her much-tried husband, a tidy sum then. Many women will read Bennett's non-grumbling letters to her and wonder how and why she could have behaved as she did.

Friends like Frank Swinnerton, seeing how ill he sometimes looked, couldn't bear the way in which both Marguerite and Dorothy treated him. As the grumbling letters all too devastatingly prove, he must have frequently got his own back. Each lady was a malcontent, a whiner (something he abhorred in a woman) and each suffered, as minor artistic talents, by being outshone by what Marguerite testily referred to as her husband's 'gloire'.

Two children intervened, as it were, in the wordy, sexy warfare. The first was Richard, who was the eldest son of Arnold's brother Frank. Richard was adopted by Arnold and Marguerite to, at first, his cool disgust.

They sent him to Oundle and Cambridge. Arnold's letters to him there are so crammed with a kind of exasperated instruction that they make one laugh. They certainly didn't make Richard cry.

He emerges as a wonderfully hard-hearted lad whose truculence captured his uncle's respect, then his affection. With Auntie Marguerite it was a very different tale. When he told her to her face that he disliked her, the heavens fell, though mostly on Arnold.

The other child was Virginia, the daughter by Arnold of Dorothy Cheston, who was from then on known as Dorothy Cheston Bennett. Arnold could not marry her as Marguerite would not give him a divorce.

Bennett wrote to his mother every day, and sometimes twice a day, but only one letter from this group remains. All the rest were destroyed at her death.

The family correspondence reveals a man who appears to know that he brought difficulties upon himself by straying into marriage and into a marriage-like relationship when by temperament, and also by the requirements of his type of work, he should have stayed a bachelor.

Either this, or he should have had a wife who could run a country house, etc. But he appears to have wanted his cake and eat it too, exciting demi-monde ladies and capable companions for life all in one.

His letters are vigorous, buoyant and intimate. There is a sound of fame and royalties rushing in and lasting happiness, as they call it in fiction, draining out.



## THE LETTERS OF G.B.S., 1911-1925

Shaw's letters are the very cornucopia of correspondence, the ultimate overflow of the epistolary urge. Recipients either received the full rich splash or the deliberate non-letter of those famous postcards. There was no drip of a note in between.

Shaw is openly intimate, if that is not a contradiction, a kind of public private man who provides enquirers with the most personal information if he thinks it will benefit society. He is the human equivalent of the standard which kings set up on a hill above the battlefield as a symbol of order amid chaos, and a sane rallying point. He is also an unrepentant busybody putting his oar in wherever he fancies, whether it is 10 Downing Street or the composition of an Elgar quintet—fearful cheek, the latter.

The intelligence is formidable. Shaw is a Dubliner Voltaire at large, and popularly licensed to speak his rational mind. He is a great public figure of the old type but with the beginnings of today's media excesses following him at every move, which he likes. He is a theatrical Irish gentleman who coats his message (and a very serious message it is) with amusement. To him the earth is a vast, noisy debating chamber in which daft views require his swift correction, and which is daily packed with fools and rogues who have to be kept in order. It is also a palace of art and language—not to mention a free space through which a paper lover can aim his missives.

These years found the dramatist at his peak, with *Heartbreak House*, *Back to Methuselah* and *Saint Joan* being written and Shaw's polemics being both controlled and driven home by his now fully realised artistry. Neither he nor the world can have any doubts that he is a phenomenon, something he loves to be. He gives miscreants some of the worst drubbings ever sealed in an envelope, never posting a page on which, somewhere or other, his literary skill is not seen at full pelt. And there is Shaw the 'virtuoso trifler' and his amorous blarney, although the letters to Mrs Patrick Campbell go far beyond this ('The feet I kissed with my pen since I could not reach them with my lips'). One is struck here as never before by the sincere emotions of this celebrated affair.

When the Great War so inevitably and predictably broke out, Shaw's own opening salvo in that crazily patriotic hour was to make him one of the most unpopular men in the country. If there was a medal for literary courage, Shaw

would certainly have earned it with his *Common Sense About the War*, which Robert Blatchford called 'the meanest act of treachery ever perpetrated by an alien enemy residing in generous and long-suffering England'. The idiot fury which this book generated, and the remorseless slaughter of so many of his friends' sons, had their deepening effect, and between the springs of 1915 and 1917 he wrote *Heartbreak House*, 'creeping' through it 'to prevent myself crying'. His letters to bereaved mothers who did not share his views contain a profound kindness. One of his horrors where wars were concerned was that they quintupled 'the influence of born fools and placed level-headed men at a heavy discount'.

And then there is Ireland, of course. Shaw never returned to his native land after 1923, but kept up the type of 'insider' criticism that was guaranteed to keep both the British and the Irish ratty. He is quite heretically unsentimental about events such as the Easter Rising, and regretted his country's insular heroics. 'The Irish adore a successful man or an executed man (the latter for preference) but a fiasco they never forgive.' The letters reveal all too shatteringly how little has changed in Protestant versus Catholic Irish attitudes since Shaw was a boy. The Irish have achieved world eminence because of their mastery of the English language, 'which is very imperfectly spoken and written in England'. His long letter to Horace Plunkett on the Irish dilemma is staggeringly relevant to much that is happening now.

## THE GREAT WAR—AND THE LITTLE MAGAZINES

It is not uncommon for writers in their work to avoid areas of their own historical involvement for reasons which they find hard to explain—particularly to themselves. I have now and then written about the First World War but at arm's length, which is strange when I remember that our toy-box at home contained father's Gallipoli medals and mother's V. A. D. insignia. And that some of our farming neighbours still called themselves 'captain', and that men laboured in the sugar-beet fields wearing army boots and greatcoats. More pertinently where its literature is concerned I should not forget that I actually met Edmund Blunden, Wilfred Gibson, R. H. Mottram and still do meet the family of Robert Nichols.

But the real closeness comes from my lifelong friendship with John Nash and his wife Christine. John and Paul Nash were official war artists in both world wars. In the spring of 1918 they hired a seed-shed in Chalfont St Peter in which to paint their celebrated pictures of the Western Front. The government paid them thirty shillings a day, a fortune, they said. When John died in 1977 I inherited his books. They included runs of English, French and American literary magazines. Also periodicals specialising in the 'new music' and the new movements in art. I have read them hungrily since then for nothing—except old film, of course,—so powerfully evokes the cultural climate of those exciting years.

These magazines are as follows: (Some belonged to Paul, who died in 1946, and some to John):

*Art and Letters*, an Illustrated quarterly, 1917-20

*The Little Review*, A Magazine of the Arts making no compromise with the public taste, 1918. London Editor, Ezra Pound

*The London Mercury*, 1919-29. Edited by J. C. Squire

*The Monthly Chapbook*, 1919-23. Edited by Harold Monroe, Poetry Bookshop

*Fanfare*, 1921-22. Edited by Leigh Henry.

*Drawing and design*, 1926.

And various other periodicals about poetry, music and art of the period. Between them they create a world which Ivor Gurney knew and was part of.

They are both international and provincial in their outlook, and their contributors, both famous or at this stage unknown, await time to sort them out. Gurney appears now and then, most hopefully and movingly for me, in *Fanfare*, when his *Five Preludes* are advertised. Granville Bantock, Manuel de Falla, Eric Satie and Eugene Goossens all wrote trumpet pieces for it. There are Paris notes and drawings by Picasso and Kokoschka, and not a little of the wild optimism of the Twenties. But Richard Aldington, staring across an English harvest, asks:

O friend, why is it that the fields have peace  
 And we have none? I press my hands  
 Softly against my aching eyes and feel  
 How hot they are with scanning many books;  
 My brain is dry with thoughts of many men,  
 My heart is faint with deaths of many gods.  
 I know I live only because I suffer.

His poem is moody with the generally experienced sense of appalling loss and possible gain. The war—its name is not quite settled and it is sometimes called the Big War or the Great European War—has both deprived the artist and poet of their natural joy and in some way in which they cannot at this moment understand, energised them.

Searching for attitudes towards the war and editorial statements on the huge calamity, I found them all rather played down. It was not escapism because there could never be any escape, even in rural England where everything went on as usual: as in Auden's 'Musée des Beaux Arts' a boy falling into the abyss is 'not an important Failure' for either the ploughman or a passing ship 'which had somewhere to get to'. Here before me is the first number of the *London Mercury* which Jack Squire sent to John Nash and which is dated November 1919. Exactly a year since the Armistice. Its lengthy editorial briefly mentions the paper shortage during the war and says "We have had a glimpse into the abyss of disorganisation", then passes on to its aim, which is the continuation of English Literature. The first poem is by Thomas Hardy and is called 'Going and Staying'. He sees:

Seasons of blankness as of snow,  
 The silent bleed of a world decaying,  
 The moan of multitudes in woe,  
 These were the things we wished would go;  
 But they are staying.

John Nash, who fought with the Artists' Rifles in the trenches, and who with his brother has completed his official war paintings in the Buckinghamshire seed shed, writes on *The Fine Arts*. He is twenty-six. He is sad because Harold Gilman, who taught him how to use oils, has died from influenza. Paul Nash too is going to be very ill, as so many soldiers were after the war. Not wounded men but injured men. John, who has contributed some delightful illustrations to them, plugs the magazines *Art and Letters* and the *Chapbooks*. He and the Australian poet W. J. Turner have become theatre and music critics, Turner writing, John drawing. Siegfried Sassoon lodges in Turner's London house. (Sassoon will buy a house for Edmund Blunden after the Second World War at Long Melford, near my home, where I will meet him and eventually give his centenary lecture.) They all read the *London Mercury*. In the first number there is a long short story by Robert Nichols which goes as far as it possibly can from the war. An advertisement says that Rupert Brooke's *Poems* 'has gone into an enormous number of editions'. One of the sailors who helped to dig his grave on Skyros 'having heard that I was interested in such things' told me what hard work it was, what with the rock and everything. They were ordered to make a cairn over it. The sailor was now a brewer's traveller, a rotund, wistful little man who *had* got to Gallipoli. Paul Nash had encountered Rupert Brooke after he had got back from the Antwerp raid in October 1914, his eyes shining with happiness and excitement. They had stood on the pavement outside Eddie Marsh's house, not believing their luck. To be young and at war!

The *London Mercury* was not at war in any sense. It was at peace with books, with that literary intelligence which had to carry on without break from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, never mind 1914-1918. It had to show an unfractured civilization in the form of Letters. To its critics it was no more than the continuation of *Georgian Poetry*, which died in 1922. But its retrospection can be a goldmine for those searching for World War One treasures, often small things which reveal the climate in which a poet-composer like Ivor Gurney worked. These include Edgell Rickword's *The Soldier Addresses his Body*, Max Beerbohm's essay *Servants* which presaged Kazuo Ishiguro's butler with uncanny exactitude as well as reminding the reader of that great army of footmen, gardeners and valets from all over Europe which vanished in the mud of Flanders. A staple of *Punch* humour between the wars was the servant shortage. Another army, that of agricultural labourers, hoped that the brotherhood of the trenches would continue on the farms when it returned home, but it did not. The farmer and his men, far fewer needed then because of the return of the agricultural depression, remained socially apart. Edmund Blunden, discovering John Clare, remains

one of the best poets of village England after 1918. Although mocked by the Modernists the *London Mercury* was, among other things, a truthful forum for those writers who recognised the irony of desecrating one countryside in order to save another, of wrecking Ypres to save Gloucester. Although poets like Ivor Gurney were provincial city boys, the fields and meadows came right up to their cathedrals and market squares – as they still do at Ely and to countless French, Italian and German towns, if held back by ring roads to some extent. And of course having ‘Gloucester’ or ‘Suffolk’ written on one’s shoulder tabs intensified the feeling that one’s entire world was an English county. As did hearing the home dialect spoken in a foreign land, for its broadness had not been narrowed by outside influences then.

In ‘First Time In’ Gurney describes the hospitality of the trenches when Gloucestershire calls on Wales, and tenderness overcomes the foreign-ness:

After the dread tales and red yarns of the Line  
 Anything might have come to us; but the divine  
 Afterglow brought us up to a Welsh colony  
 Hiding in sandbag ditches, whispering consolatory  
 Soft foreign things. Then we were taken in  
 To low huts candle-lit, shaded close by slitten  
 Oilsheets, and there the boys gave us kind welcome,  
 So that we looked out as from the edge of home.  
 Sang us Welsh things, and changed all former notions  
 To human hopeful things. And the next day’s guns  
 Nor any line-pangs ever quite could blot out  
 That strangely beautiful entry to war’s rout;  
 Candles they gave us, precious and shared over-rations—  
 Ulysses found little more in his wanderings without doubt.  
 “David of the White Rock”, the “Slumber Song” so soft, and that  
 Beautiful tune to which roguish words by Welsh pit boys  
 Are sung—but never more beautiful than there under the guns’ noise.

Among the fascinating aspects of old literary journalism is the comment on writers whose future standing is not yet recognised. Thus, turning the pages of the poetry magazine *Wheels 1919*, the reviewer finds poems by Wilfred Owen which ‘have all the earnestness, and much of the force, of Mr Sassoon’s illustrations of the beastly cruelty of War’ but passes on swiftly to the ‘hard, clear and original language’ of Mr Aldous Huxley. He quotes from ‘Strange Meeting’—‘There is one poem by the late Wilfred Owen which has a powerful, sombre beginning’. Families and friends were beginning to publish

the letters of the dead. Charles Sorley's parents published his, revealing that he carried Richard Jefferies' books with him in France. John Nash carried Borrow everywhere he went, he told me, longing not to die because he longed to take to the (English) open road. Charles Tennyson, who lived to be a hundred, used to say that post-World War One generations could not imagine the loveliness of pre-car Britain, its strangeness and enchantment. Ivor Gurney, of course, ached for it:

If I walked straight slap  
 Headlong down the road  
 Toward the two-wood gap  
 Should I hit that cloud?

He did, alas. An open-air man like John Clare, like Wordsworth, like the majority of the still non-industrialised men at the front, four walls would hold him in. By 1926 the *London Mercury* and the Modernist magazines in particular were sick of war writing. It was unending, not only poetry and novels but memoirs and politics as the generals and economists got going. 'The war is too much with us, late and soon ...', despaired Edward Shanks, '... the predicted cessation of books about the War has not yet occurred ... The public is not, as they say, tired of the subject: it only wants to be tired of it ... It remains alive in our minds, and there is much yet to say of it before we have got it out of our system'. He is reviewing R. H. Mottram's *Spanish Farm* trilogy and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and finds that 'the shadow of the War hangs a little over him as well'. Early war poems catch up with post-war 'freedom' poems. Patrick Shaw-Stewart's 'Lines Written in Gallipoli' face Belloc's 'Do you remember an Inn, Miranda?'—who isn't a girl but a Spanish duke. Now and then Marion Scott sent Gurney's poems to the *London Mercury* where they joined the flood, then the trickle of writing about an essentially war-seen English countryside and a war-hurt Englishman. J.C. Squire anthologised some of them.

In the summer of 1917, when John Nash was a sergeant in the Artists' Rifles on the Somme and his brother Paul was being chauffeur-driven along the Front as a Lieutenant War Artist, they began to subscribe to a new review entitled *Art and Letters*. The war was going badly, the casualties were enormous, and the early patriotism was waning. *Art and Letters'* apology for coming out at such a time said 'Objections on the score of scarcity of paper and shortage of labour may surely be overruled when we remember the reams of paper wasted weekly and the hundreds of compositors daily misemployed on periodicals which give vulgar and illiterate expression to the most vile and

debasement sentiments. Friends serving at the Front—some of them contributed to this first issue—remind us that there are educated men in the Army ...’ Slight but adventurous, *Art and Letters* took the new movement to the Front as well as bringing home some of its finest creations. Ronald Firbank, the Sitwells, Proust, Dorothy Richardson, T. S. Eliot and Wyndham Lewis were read in the dug-out and the work of soldier-poets was given early prominence. War artists such as the Nashes, Edward Wadsworth and William Roberts were illustrated alongside Modigliani, Gaudier Brzeska and Picasso. It was one of those little magazines which attempted to foresee a future civilisation as the old one collapsed. It lacked the space to quarrel with the conventions, it simply gave a taste of the Twenties in order to give the young people something to look forward to. It mourned loss—the death of Isaac Rosenberg received a wonderful reaction—and Ivor Gurney would have fitted into it in so many ways. Its object was to point beyond the narrowness of war and of nations. Cyril Connolly would attempt this with his *Horizon* during World War Two, and John Lehmann with his *Penguin New Writing*. In *War Books* Gurney asked:

What did they expect of our toil and extreme  
 Hunger—the perfect drawing of a heart’s dream?  
 Did they look for a book of wrought art’s perfection,  
 Who promised no reading, nor praise, nor publication?  
 Out of the heart’s sickness the spirit wrote  
 For delight, or to escape hunger, or of war’s worst anger,  
 When the guns died to silence and men would gather sense  
 Somehow together, and find this was life indeed ...

W. B. Yeats’s way of dealing with war poetry was to ignore it. In his Introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936) he makes the confession that he had:

... a distaste for certain poems written in the midst of the great war; they are in all anthologies, but I have substituted Herbert Read’s *End of a War* written long after. The writers of these poems were invariably officers of exceptional courage and capacity who ... felt bound, in the words of the best known, to plead the suffering of their men. In poems that had for a time considerable fame, written in the first person, they made that suffering their own. I have rejected these poems for the same reason that made Arnold withdraw his *Empedocles on Etna* from circulation; passive suffering is not a theme for poetry. In all the great



tragedies, tragedy is a joy to the man who dies; in Greece the tragic chorus danced ... If war is necessary, or necessary in our time and place, it is best to forget its suffering as we do the discomfort of fever ...

Amazing though it is that some of the finest poetry of the twentieth century should be excluded thus from what was intended to be its most representative collection, it was true that those who fought did become famously reticent about what they had seen and done. 'He never talked about it' was said of many a returned soldier. As for passive suffering, whatever that meant to Yeats, means everything to those who lived through both the trenches and the holocaust. Their particular tragedy was no joy to either John Clare or Ivor Gurney but it was part of their greatness.

Paul Nash's lifelong poet friend was Gordon Bottomley but his ultimate mentor was Sir Thomas Browne. Flanders under the shelling provided for him one landscape of death, *Urne Buriall* another. *The Annual of New Poetry 1917* contains Bottomley's 'All Souls, 1914' in which the universe is already crowded with 'the young uneasy dead' whose energies 'Are still unspent', and it was this sense of terrible waste which haunted the post-war world. They are the absent figures in Paul and John Nash's fields. In his grim asylum Ivor Gurney 'calls' to them again and again. There was 'The Silent One' who:

Died on the wires, and hung there, one of two—  
 Who for his hours of life had chattered through  
 Infinite lovely chatter of Bucks accent:  
 Yet faced unbroken wires; stepped over, and went  
 A noble fool, faithful to his stripes—and ended.

In 1918, painting the official war pictures in the Buckinghamshire seed-hut with his brother, John Nash, who had more than a passing interest in being a writer as well as an artist, was subscribing to *The Little Review*, with its generous serialisation of *Ulysses*, and works by Dorothy Richardson, Proust and Eliot. Modernism, now almost a century old, still reads youthfully. The contents do not reflect the last casualty lists of London, Paris and New York but a new kind of vitality and a determination to cut loose from the boredom of war, among other things. Unlike all the other magazines, the *London Mercury* in particular, *The Little Review* is flimsily and cheaply published in both French and English, and remains curiously avant-garde whilst being at the same time a museum piece. I think of the Nash brothers reading it, shocked, excited, John putting it down to continue working on *Over the Top* in which a handful of soldiers scramble out of a snowy trench to be mown

down, one of them, he told me, given the face of a singer he had heard at the Queen's Hall 'to show the death of art'.

All these old World War One and post Armistice journals are full of music. There is the Diaghileff Ballet at the Alhambra music-hall in London in the summer of 1919 with Karsavina and Massine, there is Poulenc, Vaughan Williams, Prokofief, Holst, Bax, Bliss, Bridge, Ireland and there should have been a more substantial Gurney. All the young composers and ex-music students would have heard of him, would have wondered about him, and what happened to him. What happened to him was what happened to Clare. In some ways Gurney was the soldier who could not die. For whom there would be another death.

In 1932 a stranger named Marion Scott wrote to Edward Thomas's widow Helen, to tell her that she was the friend of 'a young musical genius named Ivor Gurney who had lost his reason in the war and was in a lunatic asylum'. And could she face the ordeal of visiting him, as Edward Thomas 'had evoked in him what one can only call love'. And so they went. Helen Thomas carried flowers:

We arrived at Dartford Asylum which looked like—indeed it was—a prison. A warder let us in after unlocking a door, and doors were opened and locked behind us ... We were walking along a bare corridor when we were met by a tall dishevelled man clad in pyjamas and a dressing gown, to whom Miss Scott introduced me. He gazed with an intense stare into my face and took me silently by the hand. Then I gave him the flowers which he took with the same deeply moving intensity and silence. He then said, 'You are Helen, Edward's wife, and Edward is dead'.

Later, Gurney played the piano to them 'and to the tragic circle of men who sat on hard benches built into the walls of the room. Hopeless and aimless faces gazed vacantly and restless hands fumbled or hung down lifelessly. They gave no sign or sound that they had heard the music.'

The next time Helen went to see Ivor she took with her Edward's walking maps of Gloucestershire and spread them across the bed. Their fingers traced 'the lanes and byways and villages of which Ivor knew every stop ... He had Edward as companion in this strange perambulation and he was utterly happy.' It is interesting that Helen did not take Ivor Gurney books and magazines. Were they forbidden? John Clare possessed an entire library at Northampton. Helen said that Gurney's room contained only a bed and a chair, and window bars high up. Nothing else. Mental health between the wars, when it was most needed, was most neglected. Poor mad soldiers.



III.



## JOHN CLARE AND THE GYPSIES

Sometimes I watch a film or read a book, come-to and tell myself, 'But I was there! I heard it, I saw it.' It is a not uncommon experience. It occurs when I read John Clare on the gypsies. He both hobnobbed with them and was fastidious where they were concerned, was prejudiced and unprejudiced at the same time. He wrote many poems about them which envied their lot, their freedom, their women, and one poem which envied them nothing.

The snow falls deep; the Forest lies alone:  
The boy goes hasty for his load of brakes,  
Then thinks upon the fire and hurries back;  
The Gipsy knocks his hands and tucks them up,  
And seeks his squalid camp, half hid in snow,  
Beneath the oak, which breaks away the wind,  
And bushes close, with snow like hovel warm:  
There stinking mutton roasts upon the coals,  
And the half-roasted dog squats close and ribs,  
Then feels the heat too strong and goes aloof;  
He watches well, but none a bit can spare.  
And vainly waits the morsel thrown away:  
'Tis thus they live—a picture to the place;  
A quiet, pilfering, unprotected race.

It is masterly in its realism. Though one observation would not be ours—'a picture to the place'. Today's Travellers' encampment has swapped the vardo for the mobile home, horses for horse-power and horse-dealing for scrap metal, and is anathema in our twinkled countryside. We, the council, intended the Traveller (is 'gypsy' P.C.?—or not?—it is all rather worrying) to just winter on the official site, then push on, not to purchase them and turn them into messy caravan additions to our village. We like the gypsies best at the horse-fairs, when they return to being their colourful selves, painted wagons, fortune-tellers, dark-eyed beauties, lively yearlings and all. Appleby Fair is where they should be. No scrap-dealing there.

I was a churchwarden of St Peter's Charsfield, Suffolk, when I was writing *Akenfield*. It was the mid-Sixties, a moment of seismic change in East

Anglia as all over the countryside, although, like everyone else, I had no notion of it. One afternoon I found Mr King, our gravedigger for miles around, throwing up clay by the churchyard hedge. He was one of those not uncommon men who would hold back on some subjects and hold forth on others, being what we called ‘contrary’. You could never be certain whether he would tell you everything or nothing. Thus,

‘Whose grave is it, Mr King?’  
 ‘Never you mind. You wouldn’t know her.’  
 ‘Her?’  
 ‘No-one you would know.’  
 ‘When is the funeral then?’  
 ‘Friday they reckon.’

Dig, dig, dig. Then, seeing my still inquisitive face from down below, he said, ‘Ocean’.

‘They are burying Ocean?’  
 ‘They are.’

It was then I experienced one of those close connections between John Clare’s world and my own. I had never seen Ocean, just as one rarely sees a legend, but I knew what she looked like, which is someone he would have seen—this in the purely native sense. Ocean was one of East Anglia’s most celebrated Romanies. She had travelled our counties for nearly a century, leaving tales in her wake, a formidable woman with a magnificent name. And here she would lie, in our churchyard. There were family connections. Her grandsons, gone Gaujo, lived just up the road in a square bungalow at the edge of an orchard which was never picked and behind windows which were never uncurtained. And there was a copse where she may have wintered.

Clare’s gypsies were everywhere when I was a boy. They came regularly to the house, for mother would only have their split ash clothespegs with the little tin band. And they did piece-work in summer, pea-picking, soft fruit gathering, hence the chalked board outside the pub, ‘No Gypsies, no Travellers’. There was a green lane known as the Gull where we found stamped-out hearths and blackened cans, and evidence of ponies. In no time fireweed came to hide the mess. Grandmother, born the decade when Clare died, had actually witnessed a vardo being burnt on Lavenham common. Lavenham churchyard was full of Petulengros. George Borrow had put ‘our’ gypsies in *Romany Rye* and *Lavengro*. My old friend John Nash, wretched in

the trenches, told me how he had been cared for by a young gypsy who had been called up and who comforted them both with promises of the Open Road. One day they would be 'out of all this' and on the Open Road. They would be friends and live again. On and on they would walk—in Buckinghamshire, which was where they truly belonged. No more Artists' Rifles, roll on sleeping in haystacks. John's only reading in Flanders was Borrow, and when Passchendaele threatened he sent *Lavengro* home to his girl for safety.

We knew a woman tramp called Nellie Eighteen and her lover Boxer who refused to sleep in the Spike (workhouse) and who resided briefly in ruined buildings of all kinds, and were accepted as part of the wandering population. Fanciful things were said about them. But they were tramps and not gypsies. We all knew the difference. You wouldn't find a gypsy pushing a pram.

Jonathan Bate wrote, 'Clare loved to spend time with the gypsies who camped on the commons and margins where they were to go once the "waste" grounds became private property. It was through such eyes as these that he saw enclosure.' The enclosure of Helpston put many of Clare's best-loved spots out of bounds, and not only sometimes out of bounds but beyond recognition, for they were in our terms bulldozed. His wrath flares up in poem after poem:

The silver springs, grown naked dykes,  
 Scarce own a bunch of rushes:  
 When grain got high the tasteless tykes  
 Grubbed up trees, banks and bushes,  
 And me, they turned me inside out  
 For sand and grit and stones  
 And turned my old green hills about  
 Picked my very bones.

He made Swordy Well protest. Bad enough for the villagers, now being pauperised, but quite terrible for the gypsies immemorially camped at Langley Bush. The Vagrancy Act of 1824, swiftly following the Enclosure Act, made it an offence, among other things, 'to be in the open air, or under a tent, or in a cart or wagon, not having any visible means of subsistence, and not giving a good account of himself, or herself'. Ocean had given a memorable account of herself, we believed. But for generations after the Vagrancy Act her kind were regularly sent to prison for merely existing. And then, only two years later, came the Commons Act of 1826 which allowed the local authority to set its own rules for its own common land. And soon



most commons were closed to gypsies. When the Gypsy Council was at long last created in 1966, Gordon Boswell, a member of a leading gypsy family, at once proposed that permanent camps should be made by law where his people could winter without being moved on by the police. The Council was legally aided by Gratton Puxon, the son of a Colchester solicitor, who was a friend of ours. Gratton was the kind of practical romantic one would have met with among Clare's rural 'intellectuals', who thought and acted outside their own sphere, as it were.

Erotic gypsy women, with their freedom, were a frequent subject of Clare's songs during the asylum years.

A gipsey lass my love was born  
 Among the heaths furse bushes O,  
 More fair than Ladies on the lawn,  
 Whose song is like the thrushes O.  
 Like links of snakes her inky hair,  
 The dandy bean she kisses O.\*  
 Her face round as an apple fair  
 She blisters where she kisses O.

(\*There was an ancient law forbidding men to make love in a beanfield because its scent made them irresistible. Fellatio.)

And then we have 'Sweet legged' Sophie, and Maria 'who sleeps in the nightly dew'. He:

Loves the flowers that she sees,  
 The wild thyme bank she beds on  
 Mid the songs of honey bees.

These 'cozy blanket camp' girls exist in a sexual dimension beyond the conventions. Free as air, the poet can take them at will. Part of Clare's life might be called a vagabondage in a native place. This is still not unusual for the artist/writer. He belonged as few writers have ever belonged—yet he knew that he did not belong. Not as the rest of his community belonged. His was the fate of the insider being an outsider. In order to write and read and look and listen, he would walk to the edge of his own birthright territory, and it was there that he would sometimes find those who quite clearly had no claim to it, the gypsies. He would spread himself on the earth where they had been.

Wednesday 29th Sept, 1824

Took a walk in the fields ... saw an old woodstile taken away from a favourite spot which it had occupied all my life. The posts were overgrown with ivy and it seemed so akin to nature and the spot where it stood, as though it had taken it on lease for an undisturbed existence. It hurt me to see it was gone, for my affections claim a friendship with such things. Last year Langley Bush was destroyed, An old white thorn that had stood for more than a century full of fame. The Gipsies and Hern men all had their tales of its history.

A few weeks later Clare attended 'Another Gipsy Wedding of the Smiths family, fiddling and drinking as usual'. He learned some gypsy medicine which was based on like for like, such as how to cure a viper's sting. Boil the viper and apply the broth to the wound it made. A sure cure, the gypsies said. Some of Clare's poems show both pride and prejudice for his Romany friends, calling them 'a sooty crew'. Though before this he assures them:

That thou art revered, even the rude clan  
Of lawless Gipsies, driven from stage to stage,  
Pilfering the hedges of the husbandman ...

His frequent preferences for the parish boundary caused comment: 'My old habits did not escape notice—they fancied I kept aloof from company for some sort of study—others believed me crazed, and put some more criminal interpretation to my rambles and said I was a night-walking associate with the gipsies, robbing woods of the hares and pheasants because I was often in their company.' But sometimes he was at the camp for music lessons. A gypsy named John Gray was to teach him how to play the fiddle by ear: 'Finished planting my auricolas—went a-botanising after ferns and orchises, and caught a cold in the wet grass has made me as bad as ever. Got the tune of "Highland Mary" from Wisdom Smith, a gipsy, and pricked another sweet tune without a name as he fiddled it'. Jonathan Bate reminds us that Clare had been writing down dance tunes for many years, and that one of his oblong music books is entitled *A Collection of Songs, Airs and Dances for the Violin, 1818*. His fleeting vagabond Scottish grandfather had taught the villagers of Helpstone music among other subjects before going on his way. One of Clare's lime-burner workmates at Pickworth had actually joined the gypsies—married one of them. His name was James Nobbs. And such was their fascination that a Suffolk Archdeacon, Robert Hindes Groom, a friend of Edward FitzGerald and George Borrow, had also wed a Romany woman.

A certain fastidiousness in Clare seems to have marked their relationship, their ‘disgusting food’ for instance. But he recognised their artistry, and he was an early precursor of folksong collecting. Recalling the ‘No Peapickers’ sign outside our Suffolk pubs when I was a boy reminds me of Vaughan Williams taking a young gypsy into a bar in order to take down his song—and both of them being thrown out by the landlord. It wasn’t a ‘singing’ pub.

It was George Borrow, a near contemporary of John Clare, whose Romany books would offer an alternative life style to many Victorians. *Lavengro* was published in 1831, *The Romany Rye or the Gypsy Gentleman*, in 1857. Clare might well have read them at Northampton. Borrow was famously touchy and bad-tempered, and hard to handle. Stories of his picaresque wanderings and encounters are told in Spain, East Anglia and Wales to this day. During a walking holiday on Anglesey a few years ago my host said, ‘George Borrow stayed in this house’. Returning from gathering material for *Hidden Wales* he saw a lad mending the roof and spoke to him in Welsh—and was answered in French. Much put out Borrow demanded to know why. ‘Sir, you spoke to me in a language which is not your own, and I reply in a language which is not my own.’ Speaking Romany became quite a cult in the nineteenth century although nothing like the heady cult of the Open Road. The Open Road cult descended from a celebrated passage in *Lavengro* which, if it had come John Clare’s way during his last years in ‘Hell’, his other name for the ‘Madhouse’, would have sent shivers through him.

‘Life is sweet, brother.’

‘Do you think so?’

‘Think so! There’s night and day, brother, both sweet things; sun, moon, and stars, brother, all sweet things; there’s likewise a wind on the heath. Life is very sweet, brother; who would wish to die?’

‘I would wish to die—’

‘You talk like a Gorgio—which is the same as talking like a fool. Were you a Romany Chal you would talk wiser. Wish to die, indeed! A Romany Chal would wish to live for ever.’

‘In sickness, Jasper?’

‘There’s the sun and the stars, brother.’

‘In blindness, Jasper?’

‘There’s the wind on the heath; if I could only feel that I would gladly live for ever.’

Two years after *Lavengro* was published, and still several years before death made it possible for Clare to return to Helpston, Matthew Arnold wrote *The*

*Scholar-Gipsy*. It told of an Oxford undergraduate who walks out of the University, having seen through its claims, to join gypsy freedom. His life is furtive, shy like that of a woodland creature, and the world to which he belonged now has only glimpses of him. He is not pursued. His realm is Oxfordshire not Oxford, and the county is given a tempting pastorality which excludes such realities as the local vagabond law. Rather, the area is proud to harbour such a learned tramp. In his note on the poem Arnold said, 'After he had been pretty well exercised in the trade (of Romany lore), there chanced to ride by a couple of scholars, who had formerly been of his acquaintance, They quickly spied out their old friend among the gypsies; and he gave them an account of the necessity which drove him to that kind of life, and told them that the people he went with were not such impostors as they were taken for, but that they had a traditional kind of learning among them, and could do wonders by the power of the imagination, their fancy binding that of others ...' Arnold said too that he had found the story in Glanvil's *Vanity of Dogmatizing* (1661). *The Scholar-Gipsy* concludes with the wonderfully hazardous lines on how such a persistent foreign element may have reached our shore:

Outside the western straits, and unbent sails  
 There, where down cloudy cliffs, through sheets of foam,  
 Shy traffickers, the dark Iberians come;  
 And on the beach undid his corded bales.

During the High Beach exile, each winter surrounded by gypsy camps, Helpston dragged at Clare's thoughts all day long. Homesickness frequently overwhelmed him. The plants and birds of Epping Forest, the close-knit gypsy families with their music and nasty food and skinny dogs seemed like an extension of Helpston and yet was a hundred miles from it. One Sunday afternoon he met some gypsies who said he could hide away with them until there was a propitious moment for his escape from the madhouse. Money was mentioned. But Clare the patient did not have the same welcome as Clare the fiddler, and the gypsies cleared off without helping him. When he went to their camp it was empty save for an old hat. He picked this up and kept it—may have worn it during the walk out of Essex. On Tuesday 20 July 1841, he took their suggested route. Epping was a very confusing place. When he at last managed to find the main road a man from the discouragingly named pub *The Labour in Vain* directed him towards Enfield—towards where Cowden Clarke had introduced Keats to Chaucer—and thus to the Great York Road. Now, as Clare wrote, it could only be 'plain sailing and steering

ahead, meeting no enemy and fearing none'. 'Here shall he see no enemy but winter and rough weather.' Later he would give his own sanitized version of the gypsies. No pilfering, no stinking mutton, no being let down now. Just one more freedom song from a poor prisoner doing life:

The joys of the camp are not cares of the Crown,  
There'll be fiddling and dancing a mile out of town.  
Will you come to the camp ere the moon goes down  
A mile from the town?

The camp of the gipsies is sweet by moonlight  
In the furze and the hawthorn—and all out of sight  
There'll be fiddling and dancing and singing tonight  
In the pale moon light.

## THE POET AND THE NEST

We can do some writers no greater injustice than to read them primarily for the information of their times. John Clare is constantly in danger of such readings. But those inventories of his were made for his own peace of mind, not our education, although the bird lists, reminders for him, remind us, quite unbearably, of the wonderful *Natural History of Helpstone* that never was. When we read his inventories we see a totting-up of what he refused to believe he had lost—and we see everything which, as twenty-first century country people, we once possessed. For a great many of us are in direct descent from John Clare's landworkers. He leaves little out. He was making his lists at the very moment in agricultural history when there were for the first time more people in the factories than on the farms. He would not have known this. For Clare field toil would have gone on and on until kingdom come. The huge changes he witnessed, the coming of the railway, enclosure, some mechanisation on the surrounding estates, he treated as unwanted disturbances to the old hard way of life which had for him a spiritual quality of such importance that to alter it was a blasphemy. He was for ever counting what it consisted of right down to the honeydew on the sycamores, to a boy's song, to Mrs Nottingham of the Exeter Arms' description of fifteen will-o-the-wisps dancing reels on Eastwell Moor. Nothing was left out, from the footsteps of girls to the shouts of shepherds, from the insect on the stalk to the sound of those same bells which we hear today.

Helpston was no Eden—Clare was never clearer than on this point—but it was his. Illness and the powers that be took it from him, or would have done so had he not found a way to take it with him. What is the most repeated, most closely observed, most loved centre of his 'belonging' in his poetry and prose? It is the nest, its secrecy, its intimacy. What is the object of men's ritual discovery and theft? It is the nest. What brought John Clare into stillness and contemplation, into a silence in which he could hear his heart beating? It was the nest with its sitting bird. His finding and, watching nests took him through folklore, botany and ornithology into a profound self-discovery. Hence that superb list of nest poems which, whilst giving us such unique observations of nature, give us something extra, the poet in all his strength and song and vulnerability. 'The Fern Owls Nest', 'The Ravens Nest', 'The Moorhens Nest', 'The Pewits Nest', 'The Robins Nest' and, finest

of all, ‘The Nightingales’ Nest’, these nervous, furtive but complete observations are unique in literature. There is nothing like them.

Bird’s-nesting was until quite recently a tolerated activity for country boys. Pity, courage—some nests were high—and competition drove it. It was kind to take a single egg whilst the mother bird bravely screamed a foot or two above. The egg was sucked or blown and placed with many others in a cotton-wool drawer, the rarer the better. Seamus Heaney writes of ‘boy-deeds’ and recalls a particularly daring boy-deed by Michael Collins, a man born to be king or president. As a boy he made a practice of coming down the chute with the hay whirling from a high loft to the ground in a cloud of dried flowers and grass. Later on, says Heaney, Collins was ambushed in the Pass of Flowers, shot down, having nothing to hold on to.

John Clare was in free-fall all his life. The various and many helping hands held out to save him proved useless. Eventually they caught him and put him in a cage. Here he went on singing, lyrically, sadly, satirically, nostalgically. None of those who shared his cage get a mention, only those who continued to live in the freedom of Helpston, many of whom were in the churchyard, or who he translated to his other native place, Scotland.

Clare’s early boy-deeds had to double with child labour, the latter being the custom and the reality. At eight he was wielding a toy-sized flail in the stone barn alongside Parker, his father, though stopping now and then to draw algebraic signs in the killing dust. A pleasant thing happened when he was about ten. Francis Gregory, the young innkeeper next door, got him to run errands and to help plough and reap his eight acres or so of corn. Francis was unmarried and lived with his mother at the Blue Bell. They were both ill. Looking back, Clare said, ‘They used me uncommon well as if I was their own’. Mother and son lie by the church tower, their helper by the chancel wall. However, continued Clare, ‘Tis irksome to a boy to be alone and he is ready in such situations to snatch hold of any trifle to divert his loss of company, and make up for pleasanter amusements’. Birds-nesting in the ordinary way would have topped these amusements, but Clare, in his autobiographical *Sketches*, confesses to a very different pastime. It was that there, in Francis Gregory’s cornfield, he began his ‘muttering’, his softly speaking aloud of the rhymes which he would later write down in his bedroom, a tile shifted to let in light. He would memorise lines as he walked to and from Maxey Mill, lugging flour. Boys sang, they did not mutter, and eyes would have been upon him, this child talking to himself, a sure sign of something being wrong. Or different, which is not a good thing to be.

And all this before a Methodist friend loaned him that fragment of James Thomson’s famous poem *The Seasons*. The other day I found an ancient

anthology entitled *Poetry of the Year, 1867* and in it, only three years after Clare's death, were scattered among work by Crabbe, Bloomfield, Burns and others six poems by him. And what lines introduce this collection? None other than those which introduced Clare to poetry: Thomson's:

Come, gentle spring, ethereal mildness, come,  
And from the bosom of yon dropping cloud,  
While music wakes around, veiled in a shower  
Of shadowing roses, on our plains descend.

The editor would not have known this. Serendipity had him by the hand. The electric words for Clare would have been 'our plains'. Both Thomson and he were lowlanders, singers of the levels. Something else appeared to have left a memorable mark at this youthful moment, for Clare makes it an important point in the *Sketches*. It concerned his arrangement with the kind Gregorys at the Blue Bell—it was 'The only year I lived in hired service in my life'. He mentions it because of it being all too close to his mother's plan to put him into domestic service. She had already got him a box for his clothes. He filled it with books. Francis Gregory, the former-publican, and Clare shared a friend named John Turnill who helped the jobbing boy with his maths. It was Turnill who composed the lines for Gregory's tombstone under the tower.

I thought of John Turnill when we were exploring Robert Bloomfield's countryside near Thetford only to discover that the churchyard of his patron Capel Lofft had been recently vandalised for the sake of the lawnmower, the memorials pulled up and made into paths and a rockery, their tender village verses under our feet. Nineteenth century funerary verse may not be Wordsworth but it might well be Turnill or some other young man mourning his friend.

Robert Bloomfield was still a child when farmwork was thought too heavy for him, so they sent him to a London den to learn shoemaking. A similar fate awaited John Clare before the landlord of the Blue Bell took him in. Is this pub named after Scotland's harebell or *Endymion non-scriptus*—without the Greek 'Ai' which can be seen in the throat of narcissus, that cry of despair? Bluebells were once the most picked flower in the English woods.

Margaret Grainger in her *Natural History Prose Writings of John Clare* sees him always doubling his boy-deeds, his 'watching of the night-jar was an inextricable part of his late night wanderings for courting purposes—he had been a lover since he was fourteen—and his searching for ferns accompanied his efforts to throw off ill health'. He becomes an expert on cover, learning this essential art—Helpston always had its eye on him—from the birds. 'The Mavis thrush', like himself at this moment, 'sings like the song of a young



bird while learning to sing'. Like him, 'It loves to frequent ... old orchards and hedge borders ... near the village with a song [in December] when it can get shelter and cover as if it loved to treat the village with a song at such a dreary season. [But] as the spring advances its song ceases and it disappears to its more solitary haunts of woods and forests where it builds its nest beside a large tree on the twigs and water grains that shoot from the body. Its nest is made of the blades of dead grass moss and cowdung lined with warmer materials of wool and a finer sort of grass ... The Mavis never forgets her dead ramping grass [couch grass] for the out side covering and a plentiful supply of wool within the wool is what bird nesting boys know it by'.

In Clare's *Biographys of Birds*, one of my favourite book titles and his *Bird List* which he made for the tantalising *Natural History of Helpstone*, birds' nests stretch out like an ornithological city. The Large Wood Owle, by which Clare possibly means the tawny owl, 'attacks boys in a bold manner', the Raven builds where it is difficult to climb, the jackdaw in uninhabited houses, and as to magpies which sway about in nests filled with teaspoons, well they are apt to keep their loot. It horrifies him to see the overseers of Helpston rewarding boys who kill sparrows and he would give:

To tyrant boys a fee  
To buy the captive sparrows liberty

As he wrote in his poem 'The Fate of Genius'. The fate of genius in the villages of his day could be quite terrifying. So hide away, hide away. Take Cover. Find cover on 'our plain':

Boys thread the woods  
To their remotest shades  
But in these marshy flats, these stagnant floods,  
Security pervades.

From year to year  
Places untrodden lie  
Where man nor boy nor stock ventured near  
—Naught gazed on but the sky

And fowl that dread  
The very breath of man  
Hiding in spots that never knew his tread  
A wild and timid clan

In these thy haunts  
 I've gleaned habitual love  
 From the vague world where pride and folly taunts  
 I muse and look above

Thy solitudes  
 The unbounded heaven esteems  
 And here my heart warms into higher moods  
 And dignifying dreams

Clare often turns to nests which lie on the ground and sometimes finds them safest. He himself feels secure in lying low. Fame elevated him and hurt him, and he was sighted by the spoilers. In the sequence of nest poems, among the greatest natural history poems in the language, he finds a metaphor for his happiness and his plight. They are a miracle of close observation, both of himself treading carefully and of a sitting bird such as the peewit brooding 'on her unsavoury nest', and of moorhens on their safe 'shelved nests'. The accuracy of the descriptions result from many lengthy scarcely-daring-to-breathe starings at building material, delicate eggs and parent birds which were not conscious of the poet's presence. These observations reach perfection in 'The Nightingales Nest', which tells of Clare's nest-finding apprenticeship and, after many boyish attempts at birdwatching, that it needed maturity for him to come close. It is then that he witnesses those connections which touch his own existence.

How curious is the nest no other bird  
 Uses such loose materials or weaves  
 Their dwellings in such spots—dead oaken leaves  
 Are placed without and velvet moss within  
 And little scraps of grass—and scant and spare  
 Of what seems scarce materials down and hair  
 Far from mans haunts she seemeth naught to win  
 Yet nature is the builder and contrives  
 Homes for her childerns comfort even here  
 Where solitudes deciples spend their lives...

Clare's nest was robbed of him, shaken to bits and had to be reconstructed in his head. Taken from the nest, he joined those who sang the great songs of exile.

## JOHN CLARE IN SCOTLAND

A number of recent experiences and readings came together to suggest the subject of this chapter. First, I had just come back from Scotland, staying with friends at Kinloch Rannoch. This was in fact a retreat, a party of eight including two botanists, in a big white lonely house above Loch Rannoch, and backing onto Rannoch Moor, one of Britain's mighty desolations. One of these annual walks isn't more than two miles from a deserted stone village which belonged to the notorious Highland Clearances, when landowners like the Duchess of Sutherland preferred sheep to men. There it lay, a biggish place with crofts and barns and tracks, and drovers' roads, by a flashing burn, with sheep in residence, and the strong pattern of long habitation by men, women and children, ancestors now of prosperous folk in Canada and New Zealand.

And then, my neighbour Mr Brown died, aged a hundred; born at Michaelmas, died at Michaelmas. When he was three his father had hired a train which brought this Ayrshire family from the tough Lowlands to the South-east of England, and he as a little boy heard, and remembered, the kicking of the plough horses in their box as the special train, hired for ten pounds, brought everything the Browns possessed, their farm gear, their stock, their chattels, their corn seed, to East Anglia. He only once returned to Scotland, and this was in his seventies, when he took his grandson to see the obelisk commemorating their ancestor on the moor, the young crofter shot by Claverhouse's men for being a Covenanter. And one of his constant requests, when he came to talk to me once a week, was to look up certain Scottish words in the glossary at the back of my copy of Burns's *Poems*, for they were, in his nineties, slipping away from him. At his funeral the church, at which I had to give the Address, was filled with Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex Scottish farmers of the third generation of immigrants.

When I first walked in Scotland, during my twenties, my bible was Boswell's *Life of Johnson* with its great *Tour of the Hebrides*. And it is the notoriously unpromising first encounter of these two unlikely friends which brought John Clare's grandfather into some kind of focus. I'll remind you of what happened when Boswell met Johnson. The great man was fifty-four, the mighty biographer was twenty-three. Boswell was longing to meet Johnson when, whilst having tea with Mr Davies the bookseller in the back parlour of his shop, the door was darkened by a terrifying figure. Boswell went to pieces.

'Don't tell him where I come from', he begged Mr Davies. 'From Scotland!' said the wicked bookseller. 'Mr Johnson, I do indeed come from Scotland, but I cannot help it.' 'That, Sir, I find, is what a very great many of your countrymen cannot help,' was the reply. The year was 1763. Less than twenty years after the 'Forty-five, young Scots were on the road, and twenty years after this, Dr Johnson was still telling poor Boswell, 'Sir, the noblest prospect that a Scotchman ever sees is the high road that leads him to London'.

The effects of all diaspora, artistically as well as socially, are incalculable. Clare is constantly thought of as the epitome of the local village voice which articulates what is said and done and thought in one little place for centuries. And yet at the very moment when James Boswell came to London, Clare's grandfather came to Helpston from Scotland, not a ploughman like Burns, looking for a way out of rural poverty, but an itinerant schoolmaster. How and why he entered Helpston we may never discover. Maybe it was because there were possible patrons all around: Lord Exeter, Earl Fitzwilliam, the Trollope family at Torpel, even Christ's College, Cambridge. Or it may be simply because the Great North Road passed by this village, and the Scots perhaps sheltered in it on their long walk to London. This wanderer's name, as we know, was John Donald Parker. He could play the violin, and he was educated. If they would find him somewhere to live, and would feed him, he would teach their children to read and write, as well as play the violin at the dances. John Donald's special friend was Lord Manners's Head Gardener, and his love was Alice Clare, the Parish Clerk's daughter. When she became pregnant he vanished. But, genetically, the harm or the good had been done. And such blood mixes have been achieved ever since some Irish playboy walked the Icknield Way. Alice called her boy Parker; Parker's son called him 'one of fate's chancelings who drop into this world without the honour of matrimony'. As John Clare's grandmother lived to be eighty-three, making him twenty-seven when she died, there can be no doubt that he would have heard a good deal about his Scottish grandfather. John Clare and his twin sister were themselves conceived out of wedlock. The Parish Registers of England unblushingly tell us how this was the rule rather than the exception.

By the time Clare reached what might be called his Scottish Period among the books at Northampton Asylum his quarter-native land was no longer derided by England because of the Rebellion and its uncouthness, but had become the most Romantic country in the whole of Europe because of Sir Walter Scott's Waverley Novels, and Queen Victoria's preference for it above any place else in the world. And as for Robert Burns, it was his poetry, along with the Bible, that accompanied the great exodus to the four corners of the

British Empire, and which held the Scots culturally together. Wherever they happened to settle, they would have known these two books, and it wouldn't be entirely far-fetched to imagine that John Clare, exiled from his beloved Helpston for almost three decades, began at Northampton to relate to another place which was partly genuinely his, and to use its language with far greater claim to it than many who now sported the once-banned tartans.

And thus the Scottish poems need not be seen as pastiche, but legitimate, if sometimes Burns-imitative, to what genuinely belonged to Clare himself. Thomas Hardy learned more about life in the countryside from his grandmother than from his own mother, and John Clare, aged twenty-seven when his grandmother Alice died, could have been made to feel his Scottishness. He knew his *difference* from the beginning. It was a painful, uncomfortable, yet triumphant knowledge. The Scottishness of Clare hasn't of course been missed by Clare scholars. In a fascinating essay entitled 'John Clare: the trespasser', John Goodridge and Kelsey Thornton show the poet being drawn to both gypsies and to the Scottish drovers who, as brown-skinned and exotically attired as the gypsies, with their bits of plaid and blankets and strange speech, created a sensation as they passed through Northamptonshire.\* And they quote his description of them in the 'July' section of *The Shepherd's Calendar*:

Along the roads in passing crowds  
 Followd by dust like smoaking clouds  
 Scotch droves of beast a little breed  
 In swelterd weary mood proceed  
 A patient race from scottish hills  
 To fatten by our pasture rills  
 Lean wi the wants of mountain soil  
 But short and stout for travels toil  
 Wi cockd up horns and curling crown  
 And dewlap bosom hanging down  
 Followd by slowly pacing swains  
 Wild to our rushy flats and plains  
 At whom the shepherds dog will rise  
 And shake himself and in supprise  
 Draw back and waffle in affright  
 Barking the traveller out of sight  
 And mowers oer their scythes will bear  
 Upon their uncooth dress to stare  
 And shepherds as they trample by

Leaves oer their hooks a wondering eye  
 To witness men so oddly clad  
 In petticoats of banded plad  
 Wi blankets oer their shoulders slung  
 To camp at night the fields among  
 When they for rest on commons stop  
 And blue cap like a stocking top  
 Cockt oer their faces summer brown  
 Wi scarlet tazeles on the crown  
 Rude patterns of the thistle flower  
 Untrickd and open to the shower  
 And honest faces fresh and free  
 That breath[e] of mountain liberty

The static, trapped, parochial nature of the farm-worker thrills to any passing invasion, and always has. Hardy saw the excitement when soldiers from the local barracks were sent to help with the harvest, which he called 'a little red among the corn' and which created great emotions among the girls. And in my lifetime pea-picking itinerants and tramps and Irish travellers all, as Clare said, caught the eye, and captured the imagination. But the Scottish drovers did more than this. They spoke of relationship to him, of mutuality, of something shared. Theirs wasn't the outcast freedom of gypsies, but freedom within the rural structure itself. And the Scottish connection was freely claimed at Northampton. Among Clare's books was the 1817 edition of Burns's poetical works, as well as the five volume 1814 edition which included the letters added by Sir Walter Scott. Also, *Poems & Songs Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* by Robert Tannahill, the young Paisley weaver. But as Goodridge and Thornton state in their essay, the young Clare was as overwhelmed as the rest of the world by the Waverley Novels themselves, and phrases such as 'Heart of Midlothian' and 'Sweet Lammermore' appear in his poems, as well as a distinctly un-Romantic rebelliousness which came from his knowledge of the Scottish struggle after the 'Forty-five.

He began writing Scottish poems at High Beech, Epping, one of the earliest being:

Heres a health unto thee bonny lassie O  
 Leave the thorns o' care wi' me  
 And whatever I may be  
 Here's happiness to thee  
 Bonny lassie O

a variation on Thomas Lyle's 'Let us haste to Kelvingrove' (see George Deacon, pp. 197-8). From then on, until the end of his life, Scotland and Northamptonshire ran together, as do certain estates, with often no clearly marked border between them. A great many of these Scottish Northamptonshire poems are an amorous balladry, about Sally and Susan, and Alice and Ann and Phoebe and Mary, and lassies generally, whose wistful eroticism usually went no further than what would be permissible to recite at a party. We are inclined to flinch politely at the Clare which they reveal, but like Burns he was a man who adored women, who was married, who had had loves and lovers of all kinds, but who, for nearly thirty years, was denied this kind of companionship. The Mary and the Bonny Ann poems, etc., are often exquisite. But some are conventional or banal. All witness to a hunger for women's company, to Clare the lover. Many were written in 1845. He was then in his early fifties, and the Scottish ballad discipline allowed him to call back, as it were, the girls of his boyhood. In August 1848 at the asylum they found a bit of paper in his pocket which read:

Some pretty face, remembered in our youth  
Seems ever with us, whispering Love and Truth

Nor is it likely that a poet who kept meticulous inventories of all kinds, about nature, and rural tasks, and village people, wouldn't find some way of making a calendar of girls. For whilst these occupied a single place in his heart, geographically they were often in two places at once, Lolham Brigs and the Highlands. But what could he more legitimate for such heroines? He manages the Scottish dialect well, and although he possessed glossaries of it, there is a sense in his use of it that he had often heard it spoken, perhaps at Helpston. We know that occasionally he had a Scottish visitor, such as John Ramsay, the Kilmarnock poet, and knew the work of the Scottish songwriter Robert Tannahill, and his fine ear for language and lilt gave his Scottish writing a certain authenticity. He was by nature an escapee, a man who had to mount various barriers which would have confined him, one way or another, since his birth. And at Northampton, outlawed from the freedoms which he had created for himself at Helpston, he took claim to his Scottish inheritance. Sally Frisby, a Helpston girl, who died in 1819 aged 22, and Phoebe from the Rose and Crown at Oundle, whom he had met when he was a militiaman, and Mary King, also from Helpston, 'as brown as a boy', would be amazed to have found themselves translated to the mountains and the heather, but this is what he did for them. And sometimes, as in the beautiful 'White Thorn Tree', written at Northampton in 1845, he sent Helpston itself north.

The one girl who doesn't receive the Scottish treatment is Mary Joyce. She is always with Clare as she was back home at Glinton long ago:

I sleep with thee and wake with thee  
 And yet thou art not there  
 I fill my arms with thoughts of thee  
 And press the common air

Towards the end of his life comes a very interesting poem. A young Scotsman is trying to persuade his girlfriend to leave an English village. Might John Parker have been unsuccessful in persuading Alice to leave home? Perhaps he did not desert her. Perhaps she refused to accompany him north:

1

Will ye gang wi' me to Scotland dear  
 Where the mountains touch the sky  
 And leave your humdrum labours here  
 And climb the hills sa'e high  
 Come leave your fowl your pigs and kye  
 And your mud-floor dwelling here  
 come put your wheel and knitting bye  
 We'll he off to Scotland dear  
 For the summer lark is in the sky

2

The daisys gold in silver rim  
 Is blazing on the mountain side  
 And the skylarks wing in the sky grows dim  
 While the clouds like racers ride  
 So come with me to Scotland dear  
 And thy tartan plaid put on  
 The swallow has come to the new green year  
 And we'll to Scotland now be gone  
 So go wi' me to Scotland dear  
 Ere the winter of lifes comes on

3

And go with me to Scotland dear  
 And leave your English home  
 The gowans bloom, and the scented breere



Will tempt your steps to roam  
 And go with me to Scotland dear  
 Where the crimped brackens grow  
 Where the rose blooms on the mountain brere  
 As white as driven snow  
 Then in the green bloom of the year  
 With me to Scotland go

As I said, he was now right in the Heart of Midlothian, and a far country to which he was by blood attached had become, under Walter Scott's banner, a marvellous freedom, and Clare himself a freeman of it. He wrote to Patty that the asylum was 'the purgatorial hell and French bastile of English liberty, where harmless people are trapped and tortured until they die'. Poem after poem after this has titles like 'To Liberty', 'The Thistle', 'Scotland', 'My Heart is in Scotland', and 'On the bleak hills of Scotland my fancy reposes'. They reveal Clare's knowledge of the years of defeat following Culloden, and the years of recovery partly due to a novelist, of the Scottish fate to he exiled but to come home at the last.

Young husbands go to sea in the poems, they go to sea at Leith in order to make some money for their families. Women—and sometimes Clare puts himself in the Scottish wife's or girlfriend's position—they simply wait. One says:

I like the lad that's like mysel  
 Content to be alain  
 Though he's not a penny for to tell  
 And sits on the hearth stane  
 If hes a man—a comely man  
 My sweet heart he shall be  
 Contentment is the choicest plan  
 Love makes us baith agree ...

I'll luiv and keep him all my sen  
 And gie him a' my heart  
 To me he'll be the man o' men  
 Love's wholly not a part  
 I hate to ain ye bit o' men  
 Like Tailors cabbage gear  
 Ill be his woman every night  
 He my man a' the year

Well, contentment is not a virtue that Clare, inured at Northampton, would ever know. Just as at Helpston, he had all kinds of restless journeys to the lonely kingdoms of birds and flowers, and where gypsies and herdboys and shepherds and drovers sat around fires in the dark nights, mysterious and outside things, in a country which was beyond the parish limits.

And so at Northampton he set out on those piles of rough paper his grandfather's world of mountains and firs and burns and lassies. The injustice done to it joining the injustice being done to himself would not be comfortable, but it would be just. And he had got the climate of Scotland exactly:

1

The rauk o' the hills & the mist o' the mountains  
 Like the reek o' a pot and the smoke o' a kill  
 Draws further off still while the round sun is counting  
 His pulses o' light i' the morning sae still  
 Saftly and chill comes the breeze o' the ocean  
 Saft fans the brackin alang the hill side  
 The vale o' green broom-twigs are a' easy motion  
 Like a green sea o' waters wi' waves rolling wide

2

O maid o' the mountain here's scenes that would please ye  
 Would ye climb but as high at the break o' the day  
 Walk wi' me o'er their taps love and make your life easy  
 And look o'er the ocean mist mealy and grey  
 Life and its cares will be under our feet love  
 Like a hawk that is cheated or a foe led astray  
 We can look on sweet nature in cold or in heat love  
 Unseen on the mountain tops a' the lang day

3

There's the clumps o' rest harrow luv' purple and yellow  
 There's the bushes o' sweet-briar luscious and sweet  
 There's the swallow that twitters and fallows his fellow  
 Like birds o' the ither world under our feet  
 Come to the mountain tops soon after day break  
 Where toads canna' climb and birds seldom fly  
 There's a place i' the rock where a biggin we make  
 And true love will welcome they presence with joy

\* \*

The last poem Clare wrote before his death in 1864 was called 'Birds Nests', and he prefaced it with two lines from Robert Burns's 'Tam O'Shanter', which is one of the poems I used to have to read to Mr Brown:

That night, a child might understand  
The Deil had business on his hand

'Tam O' Shanter', you will recall, is about someone who is temporarily out of his wits, and who goes through hell and high water before being restored to sanity, to his farm, to his wife, by a guardian angel-*cum*-mare Maggie. Shanter was a farm on the Carrick coast and Tam who owned it a character well-known for getting drunk in Ayr on market day and being brought safely home by his faithful horse. John Clare knew all about haunted roads and terrors by the way, and about the warmth of the inn dissipating into cold horror on the dark road. As he says in his autobiography, as a boy running errands along the Maxey lane, he was so frightened by the local ghosts that he used to try and fill his mind with poetry in order to leave no room for them when he passed their 'registered' spots. Burns carries the popular plight of the drunk farmer beyond a joke—carries him into a satanic world which Clare would have glimpsed when sick. His bogies were real enough.

\* John Goodridge and Kelsey Thornton, 'John Clare: the Trespasser', in Hugh Haughton et al (eds), *John Clare in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 87-129.

## THE ULTIMATE DIVIDE

As most people did during the early nineteenth century, John Clare possessed a voice for those who could read and write, and for those who could not. We find in him no condemnation of illiteracy but a ferocious condemnation of 'clowns', that Shakespearian term for rustic fools. What riled Clare was their downright refusal to see what lay before their eyes and which did not require learning to identify it, a flower, a bird, any sight which carried with it feeling and intelligence. For such proudly ignorant neighbours he had nothing but rage. It was they who brought the peasantry into common mockery and who created its stereotypes. He also felt that nature demanded an understanding, a worship even, of those whose lives were closest to it. To turn away from any kind of comprehension of what surrounded the village was to him perverse and, worse, destructive. Violence and savagery could drive the plough. Could indeed drive men like himself out. Clowns existed in every class, shedding their blindness in all directions. Whether they were literate or not never came into it. Clare divided his time between well-read friends such as Edmund Artis and Joseph Henderson, household steward and head gardener respectively to Lord Milton, plus distinguished antiquarian and botanist to the neighbourhood, and to un-read companions such as the gypsies, the herdboys and the lads and girls in the inns, and his own family, father, mother and wife. He believed that the brutality of the countryside continued to persist because the loveliness of plants was ignored, animals were killed as a matter of course and the marvels of the universe deliberately turned into an unread book.

When, later in the nineteenth century, Thomas Hardy gave village people intelligent, even profound voices, his novel-reading public was bewildered. A few decades earlier Jane Austen had forced her heroine Emma to recognise that a young farmer could write a good letter, thus disturbing the educated and non-educated division of the countryside which so conveniently existed then. Literacy and non-literacy was more complex than imagined. Clare's mother and wife were illiterate yet clearly not ignorant, and we have only to glance at the little vestry at Glington to realise that only a handful of local children could have learnt their letters in it. The very fact of their being sent to school would have set them apart. And we come to the mystery of the unlettered—that not being able to read and write gave them a different

intelligence, not 'ignorance'. The literate cannot know what they have lost or the illiterate what they might have gained. I knew quite a number of neighbours who could not read and write in the Suffolk countryside when I was a boy, and I longed to find what they could 'see', that they 'knew',—their heads empty of 'reading'—and full of something else, they usually being so eloquent and differently intelligent. The normality of the many illiterate and the few who could read and write in Helpston made two cultures. Had Clare been one of those farmworkers who could read the Bible and the Peterborough newspaper, his fellows would have admired him and used his skill on the few occasions when they needed to make their mark. But he overstepped the mark. The ceaseless nose-in-a-book business was an affront to them. 'Who did he think he was', etc. He felt his situation, often painfully, and there were those who would have rescued him from it and placed him where everyone read and wrote, unable to comprehend that this village, and none other, was his power base. It was obvious to those who knew him at 'proper' work that books sapped his strength. He had a reputation for sneaking off, for getting out of tasks, for laziness—the worst kind of reputation one could have, man or woman—child even. Worse, they couldn't know what he wrote about them, so they felt exposed by him, which wasn't 'right'. In any case what was there in Helpston for him to be forever putting down on paper? And why didn't his head burst from so much reading? Until recently Dr Fenwick Skrimshire's verdict on the main cause of Clare's insanity, 'after years addicted to poetical prosing', has been seen as an ignorant, even a Philistine one. But Jonathan Bate is surely correct in seeing it as containing some accuracy. For years the poet's friends had noticed the nervous excitement which accompanied his composition and felt worried about it. Illiterate country people, vigorous and intelligent in their own sphere, would until quite recently equate book-reading with ill health. As for book-writing, this would produce less wonder than fear, and was as Clare said his mother believed, among the 'black arts'.

Once, during the process of reviewing Wordsworth's *The Excursion*, William Hazlitt sat in a Wiltshire inn, reading and making notes. And drinking. In this poem there is a passage about the kind of rustic literacy which knows its place and does not stray into 'literature'. It describes a young Scottish herdsman who, although he had attended his stepfather's school, 'had small need of books' once he had discovered Nature. Indeed he was one of:

the poets that are sown by Nature!  
When endowed with highest gifts—

The vision, the faculty divine—  
 Yet wanting the accomplishment of Verse ...

One day this young man walks to the nearest town:

With what small overplus  
 His earnings might supply, and brought away  
 That most tempted his desires  
 While at the stall he read.

No, it wasn't James Thomson's *The Seasons*, but 'the divine Milton', and this single book sufficed him for the rest of his long life. Whatever other learning he had came from Lakeland scenery and the stars. Wordsworth encountered him on his long walks, a poet who could but did not write. Hazlitt was reading about him in the Wiltshire pub when he heard it—the jeer, the irrepressible mockery of John Clare's 'clowns', and thus there arrived what is probably the most furious tirade against rural ignorance in English literature.

Ignorance is always bad enough; but rustic ignorance is intolerable ... The benefits of knowledge are never so well understood as from seeing the effects of ignorance, in their naked, undisguised state, upon the common country people. Their selfishness and insensibility are perhaps less owing to the hardships and privations, which make them, like people out at sea in a boat, ready to devour one another, than to their having no idea of anything beyond themselves and their immediate sphere of action. They have no knowledge of, and consequently can take no interest in, anything which is not an object of their senses, and of their daily pursuits. They hate all strangers, and have generally a nick-name for the Inhabitants of the next village ... The common people in civilised countries are a kind of domesticated savages.

This in 1817, the year before Clare was lime-burning at Casterton and lying low in the fields in his spare time to write and write, and read and read, and to stay out of his people's sight, and to qualify at the vast university of nature.

The solace which writers commonly share is reading. Theirs is a special entrée to literature. They enter the pages of those who created them in a unique way and find themselves at home. It was his reading which both anchored Clare and at the same time sent him off on journeys which took him away from local boundaries. Writers read unmethodically, obscurely, popularly as well as scholarly. Their bookshelves can come as a shock to their

readers, for they are a muddle of the haphazard and the expected. Hazlitt remained loyal to any writer, good or bad, who had given him pleasure, even when he had outgrown them.

Due to the circumstances of Clare's life his books tended to be only of the best. He was in a sense an extension of the literate villager with his *Bible*, *Book of Common Prayer* and *Pilgrim's Progress* who read little else. After the success of his *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* in 1820, books rained in on him from every quarter and even Sidney Keyes, an Oxford undergraduate celebrating Clare's birthday on 13 July 1941, cries, 'I would give you books you never had', not knowing that in this respect the poet was rich. Lord Radstock gave him sermons, of course. It was inevitable. And, equally inescapable, from Mrs Emerson arrived Young's *Night Thoughts*. Lord Milton gave him Crabbe, Dryden, Goldsmith, Pope, until callers became startled by the contrast between the poverty of his cottage and the wealth of its shelves. John Clare's most methodological read took place at Milton Hall where he studied for the great work that never was, his *Natural History of Helpstone*. There, Margaret Grainger believed, he might have read Thomas Bewick's *A General History of Quadrupeds*, William Curtis's *Botanical Magazine*, Donovan's *Natural History of Insects*, William Hayes's *Natural History of British Birds*, and of course Gilbert White's *Selborne*. All these books were included in the Sothebys' sale from Milton Hall library in 1918. What pleased John Clare most as he thought about his publishers' suggestion that he might join the natural history authors was a recent title on their list, *Flora Domestica or the portable Flower-garden* by Elizabeth Kent, for in it she had written, 'None have better understood the language of flowers than the simple-minded peasant-poet, Clare, whose volumes are like a beautiful country, diversified with woods, meadows, heaths and flower-gardens ... This poet is truly a lover of Nature: in her humblest attire she still is pleasing to him, and the sight of a simple weed seems to him a source of delight. In his lines to Cowper Green, he celebrates plants that seldom find a bard to sing them.' Margaret Grainger says that Elizabeth Kent and Clare approach flowers in a remarkably similar way, communicating an infectious delight in plants to their readers. Both have reservations about Linnaean classification. Clare says 'the hard nicknaming system of unutterable words now in vogue only overloads it in mystery till it makes darkness visible'. But, he adds, since his *Natural History* must be correct he will ask Mr Henderson, the Milton Hall head gardener and his friend, to check the necessary classification of the plants he will mention. Thus the ambitious project began, the poet reading his head off and now for the first time not hiding away to do it, but asking everyone in Helpston to tell him their stories about bird, beast, plant, weather

and insect. And what tales came from them! His notion of them as clowns must have taken a knock. Better managed by Taylor and Hessey, who knows what might not have happened? Pressurised in this venture, as in all the rest, the vulnerable mechanism broke. It takes time for a writer to read himself into a new book.

We might now come to that little booklist which Clare felt obliged to send his publishers in 1822 to show how well-read he was. They had sent him John Keats's own copy of Chaucer—on loan it was. In it Clare read *The Flower and the Leaf* in which the nightingale sings. Also *The Complaint of the Black Knight*. He lies in the ground all pale and wan due to his girl's unkindness. As for the author of *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, he was on his way to Italy, Taylor and Hessey having helped to pay his fare. Clare loved Keats's Chaucer. Chaucer was on the list of his favourite poets who 'went to Nature for their images'. Among them was Spenser, Cowley ('The Swallow', in which the poet accuses the bird at his bedroom window of interrupting his dream, a dream which happened to be better than any reality, including that of the swallow), Shakespeare, Milton's *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* and *Comus*, all three of which Wordsworth's one-book countryman would have read over and over again, then John Gay's *The Shepherd's Week*, in which, on Friday we have a girl's funeral:

With wicker rods we fenc'd her tomb around  
To ward from man and beast the hallow'd ground.

By the side of the busy road at Kentford, near Newmarket, lies the grave of a shepherd or gypsy lad similarly protected by 'wicker' (willow) rods to this day. Clare's list continues with Matthew Green's *The Spleen* (1737), a witty affair. Green worked in the City of London where they tried to prosecute him for feeding the cats. He wrote his defence as a poem—and was allowed to continue giving them milk. Close to *The Spleen* comes William Collins's 'Ode to Evening', which would have spoken all too plainly to a tired walker on the Barnack road:

Now air is hushed, save where the weak-eyed hat  
With short shrill shriek flits by on leathern wing ...

Collins, Christopher Smart and John Clare all shared the fate of what in their day was called 'the overthrow of the mind', yet the last of these, I have always believed, went to his books for recovery. He possessed two copies of Gray's poems at Northampton asylum. Thomas Gray, George Crabbe and Clare



himself all spoke up for the least regarded yet most essential of toilers:

Some village Hampden that with dauntless breast  
The little tyrant of his fields withstood ...

It was Admiral Lord Radstock who gave Clare one of his most loved poets, William Cowper. Radstock had written a book called *The Cottager's Friend*. Clare liked what he called 'the bluntness and open heartedness of the sailor', the shabby clothes and the Admiral's indifference to whether he offended or pleased.

Writers do not retreat into books, they advance. They meet their equals, their betters, their inferiors, but rarely know where they themselves stand. All they know is that they are in good company—the best that they are likely to find. To enter a book is to escape from a prison or an emptiness. John Clare carried around with him his twin freedoms, his inventory of Helpston as he had known it in his youth—and his library. The latter included Wordsworth's *Miscellaneous Poems*, 1820, given to him by his father Parker, and his Robert Bloomfield, a writer he thought of as a brother. At the end of Clare's book-list we read why he made it—as a CV to show his fitness to write 'What I intend to call my Natural History of Helpstone "Biographies of Birds and Flowers", with an Appendix on Animals & Insects'. And when he corresponds with Taylor and Hessey in order to create the wonderful natural history that never was, we discover a fine integration of wide reading and specialist reading, and a new kind of authority where this subject is concerned. A chronic addiction to books marries, as it were, the trained eye. What Clare saw in his countryside and what he read in it come together.

Here we have John Clare speaking up for those who were able to see only, who had vision but not literacy:

Many are poets, though they use no pen  
To show their labours to the snuffing age.  
Real poets must be truly honest men  
Tied to no mongrel laws on flattering page.  
No zeal have they for wrong, or party rage.  
The life of labour is a rural song  
That hurts no cause, nor warfare tries to wage.  
Toil, like the brook, in music wears along.  
Great little minds claim right to act the wrong.

## SILENT LIKENESS

My first statue stood on Market Hill, Sudbury, Suffolk. It was of Thomas Gainsborough in his prime and when the great artist was pitched above the noisy market stalls in a stance of supreme achievement. He stared across to his birthplace a few yards west, palette and brush at the ready. His clothes were beautiful and in winter he changed them for a suit of glittering white. The corporation lights swung above him and we locals milled around him, pleased that an Australian sculptor and an America donor had wished him on us in 1912. Our little borough had provided him with weather—warped trees, crumbling banks, thin peasants, and pert girls in tight shiny stays. Later he would move on to Ipswich for country squires and parsons, to Bath for the beau monde and Pall Mall for the royals, although taking with him everywhere scraps of where he came from, broken woods, a hut, patches of burdock, a stretch of blue sky, a church tower which to this day no-one can identify. As a boy I felt rather possessive about him. The sculptor had copied his self-portraits and caught, I thought, his quizzical face to a T. Caught just what I wanted to see.

John Clare had an open, unguarded face, Trouble would pass across it like a cloud then leave it clear, as with all visionaries. It is open to us in three forms, a bronze bust, an oil painting and a photograph, added to which we have Edward Drury's candid description of him to John Taylor, written on 20 April 1819:

Clare cannot reason: he writes and can give no reason for using a fine expression or a beautiful idea: if you read poetry to him, he'll exclaim at each delicate expression—'beautiful!' 'fine!' but can give no reason. Yet he is *always* correct and just in his remarks. He is low in stature—long visage—light hair, coarse features—ungainly—awkward—is a fiddler—loves ale—likes girls—somewhat idle—hates work.

To which the poet Edward Storey adds, 'Allowing for some exaggeration in Drury's description (and he was often guilty of that) there are aspects of Clare's nature which are confirmed both by his own words and those of others. The distinguished features shown in the Behnes Burlowe bust may not have been apparent to Drury who, in those early years, was more

accustomed to seeing the twenty-six year old Clare in his labourer's clothes, unkempt, frequently unshaven, clumsy in the presence of strangers, and certainly fond of a few pints as well as girls'.

In 1820, having accepted Clare's poems for publication, John Taylor commissioned William Hilton to paint a portrait of him as part of the launch onto the literary scene. For then as now people liked to know what an author looked like. Hilton and Peter de Wint had been art students together and both were to become Clare's friends. Hilton was to be a doubly unfortunate artist for not only did he not sell but his use of asphaltum, a mixture of coal-tar with sand and chalk, caused his work to decay. Yet his portrait of the young John Clare increasingly haunts our imagination. Here he is as he was when he was first read, and at the beginning of the life we now know so much about. The picture catches the promise, the hesitancy, the Scottish blood, the plight. He wears his best suit and a look of uncertainty. What is plain is the face of a writer. Eight years later John Taylor commissioned a bust of his now celebrated author by Henry Behnes. Henry and William Behnes were sculptor brothers, the sons of a German piano-maker and his English wife. William was said to be the better artist although something of a rake. Henry Behnes, they said, though inferior as a sculptor was less respectable as a person. He redeemed this reputation when cholera swept Rome, where he was studying and paying his way as a bust modeller, by caring for the sick without much thought for himself, and where the disease took him off in 1837. We remember him because he made a bust of Clare.

About this time an anonymous contributor to the *Druid's Monthly Magazine*, in 1833, saw the new poet on the scene and described him thus: 'The first glance of Clare would convince you that he was no common man, he has a head of highly intellectual character, the reflective faculties being exceedingly well-developed; but the most striking feature is the eye, light blue and flashing with the fire of genius ... and his conversation is animated, striking, and full of imagination'.

In April 1829 Clare told his friend Eliza Emmerson, 'I am very glad you like the Bust as I thought myself it was a good one but Frank Simpson [a Stamford friend] tells me he thinks Harry's [Henry Behnes] last touches in my absence did not add any improvements to it but rather injured the freshness of the likeness that he so happily caught in the model and as it was when I first saw it'. The previous year William Behnes was asking Clare to write a suitable verse for his bust of Princess Victoria. But Clare was ill. 'I wish to accompany your monument yet it is all no use, I can do nothing for the more I try the worse I aim'.

A few years earlier it had all been so different. His learned friend Octavius

Gilchrist had guided the famous young poet around London, and shown him the sights. It was springtime. They had lodged above a jeweller's and watchmaker's in the Strand and had walked to Westminster Abbey in the sunshine to see Poets' Corner, not then crowded with novelists. This part of the south transept had begun its literary life when an Oxford undergraduate had found a wrecked grave, that of Geoffrey Chaucer who had died in 1400. It was now 1556. The student collected Chaucer's bones and had them placed in a magnificent tomb with a canopy, the finest now in Poets' Corner, paying for it, they said, himself, and setting in process our honouring of national literary genius. A few feet away on the outside wall Caxton had set up the first English printing press to publish *The Canterbury Tales* and other works. As we have seen, Clare had been loaned Keats's Chaucer. He treasured it. It was the translation (and bowdlerisation) by Cowden Clarke, Keats's headmaster at Enfield. As Clare stood there one of those rushings together of past and present words would have overwhelmed him, something which most writers experience at some time or other.

In the 1980s I became friends with Michael Mayne when he was Vicar of Great St Mary's, Cambridge, a priest who was steeped in English literature and who loved Clare. Michael Mayne became Dean of Westminster shortly after the John Clare Society had been founded. He knew about Clare's visit to Poets' Corner and one evening when I was staying at the Deanery he said, 'Don't you think that Clare should be there?' The rule was to have a candidate supported by three signatures. I chose those of Ted Hughes, the then Poet Laureate, V. S. Pritchett, President of the Society of Authors, and Angus Wilson, President of the Royal Society of Literature. On the great day Ted Hughes unveiled one of the last stone memorials to be placed in Poets' Corner. Later writers, and some overlooked ones like Herrick and Oscar Wilde, would have their names engraved on windows. John Clare is next to Matthew Arnold for no reason other than space. On it the Abbey Surveyor had carved a bird carrying a sprig of clary, a fanciful interpretation of the poet's name. This plant, *Salvia verbenaca*, wild clary, was once planted on graves during the middle ages in the belief that it conferred immortality on those buried below. Clare would have enjoyed the botanical association but would have not much minded if, as P. H. Reaney's *The Origin of English Surnames* has it, Clare most likely derives from the occupation of clayer, or plasterer. For me it has always had something to do with clarity or Clare in Suffolk, or just bright air filled with language. I had made a huge midsummer cushion out of wild flowers from my fields to lay in Poets' Corner, and the Helpston schoolchildren had brought the descendants of the plants he saw there to his memorial, and we sang his bitter hymn *A Stranger once did bless*

*the earth*, and Ted Hughes read *The Nightingale's Nest*. As Edward Storey said:

And there you were today,  
 your name engraved on stone  
 where all the world comes to respect  
 a nation's poets—Chaucer,  
 Milton, Blake, and those  
 who were to follow your brief fame—  
 Hopkins, Hardy, and T.S. Eliot.

A decade or more later we are still absorbed in the memorial business as the John Clare Society hands over Tom Bates's plaque of the poet in profile, to be mounted in the new John Clare Lecture Theatre at Nottingham Trent University. Once John Clare sat for a painter, a sculptor and a photographer who looked deeply into his features. Tom Bates has him in his mind's eye and what he saw now feeds our imagination. In Clare's day there was a passion for likenesses, a longing for more likeness than 'art', for faces could vanish in no time at all. Our knowledge of Keats would have been quite different had not his friend Joseph Severn snatched from oblivion that eager profile.

Shortly after his visit to Poets' Corner Clare wrote to John Taylor, their shared publisher, 'I am very sorry for poor Keats, the symptoms of his illness I think very alarming as we have people in the same way here, often who creep on for a little while—but it generally proves death has struck at the root—for they mostly go off—my only master whom I lived with when a boy at the Blue Bell went off in the same way exactly—be sure to tell Keats to take care of cold and from extreme fatigue this hot weather—I should like to see the fiz of the man before he drops off'.

Phiz was Georgian slang for physiognomy—face, countenance divine. Only the painter, the sculptor, could preserve this look. Clare, old, noble, tidied up, lived into photography. Our contemporary sculptor Anthony Gormley uses his own body, and those of individuals who would in the ordinary way have not been carved or moulded, and who otherwise would have endured only via the camera. Speaking up for sculpture he said that his Angel of the North unconsciously influences everyone who catches a glimpse of it, usually while travelling, although there can be no common analysis of this experience. But sculpture has always been profoundly influential. I once read that Helen Waddell believed her entire future was directed or changed by her having to pass a great Buddha on the way to school. Her parents were Ulster missionaries in China, unaware that their daughter passed daily through an iconic ground of wisdom and serenity. The work of Epstein,

Henry Moore, Hepworth, Frink, or some unknown carver of the Christ at Vezeley, or some journeyman maker of a general or politician for the local town square, or some unrecognised by the passer-by true work of art such as the statue of James II outside the National Gallery, or many a war memorial, alters things. Statues can be marvellous, can be preposterous, such as Saddam's or the communist Dagon which littered eastern Europe, or unworthy of their subject, such as those in many Roman Catholic churches, but they are never negligible. Their power is very strange. Mostly they remain wonderfully interesting. In the lecture theatre, students will catch John Clare's face and look again, will look him up.



IV.





## IN CASWELL COUNTY

Whenever I leave home, which isn't very often, I tend to go what we used to call 'the extra mile'. I arrive at a quite unforeseen added destination to that which I set out for. These little added journeys have, over the years, overshadowed—overshone—the main trip. I find myself dwelling on them, on the accidents that caused them, on their durability as experiences.

Not long ago I travelled what was for me the farthest ever, to North Carolina to assist in celebrating the founding of the first English settlement on American soil. It was one of those sad plantings that did not take. The first small group of men and women that Sir Walter Raleigh earthed on Roanoke Island returned to England; the next just vanished. Were they drowned trying to get home? Slaughtered by offended Indians? No one knows; it is a mystery. Time, wrote Sir Walter in one of his poems, 'When we have wander'd all our ways / Shuts up the story of our days.' They said he hated the sea.

My plane descended at the city named after him and in aromatic heat. As the chief airborne view of North Carolina is one of trees, I quite expected moist woodland smells to engulf even the runway, but that an entire state should be so fragrant, as clearly it was, surprised me. In this respect nothing had changed since Verrazano rounded Cape Fear in 1524, eyes and nose overwhelmed: 'Faire fields and plains ... good and wholesome aire ... sweet and odoriferous flowers ... trees greater and better than any in Europe.'

William Byrd, one of the finest American diarists, agreed. I had been reading his *Journey to the Land of Eden* for a book I was writing and knew that, if anything, he found the scented perfection of North Carolina, especially where it bordered the Dan River, a danger to human progress, for it produced contentment and indolence. My reason for coming to the state did not stretch this far; Chapel Hill and Duke University were to be my limits, and most pleasant limits too. Going the extra mile does not mean repudiating the point where one should have halted. It is simply that because of what happened so unexpectedly in Caswell County, the university celebrations became a separate story.

It all began with a jolt. Checking my engagements, I noticed that nine days sprawled emptily between them. Why had I not noticed? What should I do? The festival organiser's diary was not nearly so blank. The nine days were for Caswell County, for me to see it and absorb it and make what I could

of it. He drove me to it in the warm dusk, the road deserted and ribboning toward Virginia. ‘Where are we going?’—‘It’s a surprise!’

It was. An antebellum country house in a park, columned, waiting, with whippoorwhills calling through the great crescent of trees that secluded the gardens, the first time I had heard them. The approach was like the opening of a novel, with the lovely house announcing itself in the half-dark amid box, willow oaks and apparition-like magnolias.

A Confederate soldier was buried on the lawn, Night after night I sat above him on the classic balcony listening to the bell-sounding birds and the house creaking as wooden buildings do after a day’s sun, and as my house in England, pegged together at much the same moment that Sir Walter Raleigh decided to populate this tempting countryside, always does after the heat has bitten into it.

Faulkner had stayed here, and many other writers, and the library reflected one of my favourite literary periods, the 1920s to 1940s. I wrote in it part of a play I was working on for Chelmsford Cathedral, but chiefly I lotus-ate, idled and let Caswell County take me over. The scents here were intense, resinous, lemony. I walked past slave cabins to an enormous lake spread with bank-to-bank waterlilies, and past wrecked tobacco fields gone to hay. At Durham the Duke tobacco factories, built when the company’s motto was ‘Pro Bono Publico’, were being turned into shops and restaurants and art galleries.

The reticence and tremendous eloquence alike of Caswell enthralled me. Its grand architecture had never been modernised because of the penury that followed the Civil War, so everywhere I wandered gleamed Greek Revival, now fresh as paint. It was like a scattered wooden Bath. But the atmosphere was still and nerveless, remote and waiting, like parts of rural Britain long ago. Only about 20,000 people live here and most of their work is done in Greensboro, Rockingham County and Danville, Va., daily leaving Caswell to its silence.

But agriculture’s loss is wildlife’s gain, and great tracts of forest and abandoned farmland now preserve the sumptuous flora and fauna of the Piedmont. It was the ancestors of these plants and creatures that filled the pages of America’s first natural history, those delicate watercolours made during the 1580s by John White, the leader of the ill-fated second expedition and the grandfather of Virginia Dare, herself the first English person to be born in the New World.

White, who left his colonists behind to return to England for supplies, brought home paintings of milkweed, cardinals, plantains, Algonquin Indians, fireflies and woodpeckers (‘Marasequo: A woddpicker of this

bignes'—Red-headed Woodpecker), waders and fishes, but none of Virginia and the rest of the Roanokeans, who were never seen again. The site is compulsively searched for answers and has yielded, among other tantalizing fragments, an English sickle. That little corn harvest, if they had one, had been succeeded by mighty cotton and tobacco harvests, but now, everywhere, from the coast to the state's deepest inland regions, the harvest most obvious to the visitor is that of the primal ecology that turned the heads of early travellers.

My incomparably kind host drives me through the bumpy lanes, taking almost as much stock of everything as myself, for often it is only by showing a visitor our own sights that we begin to see what they are. Townlets with big empty shops, the workshop of Thomas Day at Milton, the brilliant but mysterious cabinet-maker whose furniture and fittings, and taste generally, are prized throughout Caswell. Day came here in 1823—from where, nobody is sure. Denying that he was a negro in spite of his looks, he employed slaves and married a black wife for whose sake the Miltonians forced the North Carolina General Assembly to amend the 1827 act forbidding migrant free Negroes to enter the state. A craftsman of genius, Day made furniture from local woods, which with his fabric designs permitted him and his wife to exist in some kind of racial limbo. Staircases, beds, mantels, exquisite floors, chairs, hangings; what a bargain Caswell got, not for its humanity but for its pragmatism.

It is impossible for an English writer to wander through the rural South and not become preoccupied with evidences of slavery and racism, and this not from any 'clean hands' point of view. For Britain made vast profits out of the 'West India trade' and ploughed them into many of the ravishing country mansions that are now among its chief tourist attractions. What we didn't have were black people, or only such a scattering of them as to be a novelty. It is they, of course, who since the 1770s made Caswell's landscape, who dug and ditched its fields, planted its gardens, laid its roads and helped build its pretty houses and churches. (Ditto their anonymous village labouring men and women equivalents where I live, in Suffolk.)

Caswell was notorious Klan country. In the library where I was writing my cathedral play there are bills of sale for people. Outside the courthouse at Yanceyville, just down the road, stand their youthful descendants. Caswell is, I am told, part of the background of Alex Haley's bestseller, *Roots*.

The literary inheritance of North Carolina generally is tremendous, and I can see why. Climate and scenery produce the languor requisite for a certain kind of introspection and creativity. The local writer I particularly like is Reynolds Price, whose books—*The Names and Faces of Heroes*, *A Long and*

*Happy Life*—give me the swift entrée that I need to this captivating place. Guidebooks are one thing, but I always have to supplement them with the novels, poetry and paintings indigenous to an area. Price's epicentre is Macon, a little town four counties east along the Virginia-North Carolina line, and reading him ties up my historic references.

So does meeting the artist Maud Gatewood, who takes me to the Dan River. The house where I am staying is part of her childhood and her paintings of Caswell, to paraphrase a famous summary of John Constable, are a part of the landscape of every North Carolinian mind. She studied under Oskar Kokoschka. As with Reynolds Price, her work brings me as close as anyone can be who hasn't lived here for generations to this fragment of the United States. She is bluff and witty and has something of the panache of an English country lady.

Her new house, half-tucked into a wood, reminds me how cramped and mean its British equivalent is, for we seem to be having minute rooms imposed on us by today's builders. The modern wooden houses I stayed in at Chapel Hill and elsewhere, slightly chilly with air-conditioning, were wonderfully spacious. The forest birds besieged them. So did bird-sized insects. The windows and verandas are screened-in. Iridescent hummingbirds sipped honey-water from little vials, their wing-motion so rapid that their green bodies appeared to be supported by a stain of air. Heart-pine and shrubs pressed right up against the clapboarding. The old Caswell houses, highly ornamental, must have begun their lives in clearings, but the voluptuous vegetation is spreading back.

One night I sat on the balcony under the Grecian portico where the soldier buried just below must often have sat with his family, to watch one of the famous North Carolina thunderstorms, and the vast oaks, old before he was born, in turmoil. There were hundreds more like him down the road at Raleigh in a cemetery that was described at the time as 'a suitable and permanent resting place for the heroes of crushed hopes.' Raleigh had surrendered to General Sherman the day before Lincoln's murder. The great house was new when Sherman's army swept past it and through the Carolinas, ruined their economies and prevented what architecture was left after his devastations (a lot) from being replaced.

For me, the briefly stranded visitor, those few hot days in Caswell County were a pulling together of threads. Each day was 48 hours long and as much yesterday as the present. I seemed to have passed quickly and unconsciously from sightseer to initiate, making few notes, taking no pictures, certain that what I had experienced was safe within me in every detail. This has occurred before in other places, most of them nearer home. It has something to do

with stopping the 'travel', with entering a destination. It takes a little time—more time than travelling, as such, allows. It takes, too, a brand of American hospitality that has no equal anywhere.

The play I was writing in Caswell County was about two women who lived in Norfolk in the fourteenth century, Mother Julian and Margery Kempe, the authors of two of the first books to be written in English by women. Mother Julian was a recluse and lived to be very old without seeing much more than what lay outside the window of her cell. Margery Kempe had travelled to Jerusalem and seen all of the then-known world, but to understand what it meant she had to consult the person who had discovered its meaning simply by staying put. There was something of this enclosed quality about Caswell County and, to me, it was telling.

## COLERIDGE AT NETHER STOWEY

The frantic circumstances which brought Coleridge to Nether Stowey, and which have long since made his cottage in Lime Street one of literature's most potent addresses, were crammed with that worry and despair which are special to moving house. Unbeknown to him as he and his wife and baby son took possession of its cramped quarters on the last day of 1796, the year which would follow would be his *annus mirabilis*. Never again would he write as he did then, never again, or so he later affirmed, would he experience such happiness. For in these small rooms, in the garden, and in the surrounding Quantocks countryside, he would write a dazzling succession of poems which would include *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the first part of *Christabel*, *Frost at Midnight* and *Kubla Khan*. William and Dorothy Wordsworth were to rent Alfoxden, a country-house some three miles distant, so that they could be near him, and between them, in just a year, they would launch a collection of poems which would change the route of English literature. Nether Stowey, rather than the Lakes, would be the birthplace of the Romantic Movement. To this village came not only the Wordsworths but William Hazlitt—ecstatically—Robert Southey, Coleridge's new brother-in-law, Tom De Quincey and Charles Lamb. Each and all were young and had been made even more 'new men' by the hopefulness which had been released by the French Revolution.

The cottage was called Gilbards when Coleridge became Mrs Rendle's sub-tenant at £8 a year. It had two rooms downstairs and three up, a kitchen without an oven, a badly thatched roof and a huge garden, most of which has now disappeared under subsequent buildings. Later it would become a manse, then an inn—'Coleridge Cottage Inn'. In 1892 a local clergyman managed to save it from further hazards or even possible extinction, and in the autumn of 1909 it became the property of the National Trust. Coleridge had tumbled into it during a housing crisis, and although it was in its rooms that he reached the peak of his genius he soon found it unbearable. From Germany, where he had escaped on a walking tour, he wrote to Tom Poole, the friend whom he had wildly persuaded, and against the latter's better judgment, to move him and his family from Bristol to Nether Stowey, 'I must not disguise from you that to live *in* Stowey, and in that house ... is to me an exceedingly unpleasant thought'. For more had happened between the move

and the flight to Germany than either he or Poole, or indeed the Wordsworths, could possibly have anticipated. Coleridge had rented Mrs Rendle's cottage because marriage had tipped him into responsibilities for which he possessed neither the taste nor the ability to cope with. And he deserted it partly because his and Sara's life together soon began to break down, and partly because he and the Wordsworths had stirred up a local hornets' nest. He was twenty-four when he took the cottage, William and Dorothy a little older. All three were at the zenith of their amazing powers, and astonishing they must have seemed to the rural Somerset eye. Moreover, the Coleridges were accompanied by an epileptic young man and the Wordsworths by a little boy—they said, the son of a friend, a likely tale. Worse, both families walked about the lanes and woods all night, scribbling and talking. What was going on?

Troubles came thick and fast. Yet the intensity of everything which Coleridge experienced here, his domestic confusion notwithstanding, would stay with him all his life. He would long to recapture it. Drugs would promise to re-unite him to the marvellous Nether Stowey time but would prove to be will-o-the-wisps. Re-reading *Lyrical Ballads* during the work-packed later years he would ask himself how he had done it, and in a cottage which had made him so unhappy. As for the radical politics which had made him and the Wordsworths so unwelcome in Nether Stowey, they had soon guttered out. Near to death, Coleridge recalled them. 'We, John Thelwall the reformer and myself were once sitting in a beautiful recess in the Quantocks, when I said to him, 'Citizen John, this is a fine place to talk treason in'—'Nay, Citizen Samuel,' replied he, 'it is rather a place to make a man forget that there is any necessity for treason.' Thelwall had touched on the double motive which had brought the poet to Nether Stowey. Its lovely neighbourhood and the enlightened mind of his protector Tom Poole had become the fused ideal which lured him there. It was shortly after Coleridge had settled in Lime Street, that Poole had dropped in a reassuring note, 'By you, Coleridge, I will always stand, in sickness and health, prosperity and misfortunes'. Poole would observe this comradely version of the marriage vows to the letter. It was very like the promise which John Fisher made to John Constable. It went beyond the conventional patronage of the age and involved love.

It was because of Tom Poole that Coleridge, after weeks of panic over housing, recovered his equilibrium following a series of upsets which included enlistment in the army, his failures at Cambridge (he had read all the books he was asked to read there), losing a girl named Mary Evans and marrying Sara Fricker, having his exciting Pantisocracy plan quashed by Southey, running out of funds and finally becoming ill with anxiety. Poole



had given in to the youthful preacher-poet's implorings, found him the Nether Stowey cottage and steadied him. If he did so at first reluctantly, it was not because of any lack of love on his part, or not wanting to have a young hot-head whom his family detested on his doorstep, but because the very practical side of his nature told him that Coleridge simply would not find the life he wanted in Lime Street. Tiny country towns do not support idylls. Anyway, Coleridge's reputation in the West Country at this moment was less that of a writer—although he had published some poems and edited a magazine, *The Watchman*—than that of an exciting lecturer-preacher who was making the Unitarian chapels ring with the new politics. No one could have guessed that it was no gentle literary beginner who was to arrive at Mrs Rendle's uncomfortable cottage, but a great poet on the threshold of unimaginable power. On New Year's Eve, 1796, he crossed the threshold thankfully. Somewhere to live at last. 'I shall have six companions, my Sara, my babe, my own shaping and inquisitive mind, my books, my beloved friend Tom Poole, and lastly, Nature looking at me with a thousand looks of beauty'.

No sooner were they settled and he had begun his self-imposed regime of early morning gardening, reviewing, preaching on Sundays at Bridgwater (he was still thinking about becoming a Unitarian minister as a way out of the precariousness of his existence) than all at once he 'caught fire'. Never before and never later had or would there be such brilliance. Friends crowded his rooms and they, not him, took notice of Sara's drudgery. Charles Lloyd, a disciple-pupil, and son of the founder of the bank of that name, had a bed-sitting room. Nanny the maid also slept in. And there was Hartley, the adored child. 'Like a moon among the clouds', wrote his father. 'He moves in a circle of light of his own making. He alone is a light of his own. Of all human beings I never saw one so utterly naked of self.' Hartley lay by the poet's table. Writing and rocking went together. The cottage contains an indelible imprint of the first years of life of this little boy—'This strange, strange boy'. One February midnight his father would write:

The Frost performs its secret ministry,  
 Unhelped by any wind. The owl's cry  
 Came loud—and hark, again! loud as before,  
 The inmates of my cottage, all at rest,  
 Have left me to that solitude, which suits  
 Abstruser musings: save that at my side  
 My cradled infant slumbers peacefully.  
 'Tis calm indeed! so calm, that it disturbs

And vexes meditation with its strange  
 And extreme silentness. Sea, hill, and wood,  
 This populous village! Sea, hill and wood,  
 With all the numberless goings-on of life,  
 Inaudible as dreams! the thin blue flame  
 Lies on my low-burnt fire, and quivers not;  
 Only that film, which fluttered on the grate,  
 Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing.

An astonishing literary toil was taking place, not only in the small hours in the small house, but everywhere within walking distance of it. For Dorothy and William arrived that summer. All of them were to re-direct the mind from the lethargy of custom 'to the loveliness and wonders of the world before us'. To the young poets this meant both the ordinary life of the countryside and life which was 'romantic' and supernatural. Wordsworth would deal with nature, Coleridge with what lay beyond it. But both would be visionaries. 'With this in view I wrote *The Ancient Mariner*' and in this low parlour. The terrifying ballad for which he aimed to get £5, and so begin to pay the bills, would become the turning point in his fortunes. For no sooner had he finished it and gone off to preach at Shrewsbury, where the twenty-year old Hazlitt walked ten miles to hear him, than he was told that the rich Wedgwood brothers were to give him an unconditional annuity of £150 for life. It would be wrong to omit from the various factors which made the year 1797 such a matchless time for Coleridge—his inspiration, his friendship with the Wordsworths, his discovery not only where he should go but where he *could* go—this modest financial security.

William Hazlitt encountered the headiness of this moment as soon as he arrived in Lime Street that spring. So sublime was it to he invited there that he had prepared himself for 'my first poets' by tramping all the way to Llangollen first so that his head would be filled with glorious scenes and his thoughts refined, and his heart raised to bursting point. He wrote, 'In the outset of life our imagination has a body to it. We are in a state between sleeping and waking, and have indistinct but glorious glimpses of strange shapes, and there is always something to come better than what we see.' He is hinting at what would be the theme of Alain-Fournier's *Le grand Meaulnes*. But when Hazlitt entered Coleridge's house for the first time he thought of himself as an artist to be, not an essayist. Two days later Wordsworth arrived, gaunt and looking like his own Peter Bell. After wreaking havoc with the cheese, he looked through the window and said, 'How beautifully the sun sets on that yellow bank', and Hazlitt wrote it down. The following day the two

poets described their working methods to him. 'Coleridge has told me that he himself liked to compose in walking over uneven ground, or breaking through the straggling branches of copse-wood; whereas Wordsworth always wrote walking-up and down a straight gravel-walk, or in the same spot where the continuity of his verse met with no collateral interruption ... Thus I passed three weeks at Nether Stowey and in the neighbourhood, generally devoting the afternoons to a delightful chat in an arbour made of bark by the poet's friend Tom Poole, sitting under two fine elm-trees, and listening to the bees humming around us, while we quaffed our *flip*'. Flip was a mixture of beer and spirits which was sweetened with sugar and heated with a poker. Coleridge took him 'for miles and miles on dark brown heaths', through Minehead and on to Lynton, which was the seascape of *The Ancient Mariner*, and told him that in *Lyrical Ballads* he and Wordsworth were going to use 'only such words as had probably been common in the most ordinary language since the days of Henry II'. It was a language which at that time neither critic nor common reader associated with poetry, thus the book was a failure. Besides *The Ancient Mariner* it contained *Tintern Abbey*.

This starry conjunction in the Quantocks occurred due to the fact that each young poet had drifted into Somerset at the same moment. After searing political experiences in revolutionary France, and his love affair with Annette Vallon, and the birth of their daughter, Wordsworth had returned to the demands of his family to settle down. It had to be the Church or the law. Then, unexpectedly, he was freed from these unwelcome prospects by receiving a legacy of £900, plus an invitation to tutor the son of a recently widowed friend for £50 per annum, plus too a rent-free farmhouse near Crewkerne. Coleridge had already read some of Wordsworth's early poems, and Wordsworth had already heard of the exciting young Unitarian preacher when they met in Bristol. Each at once recognised in the other the personification of what they were searching for. Return visits to Nether Stowey and Racedown, William and Dorothy's village, were made, and all three writers became thrilled by what must happen. During the hot summer of 1797 the Wordsworths decided that they must be near Coleridge, went house-hunting, and found Alfoxden, a country-house in a picturesque park not far from the sea, to let. Below it lay a glen with a roaring waterfall. Giving Tom Poole as a reference they took it. This closeness would inaugurate a season of fulfilment and pleasure which would never be repeated.

They had hardly decided on how they would employ the freedom which Alfoxden promised, with its many rooms and spacious grounds, when the three-mile walk between this house and the cottage in Lime Street set the pattern. But although they daily trod in the same scenery of what Dorothy

called 'that dear and beautiful place' after they had been driven from it by the local busybodies, each of them would see it entirely differently. For William, fresh from France, it was paradise, but a paradise in which the labouring people, orphans and common soldiers half-starved. For Dorothy it was a paradise of plants, creatures and geographic colour and shapes. For Coleridge it was both a paradise and an oceanic border of terror.

This walking and composing had barely begun before an interruption far more grotesque, though less damaging in the long run than that of 'the person from Porlock' occurred. A combination of tittle-tattle, real mystification and 'patriotism' spread from the Quantocks to the Home Office, and a government spy hurried down to Nether Stowey to find out what was going on. With wild rumours circulating of French invasion, and even of a French style revolution by the 'people of Britain', Pitt's administration was taking no chances. Here were some suspicious folk strolling about at all hours by the Bristol Channel, one of them a young man (Tom Poole) who had stopped the local authority from burning Tom Paine's *The Rights of Man*, a Unitarian minister preaching democracy, and a man and woman with a child who called themselves brother and sister, and who, although they had rented a mansion, spent most of their time making friends with the local peasants. The government spy, whose name was Walsh, put up at the Globe Inn, Castle Street—which was practically next door to Tom Poole's house—and settled down to observe them. The result was that the Wordsworths had not been at Alfoxden for more than a month or two before their landlord gave them notice to quit after their year's lease was out.

If these poets were greatly disturbed by all this, there is little evidence of it either in Dorothy's *Journal* or in *Lyrical Ballads*. They were ceaselessly exploring the combs and woods. The far more devastating business lay in the fact that Dorothy was quietly falling in love with Samuel, and that he was unhappily comparing her mind with that of his wife. It was ill-judged to have married Sara, ill-judged to have done so many things in his life. He was the last of the Reverend John Coleridge's ten children, a boy who had fed on books. Where these were concerned he said he was a 'cormorant'. Glutting on them helped him through the horrors of Christ's Hospital school with its bad food and violence. Southey, his future brother-in-law, had been sacked from Westminster for daring to protest against the flogging there. Much later, hearing of the death of his brutal headmaster, Coleridge told Charles Lamb, another Christ's Hospital student, 'Poor J.B.—may all his faults be forgiven; and may he be wafted to bliss by little cherub boys, all heads and wings, with no bottoms.' He was still at school when he fell in love for the first time. At Cambridge he ran into trouble for being 'an extreme democrat' and for

having already read all the books which the University could offer. In 1793 he ran away and enlisted in the 15th Dragoons as 'Silas Tomkyn Comberbacke', a funny name he had seen on a brass plate in the Inns of Court. As he was quite hopeless on a horse and almost as hopeless on the parade ground, his four month military career was chiefly spent writing letters home for his illiterate comrades, and nursing them when they were ill. In the spring of 1794 his brothers bought him out.

A few weeks later, whilst visiting an old Christ's Hospital friend at Oxford, he was introduced to Robert Southey. Southey's father kept a draper's shop in Bristol and his grandfather farmed in the Quantocks. Thus began the road to Nether Stowey and the dreamland of *Kubla Khan*. During the Oxford visits the eloquent Coleridge turned Southey into a Unitarian and Southey, equally persuasive but in a different sense, began to co-opt Coleridge to a scheme to set up an ideal state in New England. There twelve young men and their wives would live together as a 'pantisocracy' on the banks of the Susquehanna River, a place chosen because of its pretty name. Much of the adventure was planned whilst Coleridge and Southey were on a walking tour in Wales. The latter then took his friend to Bath to meet a girl named Mary Fricker who was engaged to one of the pantisocrats, Robert Lovell. Mary had four sisters, the children of a bankrupt Bristol tradesman. Soon the pantisocrats and their girls were sharing Mrs Fricker's house in Bristol and saving up to emigrate.

Just before this Coleridge and Southey were on another of their great hikes, this time tramping from Cheddar and the Mendips to Nether Stowey, where they each had a special friend. Southey's was George Burnett and Coleridge's was Henry Poole, the brother of Tom. Henry and Tom were the sons of the local tanner who had sent George to the University and kept Tom home to help run the family business. This unfair start was to have astonishing consequences, for Tom Poole, self-educated, used the family wealth for the benefit of the whole town, set himself up in a beautiful house with an extensive library, and became host to many of the great writers of the age. Tom Poole reluctantly brought Coleridge to Nether Stowey because of his implorings. There was no lack of love on Tom's part for this loquacious young man, nor any self-concern at having trouble on his hands. He simply knew that Coleridge and his wife and son could not live in such a place. They were in search of an idyll and Nether Stowey was not idyllic. But it was, as things turned out, quite amazing. There was for instance that walk which Coleridge took without the Wordsworths. It was from Porlock to Culbone where, just above the church, he tumbled into a derelict house, Ash Farm, after a row with his lodger Charles Lloyd. Lloyd sometimes made him both physically and emotionally ill. Coleridge had brought some opium with him

and an ancient book entitled *Purchas his Pilgrim* which contained 'a history of the world in sea voyages and land travelled by Englishmen and others'. Seated downstairs in the farmhouse he took two grains of opium and while he waited for it to take effect he read the following:

In Xamdu did Cublai Can build a stately palace, encompassing sixteene miles of plaine ground with a wall, wherein are fertile Meddowes, pleasant Springs, delightful Streames, and all sorts of beasts of chase and game, and in the midst thereof a sumptuous house of pleasure.

He then went to sleep for three hours and had what he called a vision, awoke with a total recollection of the vision and was writing it down when the most notorious interruption in English literature occurred. 'A person on business from Porlock called, stayed for an hour, and put a full stop to the marvellous poem. Only fifty of what Coleridge later believed would have been two hundred lines had been written. He walked back to Lime Street with this fragment in his pocket—and this was only published years later at Byron's insistence.

An equally propitious walk had been taken a few months earlier when all three friends set off to Watchet. They started on a dreary November afternoon in 1797 and it was nearly dark when they descended West Quantoxhead to search for beds for the night in the little seaside town. Coleridge had been drawn to the north shore of Nether Stowey for some time, just to stare at a particular ship as it came into sight on the open sea. It became for him an immense moment. The landfall of a ship manned by ghosts was a scary notion with which sailors had long frightened themselves, and a friend of Tom Poole had told Coleridge such a tale. He was engrossed at this time with a book called *A Voyage Round the World, by the Way of the Great South Sea* by George Shelvocke, a rascally adventurer who, in 1719, while steering a ship named the *Speedwell* round Cape Horn, was driven as far south as latitude 61° 30' by appalling weather until 'We observed that we had not had the sight of one fish of any kind since we were come to the southward of the Straights of Le Maire, nor one sea-bird, except a disconsolate black albatross, who accompanied us for several days, hovering about us as if he had lost himself, till Hatley, my second captain ... imagining that from his colour he might be some ill-omen, after some fruitless attempts, at length shot the albatross, not doubting, perhaps, that we should have fair wind after it.' After the death of the albatross, the *Speedwell* suffered dreadful gales for six weeks until at last it sighted the coast of Chile. It was Wordsworth who had first read this story and who drew Sam's attention to it.

Between the walk to Watchet in November and his journey to Shrewsbury in January (and his meeting with Hazlitt) Coleridge wrote *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, his major contribution to *Lyrical Ballads*. It was brought over to Alfoxden for reading aloud on 23 March 1798.

The collaboration ended when William and Dorothy were obliged to return the keys of their now much-loved Alfoxden. They left as they had arrived, after a brief stay with the Coleridges in Lime Street. Samuel found life without them intolerable and caused concern when he abandoned Sara for a German tour with Dorothy, William and John Chester, a neighbour. While they were away Sara went back to Bristol to live with her mother. When Samuel came back from Germany he had no intention of resuming a Wordsworth-less existence in Nether Stowey and in June 1800 he followed them to Grasmere, there to become estranged from his wife and to begin a hopeless love for Sara Hutchinson, Wordsworth's sister-in-law. Eventually, throughout his long life, he came to see the Quantock Hills and the cottage in Lime Street as the home of his mightiest achievements. On and on he waited for the lost lines of *Kubla Khan* to come to him, but they never would. Lost too was that spontaneous mastery of language which, in spite of all the difficulties there, seemed to have come so effortlessly to him on those tramps. Nether Stowey itself remains much as he would have seen it. Scores of the buildings which line its crooked streets, its brook, and of course its views are those which he and the Wordsworths knew. One does not need to be fanciful to see Coleridge hurrying along Castle Street and Lime street with his zigzag gait, a thin, dark-haired man in his twenties with clear grey eyes and a wide mouth filled with bad teeth. The following confession by his son Hartley, aged seven, might almost apply to the poet himself.

I see it—and I saw it, and tomorrow I shall see it again when I shut my eyes, and when my eyes are open, and when I am looking at other things. But ... it is a sad pity, but it cannot be helped, you know, but I am always being a bad boy when I am thinking my thoughts.

This was one of the many of Hartley's child-sayings which Coleridge put into his notebooks.

## THE RUNAWAY: LAURIE LEE

The stint of vagabondage and the romance of the open road were at their zenith in 1914, the year Laurie Lee was born. Vain were the attempts of squire, parson and the local press to stem what was called 'the flight from the land'. This wholesale rural exodus was created primarily by the great farming depression which was well set-in by the early twentieth century. It would dominate village life until the second world war. Young men just walked off the farms to the towns, and out of their ancient traditions, leaving behind a kind of beautiful inertia beloved of watercolourists, a penniless scene of 'tile-spilling farms', as Lee put it.

Both he and his father fled from rural Gloucestershire, though differently, and leaving their wives behind them. Lee senior went off because he was driven by the excitements and possibilities of the new freedoms which life promised, Laurie because he had to gain some perspective on who he actually was, being a poet and all that. 'Young men don't leave a lush creamy village life solely for economic reasons', he said. But there were not many youths, faced with fieldwork and penury, who would have given a thought to its topping of lush creaminess. And to give Laurie Lee his due, he never forgot the hardships and limitations which he so famously coated with opulence. He knew what lay beneath.

His books are retrospective, that of the countryman in perpetual exile and who is always young. Lee believed that 'the only truth is what you remember', but he would worry a bit about what he called 'the censorship of self' and 'some failure between honesty and nerve'. But access to a lyrical language gave him just the right balance to record what he felt had happened to him. One of his great attractions as a writer is his admittance to making journeys without a cause. His interest in the Republican cause in Spain was minimal and yet his wonderful account of the defeat of the Republican Army in 1937 makes *A Moment of War* (1991) an unforgettable addition to the literature which came out of that conflict. He had walked into that war as he had walked out of Slad, with his fiddle under his arm and with his open, watching face, apparently never asking himself Why? A road led there.

After an office job in Stroud—it was the day of the office-boy—he simply walked to London to live 'in the flats, rooms and garrets of this city, the drawers in the human filing-cabinets that stand in blank rows down the



streets of Kensington and Notting Hill'. The analogy fitted him well because from then on he would exist happily in a papery mess with daily outings to the pub. After *Cider with Rosie* (1959) the bar became his court and he was always the author on show, both in London and Slad, though giving little notion of what it cost him to write and re-write his books, the long crafting of them in soft pencil, and especially the difficulties of hauling back into his consciousness events that had occurred sometimes decades ago.

In order to achieve this he had to become the young wanderer he had once been. There are few middle-aged or elderly views on a Laurie Lee page. 'One bright June morning, when I was nineteen, I packed all I had on my back'—and the reader is away. And so is the author.

Lee's first poems were published in *Horizon*. He was then working with the G.P.O. and the Crown Film Unit during the early Forties, and then as Publications editor for the Ministry of Information. Although at this time in casual pub contact with the literary world, it was not until a friend showed Cyril Connolly some of his work that he decided to be a writer. He was immediately prolific and promising. Collections with lovely titles, *The Sun my Monument* (1944), *The Bloom of Candles* (1947), *My Many-Coated Man* (1955) were praised for the originality of their technique but criticised for their absence of depth. But what did they expect from a troubadour? Just as light tunes start feet tapping, so Lee's lines made his readers long to walk out of things.

And then came *Cider with Rosie*, that evocation of rites of passage in Lush-creamy-land—boys do not wait to grow-up there—and its brightly coloured happiness. Few who had witnessed the realities of the time would have countenanced its existence. Yet it did exist. The wild flowers grew, the birds flocked, the cottages burst with brothers and sisters, the teachers taught rot, the churchbells tumbled, mothers worshipped the Royal Family, fathers were liars, and life was incongruously exultant. What could be done? Nothing. Slad is situated in a darkish valley, anyway.

Laurie Lee's parents, although festooned with a rich, loving, head-shaking array of words, are nonetheless archetypal products of the 1870 Education Act, domestic service and the collapse of agriculture. Unlike their son, they were mad on books. Each was a dedicated escapee from the humdrum, father spinning away to the suburbs in his new car (cranking it in one of them would kill him), mother into total romance which involved loading the house with pretty nicknacks, adoration of the gentry and novels. Laurie sees his mother as both an artist and a buffoon, and his father as deplorable. His portraits of both of them are relentless yet amused, rather like his description of rural education. All the characters in *Cider with Rosie* are involved in

perpetual rites of passage, and are absorbed more in touch, scents and glimpses than sights.

Despite Leonard Woolf's apparent lack of enthusiasm when the manuscript arrived at Hogarth Press it would sell six million copies. Under its flowery bower of language countless readers have found a tough enough social history to reveal to them just how things were for their own country relations not so very long ago. The success of *Cider with Rosie* would commit Laurie Lee to autobiography and he made it the first volume of a trilogy.

*As I Walked Out One Midsummer Morning* followed in 1969 and *A Moment of War* in 1991. Try as he might, Lee could never quite convince people why there were such huge gaps between each volume, none of which was of great length, and the last one honed to the bone, so to speak. Whilst *As I Walked Out One Midsummer Morning* trails many of the by now famous enchantments of *Cider with Rosie* and allows the author, the vagabond boy with the violin, to enter a Spain as yet untouched by tourism and to do what can never be done again, wander around in near-medieval scenes, encountering generous girls whose innocence is on a par with his own, and with still no connection with hippiness, *A Moment of War* abandons all those elements in his previous work which had been so beguiling. Instead, it is a small masterpiece of recollected helplessness and terror, the result of 'a number of idiocies I committed at this time'.

These were to walk across the Pyrenees in the December snow during the bloody winter of 1937, knock on the door of a Republican farmer and say, 'I've come to join you'. After a few old Spanish courtesies Lee was at once locked up as a spy. Between then and his rescue by Bill Rust, editor of the *Daily Worker*, Lee would, had he felt at all strongly its ideals, have been part of the martyrdom of the International Brigade. But he did not. He seems to have just walked into a civil war simply because it was somewhere for a walker to go. But he also believed that the Spain of *As I Walked Out One Midsummer Morning* would protect him. Instead, he and another lad were thrown into a kind of St John the Baptist-type hole and, a few days later, his companion in horror was dragged out and dispatched like a rabbit.

*A Moment of War* is written with brilliant economy and has a place in the remarkable literature which the Spanish Civil War inspired. It is cinematic in its sharp detail and its remorseless atmosphere, and it may have some kind of throwback to the Laurie Lee of the film unit. It succeeds in doing that rare thing, documenting the helplessness and fright of the individual under ruthless soldiering conditions. *As I Walked Out One Midsummer Morning* had led him to the verge of this explosiveness. He recognised the cruelty and murderousness of Spain as he got away. When he returned for what to the

Republicans was no convincing purpose, it was like stepping on a landmine which had been situated at a spot where there was no reason to cross. The narrative is simple and tense and has some of the qualities of a novella. And, as so often in accounts of young men close to death, a faint eroticism floats about it. Lee was in his seventies when he wrote it. As a writer he was both the youthful hero and the mature craftsman, the disengaged onlooker and the participant. He needed to be faraway in time and in miles from what and who were closest to him, his wife, his roots and especially his first travels. His art employed a soft pencil for hard times but he was also a young old man who appreciated being alive.

## GOD'S TRIP TO DORSET

Theodore Francis Powys was fifty-two when his best novel, *Mr Weston's Good Wine*, was published in 1927. He was already thinking of himself as a writer while still in his teens and working a small farm at Sweffling, Suffolk. Having been educated at an Aldeburgh school run by family friends, it probably seemed quite a reasonable thing for his parents to do to place this large, strong seventeen year-old in such a situation, to give him independence and to see what he would make of it. There were also considerable family associations in the area, for although Theodore's father, the Reverend Charles Powys, was obsessed by what he believed was his descent from Welsh princes, his mother was equally proud of her Norfolk descent from the poet William Cowper. Theodore had often spent holidays at his grandfather's Norfolk rectory, and what with the close companionship of his headmaster's son Louis Wilkinson, a young man who was to play an influential role in the lives of a number of the Powys children, there was a period during his early years when Theodore must have felt himself less West Country than East Anglian. But his brothers John and Llewellyn were never even partially deceived and with that passionate sibling intuition regarding each other's states of mind and emotional need which was to hold them close to the end, they came to regard Theodore in Suffolk as Theodore in exile.

In any case there could not have been a worse time, economically speaking, to be thrown into farming, than this 'coming down' time of the long agricultural depression. Village life was running into poverty and ruin, and a new kind of harshness was beginning to appear in rural society. Added to which, this son of the rectory, brought up in a secure, unquestioning Anglican orthodoxy, was discovering that he was the kind of person who would question everything. Question but not dismiss, not rout or not replace—which is by far the least comforting of all reactions to what one is told one must believe. It was easier for John Cowper Powys, who replaced the Trinity with the thousand divine essences of the universe, and for Llewellyn Powys, who became an atheist and free of all gods. Theodore's difficulty was to retain a mounting admiration for Jesus which was in proportion to his mounting dislike of God. What to do with God became the Powyses' main dilemma, as a moral and imaginative force, that is. John broke him down into sacred facets which caused every hill, stream, rock and plant to illuminate

existence, Llewellyn eroticised him (which all three brothers did to a large extent) but Theodore catechised him, and never more brilliantly than in *Mr Weston's Good Wine*. The title comes from a scene in Jane Austen's *Emma* where the young rector Mr Elton, returning with Emma in her carriage when she knew 'he had been drinking too much of Mr Weston's good wine, and felt sure that he would be talking nonsense', has the nerve to make love to her. What is it that God gives his creatures? Theodore Powys asks. Is it Dutch courage or a blurred vision, or an opiate? Or that bliss which pours from the fruit of the true vine? After men, particularly clergymen, of course, have explained God for centuries, Theodore now, very respectfully but firmly asks God to explain himself, which he does as well as he can, and certainly without talking nonsense. It is an audacious theme for a novel and perfectly sustained to the last page.

All three Powyses remained profoundly religious men who had, each in his own way, got themselves unchurched. This was in no sense part of the usual post-Darwinian dilemma and loss of faith but the result of their dramatic understanding of the mystical nature of what we call reality. The effect of the rejection of their conventionally imbibed Anglicanism was for all of the brothers one of expansion and release, Theodore the heretic most of all. They recognised that they had made a collective advance into an exciting creed-less dimension and for the rest of their lives they shared the discoveries made there, including the sexual ones. Yet it remained a sacred dimension, and the quandary for the modern reader is how to perceive and comprehend this triple-stranded Powys sacredness. To call Theodore's novels and short stories 'black comedies', Llewellyn's essays and autobiographies 'erotic' and John's novels Celtic fantasies simply won't do. Powysdom continues to be a rare literary height because it offers some of the eternal views in an inimitable language. Writing of the brothers the poet Peter Redgrove made the point that 'the occult or magical life, the life lived according to a reality behind the veil, the Romantic or symbolic life, gets an exceedingly bad press in the serious journals of our age. It is the positivistic spirit that has prevailed, which claims that the surface reality apparent to our conscious senses is all that matters, and that there are no "unconscious" senses at all, through which the unseen influences the seen. It has been difficult for scholars to accept that the magical view of life of so great a writer as W. B. Yeats was not just an aberration but his very core; and it is likely that the paganism of the brothers Powys has not helped them towards the wide acceptance which is their right.' This is true. It is fatuous to dismiss the core of a writer's imagination as a weakness or as something which can no longer be taken seriously, when it is clearly the centre of his art and originality. At the heart of all three Powys

brothers lay what might be described as a natural mysticism, that sensuous searching and probing of this life, this earth.

Theodore was the third of the Reverend Charles Powys's eleven children by his wife Mary Cowper Johnson and part of a triumvirate which has no parallel in English literature. Although so individual and so different, John, Theodore and Llewellyn project a unity, a blood vision which continues to synchronise whatever they are writing. They remain curiously undated too, even when, as with *Mr Weston's Good Wine*, nothing is spared to evoke an historical moment in 1923, the year in which the story is set. They were near-contemporaries of Arnold Bennett, H. G. Wells, Virginia Woolf, E. M. Forster and John Galsworthy, but their names do not suggest a similar period connection. It is because by imposing a kind of religious timelessness on their stories and essays, they appear to have severed them from the chronological position in which one would expect to find them. 'The Powys Brothers' do not sound Edwardian, or Twenties, or decadal in any way, they simply sound very old and very new, like a mountain morning. It is still a disturbing business to become involved with them, and with Theodore especially.

He was born in Shirley, Derbyshire on 20 December 1875, where his father was the vicar. Ten years later the family moved to Montacute, Somerset, and into that myth-filled countryside which was to have such a lasting and profound effect on it. Theodore left school when he was fifteen, soon grew a large moustache which, wrote his friend Louis Wilkinson, made him look 'astonishingly like Nietzsche. I remember him as a heavily built young man with grey melancholy eyes. His manners were courteous to the point of what seemed to me an ironic deference. Always he was a countryman ...' Wilkinson added that he also saw in Theodore a mixture of fantasy and cruelty, benevolence and poetic sensitiveness, plus a 'goblin humour'. Already he had begun upon that long dialogue between himself and God which he was to bring to such a brilliant conclusion in *Mr Weston's Good Wine*. He wasn't happy and would rarely ever be. In 1902 he went to write in a cottage at Studland on the Dorset coast. Shortly afterwards he met his future wife, a practical, good-hearted and uneducated village girl named Violet Dodds, telling his brothers, 'I don't want anything intellectual. I want little animals' roguery. I don't like ladies.' It was Violet's famous talkativeness and her entrée to a great range of colourful rural experience which brought him into imaginative contact with a whole new world of rural drama. In 1907 his first book, *An Interpretation of Genesis*, was privately published, after which he turned to fiction, and wrote a long stream of novels and short stories, all of which were rejected. But in 1916 he published an essay called *The Soliloquy of a Hermit* in which he sees himself as a 'priest' and a kind of secular mystic,

someone who is always on the alert to ‘catch God on His own thought’, and this too shows him moving towards the darkly-witty God or man argument of *Mr Weston’s Good Wine*. About this time he summed himself up in a caustic thumbnail portrait. ‘Mr Thomas is married, and he digs in his garden ... (He is) what we call in the polite world, “a crank” ... Mr Thomas used ... to brood in odd corners and try to hatch a little God out of his eggs—a little God that would save his type, the outcast monk type ...’ These years of toil and neglect were brought to a halt when a friend introduced him to a writer some eighteen years his junior, and who as yet had had nothing accepted. Her name was Sylvia Townsend Warner. It was she who immediately understood his uniqueness and excellence, and who got the influential David Garnett to bring his work to the attention of Chatto and Windus. The celebrated country stories then began to appear in rapid succession, first *Black Bryony* and then on via *Mockery Gap* and *Mr Tasker’s Gods* to his masterpiece, *Mr Weston’s Good Wine*.

In his remarkable collective biography *The Brothers Powys*, Richard Percival-Graves quotes Sylvia Townsend Warner on the way in which Theodore worked. His ‘books grew like stalactites and stalagmites. He deposited them, secretively in a cave. After breakfasting, rather late, and leisurely, he went off to the parlour, sat down before a large solid table, read for half an hour (usually in the Bible) and then set to work. He wrote uninterruptedly for three hours or so, put his work back in the table drawer, and began again, where he left off, on the following morning ... When I happened to pass the window, I saw the same grave, dispassionate countenance, pen moving over the paper, dipping at regular intervals into the inkpot.’

T. F. Powys’s maternal ancestor, William Cowper, could have provided the initial idea for *Mr Weston’s Good Wine* when he began a hymn with ‘God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform’ and ended it with, ‘God is his own interpreter, and he will make it plain’. The Deity in the guise of a travelling salesman selects an average English village in order to inform himself of the current state of the world. Has he made it plain? is the recurring question. Life, death, good and evil, time and timelessness? The reader is invited to come to judgment. God, alias Mr Weston, ages past, started something which he now needs to take stock of. Not wishing to create too much interest in a country parish, he drives to it in a Ford van labelled ‘Mr Weston’s Good Wine’ but as this is 1923, it creates interest enough, especially as Mr Weston’s assistant is a staggeringly good-looking young man named Michael, who is clearly the same person as that painted on the sign of the Angel Inn. The date is 20-21 November, a significant one, for it is the

week before Advent, and Mr Weston could be thoughtful in getting his visit over before there is another arrival. The Sunday of the week of Mr Weston's visit would have been called 'Stir up Sunday' by the inhabitants of Folly Down, from the first line of the Collect, 'Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people,' and stir them up Mr Weston certainly does, but also himself in the process.

What he witnesses, understandingly, forgivingly, and guiltily, is a marred creation, and what he offers is not the possibility of perfection but a palliative. To be human is to be flawed, badly or slightly, but imperfect all the same. His wine cannot, or perhaps must not (or 'what's a heaven for?') mend these flaws but it can make them privately tolerable and publicly less damaging. What Mr Weston offers, in fact, and here lies the essence of the T. F. Powys heresy, is not the wine of salvation but the wine of comfort. Strict to his quirky Christianity, the writer drew comfort from the weekday liturgy in Mappowder Church although he refused its chalice on his deathbed.

The novel opens in the market-town of Maidenbridge which serves as the prelude for the main drama of life which, of course, always takes place in a village. Mr Weston's course is to consult his assistant on everybody who walks down the street or emerges from a doorway. The atmosphere is one of ennui and an exquisite provincial dullness wittily observed.

What T. F. Powys achieves here is a view of the town as the rustic eye sees it, a community caught up in a broader but not necessarily more dramatic rhythm than that of the countryside. After it has been tantalisingly set in motion for a few brief pages the whole place disappears until the last sentences of the novel when Mr Weston, deputising for the author, says 'We have forgotten Miss Nancy Gipps.' She is the first of those 'affectionate and forgiving' women who populate Powys's erotic-imagination and who he can hardly bear to let fall into the clutches of the mainly brute males who either ignore them or pursue them like quarry. Miss Gipps loves Mr Board, the Mayor of Maidenbridge, who could scarcely be less worthy of her. The first girl whom Mr Weston and Michael actually encounter is the one they run over on the way to Folly Down, a mere child who, of course, is at once restored to health. But Michael muses on her future:

A human girl-child is a creature set in a dish for time to feed upon. She wears garters, frocks, and petticoats, and later, frills and pink ribbons. She walks out on the seventh day of the week and sighs for a pair of holiday trousers. They meet and embrace, and amuse themselves as best they may for a few short years, and then they fall sick and go down to the dead.



‘And what harm is there in that?’ asked Mr Weston, guiding the car carefully round a corner.

Before Mr Weston drives down into the hamlet which is to be the representative of all the countless groupings which Christian men have formed on the earth, he stops the car to stretch his legs ‘and walk upon this pleasant hill.’ Blake’s question is answered. Those feet have walked upon England’s mountains green. The triumph of *Mr Weston’s Good Wine* is achieved by the utmost delicacy of its references, a kind of definite feather touch. This is where it entertains yet is simultaneously profound. Mr Weston-God, who had ‘risen, as so many important people do, from nothing,’ and who ‘had once written a prose poem divided into many books’, and who can say, ‘How often I have to remind you, Michael, that in our trade report the women come last. Ours is the only business, you know, that they do not dominate,’ is both Creator and his critique in one. While he puts Folly Down to rights, its people—his creation—are able to tell him a thing or two.

T. F. Powys’s English village is far removed from what we have been told by others in fact and fiction. It is his own village-bred sights and deeds and dreams reduced to the common pattern of country life and made to animate an insular community. The characters are all the things he fears or desires. Some are gargoyles, some medieval saints. Class is barely relevant and is kicked around like a piece of meaningless finery. A fiercely-protected gullibility reigns. To challenge the general acceptance of what has to be believed would be like cutting short the ramblings and point of some self-satisfying old tale. Everybody knows his or her place, but it is the place in a game. Nobody stops playing when someone gets hurt. T. F. Powys’s most brilliant comic invention is Folly Down’s gargantuan ignorance, its meticulously maintained state of unknowing. To possess a vision which went beyond the parochial view of life would be a terrible handicap in Folly Down. Was this the reason why Mr Grobe the rector did not send his daughter Tamar (the height of the author’s girl-fantasies) away to school? Or was it simply sloth? Tamar’s ignorance of the facts of life did at least allow her to marry an angel unawares, so perhaps her father did right.

Before this apotheosis beneath the oak tree, Michael, now in his role of Recording Angel, presents the local inhabitants, one at a time, to Mr Weston, who lovingly assesses which of them needs the wine of comfort, strength and hope, or the wine of oblivion; who needs a not too clear view of reality and who needs the cup to speed him beneath the waters of Lethe. Except for the rector, who doesn’t believe in God and who has a benign notion of his fellow men, Folly Down is roughly divided between those who put all the ills of the

world down to the Almighty and those who put them down to human lust, or 'old Grunter', as they call their gravedigger-sexton. Mr Grunter is the village scapegoat or sin-eater, a role he silently accepts; although quite innocent himself of the debaucheries attributed to him, he carries in his person both the guilt and the gallantry. In a small place, you can't go around blaming everybody for every wronged girl, so you blame only one—'old Grunter', or human failings personified. The villagers are made to reveal their entire characters through their sexuality alone and, contrary to what the Christian religion insists, Powys's God finds this natural enough. What is hateful to him is male cruelty in the pursuit of sex and the blunting of tenderness in some older women. Mrs Vospers, who procures girls for the layabout sons of the squire, is a heartless, voyeuristic bawd who, it has to be said, also procures keyhole excitements for the author himself. But they are artistically deliberate excitements and all part of a black comedy in which Powys's creative eroticism has to find literary expression. His unmarried girls drift about the lanes in peril and innocence, his married women are house-bound drudges with sharp tongues in their heads. Jenny Bunce, the landlord's daughter and maid at the Rectory, who is the epitome of all good and lovely village girls, is, by the grace of Mr Weston's wine, brought most joyously to the arms of an untypical man, the rather girlish himself Luke Bird who, after losing his job in the brewery by preaching teetotalism, now spends his time bringing the bulls and sparrows to Christ.

Having interviewed everybody, taken a look into the church (the first time he had ever been in one), and seen the two extremes of human conduct, plus that large middling section of it which does nothing very good and little that is awful, Mr Weston shakes his head, which, of course, is as white as wool, and asks himself, 'where did I go wrong?' In creating the world and the need for each generation of its living creatures to replenish themselves? In not ensuring that all men were given a far greater share of God's finer feelings? Saddened, self-critical, Mr Weston's conclusion is that Man since the Fall, having become on the whole incorrigible, God's love for him is best expressed in healing or diverting him from the excesses of his waywardness and instincts, or in drugging him when things become unendurable. And so, in faultless allegorical language, Mr Weston does his Folly Down round while time stands still. A perfect balance is struck between the novel's wit and satire, and its profundity. There is nothing comparable to it. Now nearly a century old, it joins the classic tales of the English countryside, as well as being one of the most penetrating statements on the role of the Christian God in the post-Constantinian era.

## LISTEN WITH FATHER

Having done our duty at the Ipswich bookshop we emerged into the Buttermarket, not quite certain what to do next. We shook hands and said our names, this in spite of them having been writ large on placards by our publishers. But the book-signing tables had been placed too far apart for us to have any real introduction. Then we each exchanged our books. His was *The Mouse and his Child*. I read it on the train home with amazement.

The literary evidence which in childhood moved us to recognise tragic experience is not the same as that which moves us when we are grown up. We have learned what we can recover from and what we cannot—even if, like Sir Thomas Browne, we agree that the world is not an inn but a hospital, somewhere not to live but to die in. The chief difference in our attitude towards the happiness quest in literature is that we cannot now accept, as we did as children, the need to suffer so such before becoming happy ever after. How we loved our sad stories then, the sadder the better. How marvellous was grief, were tears. How satisfying it was when the wicked bled or were blown up, and how perfect it was when the virtuous took possession of the firelit cottage or the towering castle. *Dulce Domum*, that is where we were heading for—even when we should, at our age, have been thinking about leaving the nest.

Russell Hoban's *The Mouse and his Child* is now established in as many grown-ups' as children's minds as one of the great classic tales of finding one's way home. For the adult reader, it provides the imaginative strength and originality of the classic fiction of childhood without one having to make the emotional and intellectual adjustments which are usually necessary in the re-discovery of those stories. This since it was never a 'children's book' for the adult reader in the first place. Similarly, a child reads it as a book exclusively written for childhood and will eventually look back on its suffering as something which only a child can share. Of course, the same response could occur to an infant or adult reading *Alice in Wonderland* or *The Wind in the Willows*. Or a Victorian children's novelette of little literary but huge emotional merit.

Russell Hoban's story is of two tin mice jerking their way through all the pitfalls of the happiness quest. Adult readers do not expect to be overwhelmed by it—and are upset when they are. Hoban quotes Auden—

‘the sense of danger must not disappear’—and it doesn’t. One feels every tender concern and distress until this battered toy is gathered into the safety of the doll’s house.

Father and son are joined together by their hands in a dancing position, with the clockwork in the father. The son is hollow and helpless, the mere appendage of a wind-up. And the father himself, like all wind-ups, relies on a greater power to turn the key which creates movement. Uncertainly and through much humiliation and cruelty, the pair journey towards the longed for freedoms of self-wind. Starting out with dear companions from the Imperial Palace whence they came—the toyshop—and after enduring every kind of moral and physical hazard, which are enough to make one cry, they enter the country of self-wind with its eternal dance. Though it is a witty book, a shattering melancholy keeps on breaking in, and one arrives at the last page feeling that one has had a very grown-up experience indeed.

Russell Hoban and I met again a few years later, this time at an arts festival held in a redundant church in Colchester where the Lord and his saints stared down at the post-Sixties scene reproachfully. I watched Russell watching a group of English teachers doing performance poetry on a stage below the chancel arch and would hear him later questioning them about this in his soft American voice. Would it not be better to write and read? He and I went for a drink afterwards in a pub over the Roman gateway to London, a part of which had been bashed away in the 1840s so that the customers could see the new railway station and its activity. Inside, the pub was heaving, outside the night was scented with the flowers which thrive on ancient walls. I had been reading his first adult novel, *The Lion of Boaz-Jachin and Jachin-Boaz*. It is about another father and son, although these two struggle to break apart and rush off into full-blooded independence. It is a parable which begins in that still parabolic area the Near East, although it ends on what sounds mighty like the Thames Embankment, though no specific geography is mentioned.

Jachin-Boaz the father is forty-seven, like Russell at this moment, and although he knows that he can now call himself middle-aged, he does not believe that he has as many years ahead of him as he has behind him. He is moreover impotent with his wife and seemingly inconsequential to his sixteen year-old son Boaz-Jachin. And so it is understandable that, lying awake by the dull haunch of his wife, Jachin-Boaz should think of death and ‘of himself gone and the great dark shoulder of the world for ever turning away from the nothingness of him for ever in the blackness’. He, the fine map-maker and the descendent of many map-makers, is about to be lost. What is worse, having spent years making a map for his son—a master-map at that—so that the boy at least will not have trouble finding his way through life, he discovers

that Boaz-Jachin much prefers a map he has made himself. It is full of rubbings-out and tentative routes, naturally. What makes his son so perverse? Everyone else Jachin-Boaz knows is only too glad to have one of his maps. In the map shop beneath his bedroom he:

... would sell a young man a map that showed where a particular girl might be found at different hours of the day. He sold husband-maps and wife-maps. He sold maps to poets that showed where thoughts of power and clarity had come to other poets. He sold well-digging maps. He sold vision-and-miracle-maps to holy men, sickness-and-accident-maps to physicians, money-and-jewel-maps to thieves, and thief-maps to the police.

But he is quite unable to sell or give a map to his son, for, as the boy says as he glances at his father's charts full of information, 'If there's no empty space where can one put the future?'

Way out in the desert but not far from the map-shop lies the kind of ruin which Edward FitzGerald may have had in mind when he wrote,

They say the Lion and the Lizard keep  
The Courts where Jamsh?d gloried and drank deep:  
(*The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, verse 17)

except that in this case the lion is in bas-relief on a tawny wall. It would have to be for, as all the world knows, and including Jachin-Boaz and his son, there are no lions anymore. They are extinct. In fact, when Boaz-Jachin wants to irritate his father he begs him to make a map showing where to find lions. 'I don't understand you', says father, which is the key, of course, to what has to follow:

'You know very well there are no lions now. The wild ones were hunted to destruction. Those in captivity were killed off by a disease that travelled from one country to another carried by fleas. I don't know what kind of a joke that can be.'

Nevertheless, shortly afterwards, Jachin-Boaz's wife wakes to find half the cash gone and a note from him saying 'I have gone off to look for a lion'. As her son explains, his father means something else. But when the boy goes off to search for his father he makes straight for the ruined palace with its carved-lion court. It is a busy place. Trippers picnic on the artificial hill erected by the

king in order that his subjects would admire his mastery during the lion hunt. And an efficient complex of lavatories, car-parks, informative archaeological digs and souvenir stalls surrounds the hall where monarch, chariot, attendant and lion are frozen in a vast bloody design. Boaz-Jachin wanders about bewitched, and taking strength and divinity from the lion while noticing how 'everything was lion-coloured, low, tinny, broken, preserved in forgottenness, found so that its lostness might be fixed, and made permanent, fenced-in, stripped naked of time and earth, humbled, refusing to say a word'. He notices too that the lion has only come to within reach of the king's spear because it has let itself be carried there by the turn of the chariot wheel.

Jachin-Boaz, his father, will have none of that submissiveness. Hence his flight to another country and to a woman who makes his body feel young again. They get jobs in two different bookshops and have sex in a flat like teenagers. He only thinks about his deserted wife when the newspaper headlines which he glimpses on the Underground change from war and politics to 'Jachin-Boaz guilty!' But the pursuer is on his trail. It is his son, a young lion with a guitar demanding his father's space. The first danger father encounters is an actual lion which, had it not been for a cruising taxi, would certainly have gobbled him up. His dreams of death return, though not his impotence. The next time he goes out he takes a big bag of beefsteak with him for when he meets the lion again.

Meanwhile the son discovers the perils of hitchhiking as he gains on his father: gay lorry drivers, older women; and rage from those for whom he has worked inefficiently, the usual hazards for an adventurous lad. As he gets nearer to his father, the father finds the lion less and less avoidable. Twice Jachin-Boaz suffers a mauling, finally hiding up in a mental hospital on the National Health, with the beast prowling around on the lawn below. One day lion music floats up from the Underground where his son is busking, drawing them together. They unite in harmony. A raging beast who separated them has turned tail and become love. 'Right,' says the policeman at the Embankment Station, 'I am facing west, looking down the steps. There are two men there with a lion. I am dead sober'.

Hoban works allegories—and spells. It is hard to know how young or old you are with him. The generations break away from each other yet are unable to break free.

Riddley Walker is a priest with a scar on his belly to prove it. Some disaster or happening has turned Canterbury and all it stood for, including language, to rubble, and he has to walk through a blighted land to stir up its pulverised thought by means of riddles. One is reminded of William Langland after the Black Death. Except that Russell Hoban has the advantage of being an

American unschooled in Middle English. Thus his etymological way is clear—or as he would have it, marvellously cloudy. The novel is a masterpiece of inarticulation becoming poetry. The government's attempt to instruct its people by means of a Punch and Judy show would have been disastrous without Riddley's interpretation. He corrects this 'popular' teaching. The common talk is lewd and low. Out of the mouths of babes and gargoyles one might imagine. His characters live on a kind of bumby-heap made of the refuse of a previous culture. His map of it is childishly rude. One of its inhabitants is Eusas. In the Church's list of saints it says 'There is no proof of St Eustace's existence'. But once he was among the Auxiliary or 'assistant' saints, a 'Holy Helper' who could be called upon for our necessities. Riddley is a lowdown holy helper in a squalid society.

*Riddley Walker* followed *Turtle Diary*, that great comic novel in which William G., a London bookseller, and Neaera H., his Cornish woman friend, manage to take the turtles in the London Zoo to Polperro and release them in the Atlantic. The pleasure is not so much in this humane achievement as in the feather-light descriptions of the capital during the nineteen-seventies. Recollecting them on the Roman Wall at Colchester, and with Cymbeline's railway station intermittently flashing below, I wanted him to describe this scene in some uniquely Hobanian words, but if he did they were lost in the usual post-literature festival clamour.

At three o'clock in the morning I sat in the dark looking out of the window down at the square where the fountain is not and I thought about the turtles. The essence of it is that they can find something and they are not being allowed to do it. What more can you do to a creature, short of killing it, than prevent it from finding what it can find? How must they feel? Is there a sense in them of green ocean, white surf and hot sand? Probably not. But there *is* a drive in them to find it as they swoop in their golden-green light with their flippers clicking against the glass as they turn. Is there anything to be done about it? My mind is not an organisational one.

What is there to find? Thomas Bewick diligently followed the patterns of light from feather to feather, John Clare looked carefully at hedgerows, Emily Dickinson cauterised her lopped-off words with dashes, Ella Wheeler Wilcox implacably persisted, Shackleton came back against all odds, Scott didn't. ... There is no place for me to find. No beach, no breeding grounds. Do I owe the turtles more or less because of that? Is everyone obliged to help those who have it in them to find something?

## *Afterword*



I get up very early, but so do the neighbours. I savour the morning silence, they make a dash for the commuters' train six miles away. The silence of my old farmhouse is foreign to it and when I think back far enough I can hear the old din of children, animals, machinery, labourers, pumps, all the noises which filled it for centuries. The neighbours are too young to have listened to such sounds in their farmhouses and cottages, and there is the great divide so far as the countryside is concerned. It is just a matter of age and generation. I do not feel in any way superior to those who only know the present countryside, but I do feel different. I fetched water from the well, lit oil-lamps and watched the beautiful plough horses treading the furrows, and saw the final years of the long agricultural depression, and these experiences continue to affect my view of rural life and of everything from the country economy to the ecology. It is hard for me to regard today's countryside as a place of leisure and 'heritage', a good concept originally but now made threadbare by misuse, and I often long to see what may never be seen again, country people in the fields and meadows, though not as the serfs they were at the beginning of the century, but true inheritors of the land. It often saddens me that in all the rushing about to events and theme-parks, etc., and during all the brief travels to the shops or to the school, no one any longer pauses to look at a field. In fact, a growing field is likely to be the least visited part of a village. A huge field, once six, lies the entire length of my farm-track and there are not many days when I do not study its lines and swelling contours in winter or its golden splendour in summer. When did you last stop to look at a cornfield—or an onion field if it comes to that? Or just a stubble-field or a bare field with its flints pushing through?

Whilst birdsong is making a comeback in my woodland, I rarely hear a child's voice. The old countryside was filled with children's voices, boys and girls by the river, blackberrying, bluebelling, climbing trees, on foot, on bikes, running, idling, sliding on ice, yelling, singing games, all of them outside until bedtime. Now, except for school playtime, not a sound. Instead, the quiet face in mum's childmobile or behind the double glazing, for these are village children who walk nowhere. A recent study suggests that the problem of today's fat children is more likely to be caused by their not walking and running than by junk food.

I remember my brothers and I disappearing all day on an adventure. 'Where have you been'—'Out'. We saw some strange sights but we also saw our own native territory in an exciting and explorative way which became unforgettable. As for being driven a few hundred yards to school, it was unimaginable. It was indeed this childhood wandering which told us that we were 'Suffolk' and laid down our territorial rights. We found nearby woods

and streams, sandpits, ancient cuttings, wastes, tumbledown farms, towpaths, also decidedly foreign-looking villages not a dozen miles from our own. I particularly discovered the local architecture, from thatch to immense medieval works of art in the shape of an East Anglian church. I was fascinated, too, by associations, the most famous in our area being those of Thomas Gainsborough and John Constable. The latter's uncle ground the corn from my home, Bottengoms Farm. There were writers like Adrian Bell, Martin's father, and novelists and poets all tucked away in our scenery, and these especially possessed a kind of magic for me. Looking back on these boyhood scenes which have remained the same scenes that stretch so familiarly wherever I look to this day, I can tell how emphatically my own patch of the English countryside has moulded me.

Whilst recognising the need for so many conservationist campaigns, I do find that the media's demand for a story has created a negative vision of rural Britain as a place where everything is dying. But I never return from Australia or America without being utterly overwhelmed by this country, with its subtly changing climate and its lovely, distinctive counties, no two the same, and its popularly mocked Essex containing many glorious villages and small towns. The chief blots on the landscape must be attributed to the car. It is horrible to see all our best sights, whether they be areas of outstanding beauty or ancient monuments, or bird sanctuaries or wild-flower havens, being descended upon by armies of cars on a fine day, and their passengers in search of 'the amenities', teas, tourist tat and loos. But amenities are now part of the countryside's big business, and the more lovely or celebrated the place, the thicker they cover the ground. It should be a physical and spiritual effort to reach certain spots and, ideally, there should be nothing at the end of such journeys but the place itself. Let the final stretch be on foot if needs be. Only occasionally have I thrilled to signs which say, 'Come this way'. Usually I wander off the beaten track. But in Kirkwall I saw a sign which said, 'Scapa Flow 2 miles', and on Culloden Moor one which declared, 'This is not the Wishing well, this is the Well of Death', and a kind of gratitude overtook my usual irritation at being told where to go and what to note. Often the most memorable aspects of our still marvellously varied countryside cannot be shown on the tour-guide itinerary because of their habit of revealing themselves to the traveller at a special moment, and usually when privately alert and perceptive.

Unprecedented leisure and what is quaintly called disposable income, plus our sloth in finding rural Britain for ourselves, are turning us into lemmings whose only notion of an outing is to pour along the massively-signed route to the sanctuary, the theme-park, the stately pile, the destination which has

been marked out for us by those who run the heritage industry. And, of course, the latter do an efficient job. But why and so often do we return home feeling tired and cheated? It is because some great sideshow has obscured what we should be seeing, and this without entrance fee. It would not be a bad thing if we began to resist the leisure managers and, when asked, 'Where have you been' to be able simply to reply, 'Out'. Often, and even in the middle of the day's work, I just go out. I walk to the river or to the village, or to nowhere in particular, and the magic of the outing begins without fail. After a mile or two the walk through the home country joins countless walks in Scotland, along the Cornish coast, in the footsteps of walkers such as John Clare or William Wordsworth, and sometimes in the small footsteps taken in my childhood, and alongside all this collective walking, extraordinarily beautiful in all its seasons, stretches my own Britain—the part which has met my eye.

Hidden from most of those whose disposable incomes flow into pub restaurants and leisure management tolls lies British agriculture at a time of change. It is popularly thought that farming is all progression due to such things as chemicals and machinery. Instead farming is a history of the giving and the taking away of subsidy, and also in times past of good or dreadful weather. Tremors of an economic earthquake are now being felt, as an unsubsidised agriculture is debated. Not that the fields show anything but prosperity. But for the countryman proper the rural mood has changed, has altered from what it has been ever since the war. So few people now work on the land that there can be nothing like the agricultural depression into which I was born, yet the contrast between those whose countryside is leisure and those whose land is work and livelihood, has become suddenly evident. A comic debate is now taking place between those who see themselves as genuine country folk and those who would put a stop to their bloodier traditions. The truth is that due to television, cars, fitted carpets, provincial cinemas, supermarkets, etc., most of Britain is pretty well urbanised. Incomers like the early retired and well-off commuters fill the old rectories and the farm houses made redundant when the fields of four small farms were joined up to become an 800 acre farm, and it is often these new residents who hanker after the old values. They like a 'cause' and they—naturally—see a very different village to what we, the locals, see. Can they do otherwise? In the village the indigenous population is known as 'the old people'. You can be an 'old' person at any age. None of this incoming or belonging is remotely new. Everything from the church registers to local reminiscences reveal a ceaseless influx of strangers towards those who have known each other for ever.

The essential thing is to save the rural structure and not to let diocesan, educational or planning bureaucrats rationalise any part of it out of existence. One redundancy and it can all fall down. Incomers with their smart ways can be useful props or goads. Locals are inclined to fatalism and wrath. My role is to write to a particular authority, although I refuse to associate myself with the occasional nimby protest. I write so that an excellent young craftsman can have planning permission to build a house for himself in his own native village. I talk to the children—and the teachers—in our little school about local history, plants and legends. And I write in a different way about myself in this place, seeing my own life as something which has emerged over many generations from the Suffolk countryside. Artists, poets, novelists, historians have great depths of ‘belonging’, roots which go down a long way, and yet they are clearly odd men—and women—out in a small community. I jog the local memory, I tell stories, I listen, I watch, but most of all I interpret the present via the past.

How would I describe today’s real countryman and woman? They would be people who looked at crops, cared for domestic and wild creatures, supported the village shop, sent their children to the village school for their primary education, were part of the parish church, played games on the local pitch and who saw through the falsities and naff notions which have recently descended upon them. Rural life and town life will never again be as distinctive as they once were, and they are now separated by the thinnest of green lines.



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