

Nature Writing – for Archipelago 5

Every other chapter or so in Gerald Durrell's autobiographical animal collecting stories (I'm thinking of *The Bafut Beagles*, *Three Singles to Adventure*, or *The Drunken Forest*), our hero steps into the jungle 'to answer the call of nature'. When I was seven, and Durrell certainly was my hero, I thought this meant he was somehow talking back to the wild: first, perhaps, uttering words in atonement for his trapping and caging of it, and then deepening the meaning of his capers by communing with the bush and its babies, finding commensurate things to say to the great green throb of life. I had no idea he was pissing on it all.

Something of my seven-year old confusion lingers in my adult mind as I look along my bookshelves. Nature Writing might be my thing but I am uncertain how best to think of it or how even to house it. I am a chaotic librarian and a poor carpenter but it isn't only that. Nature Writing is not simple to define any longer and my books are announcing this. Weight dictates that chunky, monumental series like the *Birds of the Western Palaearctic* (ludicrously called handbooks) must be at ground level. Usage, or lack of it, has relegated my run of *Bird Study* (the British Trust for Ornithology's noble journal detailing local surveys of amateur effort) to the top shelf just below the ceiling. The middle is a mess. Field guides tumble with my 'Poysers' and 'New Naturalists'. *Corvus* and *Crow Country* are neighbours but that doesn't seem proper. Attempts at ordering runs of books on mountains shade into an ice shelf and a foot or so on the sea. Stephen J. Gould and Edward O. Wilson are there, next to one another regardless of their disputes in life, but pell-mell too with my Olde English Henry Williamson, T. H. White and Richard Jefferies. Robert Macfarlane is the right size to sit alongside Willard Price (his 'Hal and Roger' series, *Lion Adventure*, *Africa Adventure*, *Shark Adventure* – you get the drift). *The Early Annals of Ornithology* props up a copy of Aesop's *Fables*. Tim Robinson, Ronald Blythe and Hugh Brody are stacked on the floor. John Clare has found his way into a corner, hedged by some key maps on which I have scribbled birding gen.

Until relatively recently, things were clearer; the British branch of Nature Writing was mostly about the countryside, its landscape and creatures; it was non-fiction, non-scientific prose characterised by close attention to living things, that were known and often loved by its writers. It almost always felt as if it had come from the pre- or barely-industrial past and, with rare exceptions, Nature Writing was nice writing and it walked – stout shoes and knapsack – a thin green lane between hedges of science on one side and a wild wood of poetry on the other. It was different from either, though fed by both, and it bled palely back into each. It developed through letters (for example, Gilbert White), diaries (Francis Kilvert), essays (Edward Thomas), and journalism (W. H. Hudson). These writers, the old nature writers, gather equably, ecumenically, on my shelves. But they are outnumbered these days.

Current writers are still nourished by those past masters – that bluebell haze coming through, even if the woodland has gone – but, somewhere between

Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) and Richard Mabey's *Food for Free* (1972), a modern Nature Writing was born. Forty years of writers since have worked under new terms and conditions. The twee and the tweedy are extinct. Writing like William Boot's in *Scoop* (1938) of the plashy fen and questing vole is today as rare as real water voles have become. Country diaries survive in newspapers but DDT, extinctions, and Ted Hughes' gore-poetics saw off the nice in the 1970s whilst nature itself – under the human heel – has been pushed, bloodied, shrunken and ruined to the front of the stage ever since. There, even enfeebled, it has called up new descriptions, fresh thoughts. In the long crisis of the end of nature, poetry, polemic, and scientific prose (popular and academic) have vastly lengthened the Nature Writing booklist.

Old taxonomies, hierarchies and clarities have disappeared. In the mashed up world divisions and certainties of fact and fiction, science and poetry, what you see and what you dream, have all broken down. John Clare has been reinvented, the mad provincial peasant poet shown to have been a consummate fieldworker, his poems discovered to be as accurate as the great bird textbooks. The director of the British Trust for Ornithology (a scientist) cites Ted Hughes' poem on returning summer swifts as central to his understanding of what the bird life of Britain *means*. J. A. Baker's shamanic, poisoned, and possibly made up account of hunting peregrines adds to what we know, scientifically, of *Falco peregrinus*.

Nature is no longer perceived to be separate from the more urgent and urban concerns of mankind. Raphael Samuel wrote how, growing up in the 1940s and 1950s as a socialist child in a leftwing intellectual family, he 'had no historical sense of the countryside, no feel for natural history'. Samuel's mother was a keen walker and drawn to the wilder parts of Britain, but she and the rest of her communist family showed 'not the slightest interest in rural life' ('We would not lean over the gate to watch the ploughmen, nor pause in the farmyards...'). The living countryside, though full of poor working people and increasingly contested in matters of access and ownership, remained primitive and frozen in many peoples' minds. Arthur Ransome was a student and friend of the Russian Revolution but wrote children's books set in the British countryside as if it had never happened. Edward Thomas's *Lob*, the old tramping man met on the farm road, managed to be the same person from *Piers Plowman* to H. J. Massingham. For as long as a farmhand exemplified serf-like political conservatism, nature itself would be tied in some reactionary bondage to those perceived to be in charge of it – farmers, gamekeepers, and landowners.

In the 1960s a few animals broke cover and made a special subject for special people. Ted Hughes's crow seemed fashioned for him alone. Gavin Maxwell slept with his otters. J. A. Baker finished off a wood pigeon with his bare hands that had been half-killed by a peregrine he'd been watching, and threw it down to the falcon in an Essex caveman moment. At this point, the beginning of the end of nature, extreme experiences got you into print

because 'normal' nature had been almost done to death by the belletrists and the conservative romantics as much as by invisible toxins and creeping habitat loss. The countryside in the 1960s felt old, nature somehow finished; its last words were only just audible.

Those croaks and groans, as told to Nature Writers, predominated from the 1970s until around 2000. The crisis was by far the major theme. Kenneth Allsop's collected columns, *In the Country* (1973), is the key and underrated early text; Fraser Harrison's *Strange Land* (1982), equally and undeservedly poorly known, is a later one. Elsewhere, the last of the wild places of Britain were documented, the end of the red-backed shrike and the large blue. Our bleached and denuded land (drowned one year, desiccated the next), sluiced with acid rain and Ukrainian fallout, and evacuated of life (the sudden *goneness* of skylarks and house sparrows) was preoccupying. At the turn of the century, the pristine banality of gardeners' grass-cutting diaries listing earlier and earlier first mowings told us we were fucked.

Yet, we cannot bear (or bare) too much or too big a reality. A roll call of population crashes and extinctions would say it all, but pressing losses in the last few years have sent us back to study and write tellingly of what we have, to remember what we once saw, to attend with a deathbed diligence to what is going. And to do this, above all, in the first person singular. If they were dependent on facts alone these books of new Nature Writing would fail; their strengths and authenticity come from their subjective eye. Ian McEwen, promoting his climate change novel, *Solar*, has spoken of his surprise at the paucity of fiction on the big theme. Perhaps more will come but the scary stuff is hard to write and often blows windily vatic. Judging various national poetry competitions in the last decade, I have yet to see a decent global warming poem, but I have read many excellent ones on blackbirds. The point of a barometer is to give a particular but devolved reading. A poem might be the same. The more a globalised future awaits, the sweeter the local patch seems, whether it is old apples on an allotment or a bird list from a walk to work. Thoreau's cabin and Heidegger's hut are revered. From our notebooks we will plumb our souls and examine, order, and remake the world.

Nowadays, to look closely at the local feels, weasel word or not, sustainable. New Nature Writing is modest, and its cautious but knowing approach and retreat seems de rigueur; the new Nature Writer is personal and intimate and the opposite of the aggrandizing big game hunter or summiteer. Nature Writing is un-possessive and anti-imperial (human and non-), straitened by science but alive to the imagination's needs and discoveries. It is apprehensive in both senses of the word.

Recent books take various forms: memoirs, anthologies, essays, anthropologies, cultural geographies, travelogues, and natural histories. Many of them combine several of these forms within individual books. They are commonly feral in feel. W. G. Sebald might, in part, be to blame but mixed styles and shifting registers seem appropriate for our broken and fugitive times and for the swansongs we've made for them. However, a single

mood (in two gears) characterises almost every one. They are elegies, remembering of things passed (*Say Farewell to the Cuckoo*, *At the Loch of the Green Corrie*) or they are prayers, devotions to what remains (*The Wild Places*, *While Flocks Last*). They are also strikingly ordinary – with much that is domestic and suburban and local to the lives of their writers. Kathleen Jamie's prose book *Findings* is this, so are her poems in *The Tree House*. Richard Mabey's *Nature Cure* exemplifies it. Alongside their contemporary bucolics, these books relish various kinds of democratic ecology (the give and take of nature, its sportive wit) as well as being alive to human politics (the legacy of the Clearances, for example, or the impact of agribusiness in East Anglia).

At the breaking point of the old pastoral continuities (summed up by Philip Larkin: 'the shadows, the meadows, the lanes,/The guildhalls, the carved choirs'), Geoffrey Grigson wrote *The Shell Country Alphabet* (1966), a book in which an intellectual told us what the countryside and nature means. Forty years on, the know-all, one-man encyclopaedia has been replaced by Common Ground's *England in Particular* (2006) – a communal manifesto for local action, enjoining the people to hold on to what remains, to claim it as theirs, and make new (and subjective and diverse) relationships with nature – however fallen or vestigial it might be.

As worthwhile as Common Ground's project seems, it will struggle in the wider, less thoughtful world where knowing things has become problematic. It's a curious scene. At the point where Nature Writers are asserting that it isn't in wildness that the preservation of the world will happen, but in the acknowledgement and detailing of how broken humanity is touched by broken nature, getting close to things is becoming harder and harder. Expertise is no longer a prerequisite for deep experiences of nature. 'Wonder' and 'Enchantment' are handed out like sweeties to children. 'Bad' birdwatching is encouraged. This might all be for the good. But the contacts that fanciful gawking and amateurish bumbings would allow are more and more mediated. The nature table is banned from schools. Hides and raised walkways, iPhone apps, and x-ray spex are forever leading us to experience and keeping us from it at the same time. And we manage things like never before. The red-backed shrike does seem to have gone, but the red kite has returned in a speeded up rewind film of the species' near extinction in the nineteenth century. Then, trapping and egg collecting saw it off from all but the uplands of Mid-Wales; now, trapped birds and eggs from Europe have been secreted across the country and the kite is flourishing. Large blues have been reintroduced too. And there have been appropriately modern natural arrivals. Despite the RSPB's best efforts – as it sometimes seems – to be the policemen of the wild, the countryside remains, in Richard Mabey's prescient formulation, as unofficial as ever. Global warming has put little egrets substantially into the British avifauna and the birds now dot our wetlands like drifting shards of ice.

Back on my shelves, the new pluralism - of words (many genres can qualify

as Nature Writing) and of natural life (introduced, escaped or generally man-altered nature is as common as anything that might be called wild) has had a retroactive impact on old books and categories. It seems right that they tumble together. The jungle of my shelves becomes one way to describe nature today: desperate times call for disparate measures. Who's to say what fits the bill? We need to load as much onto the ark as we can. If Richard Dawkins is allowed, how can we turn away the Book of Genesis? Why should we include *Ask the Fellow Who Cuts the Hay* and not *Dead Souls*? We must have Wilbur in *Charlotte's Web* if we are having *Pig Earth*.

Why, then, stop with books or writings that are avowedly about nature? Much writing, most writing even, at some point or another addresses the natural world. Landscape or animals or weather in fiction or non-fiction tell us much about the meaning of nature in our time. Its place in this writing reflects how most people experience nature and think about it. Nature is and will continue to be mostly no more than incidental music, scene setting, backdrop, metaphor and simile, what radio producers call 'wildtrack'. But even this is important. Where more informed nature-writers might be hobbled by knowledge and detail, ground down by Bitzer's horse and its forty teeth ('namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive'), less scientifically knowing observers who are good writers can give the very best smack of the real. There is no better evocation of a curlew's call than W. S. Graham's one-word coinage, 'loveweep'; nor a better line of psycho-geography than Macbeth's, 'light thickens and the crow makes wing to the rooky wood'. All Nature Writers should read as much non-Nature Writing as they can, and pay heed. Shakespeare and Graham are doing the life of the skies (the phrase is D. H. Lawrence's) not air traffic control, as some Nature Writing would. And that is worth thinking about.

Martin Amis has a shtick going with birds in his latest novel, *The Pregnant Widow*. The same species crop up several times: yellow birds like canaries laugh in elms, crows scavenge, and in the sky some vaguely portentous – 'Homeric strivers' he says – raptors (probably) are shifting, always on rigid wings. These birds might have little truth but they are very telling. His crows are particularly good. Already blackened with meaning (see *Macbeth* and much else), Amis manages to notice something new about them that feels believable. Their faces, he says, are 'famished and bitter...half carved away'. We get it at once and register the rightness. The 'half carved' is spot on. He has looked and thought and made the birds work for him without wrenching them too far from their reality.

As for what that reality might mean, and the various approaches various sorts of writing (Nature or otherwise) might make towards it, this is what Nabokov said in a BBC television interview in 1962: 'Reality is a very subjective affair. I can only define it as a kind of gradual accumulation of information: and as specialization. If we take a lily, for instance, or any other kind of natural object, a lily is more real to a naturalist than it is to an ordinary person. But it is still more real to a botanist. And yet another stage of reality is reached with

that botanist who is a specialist in lilies. You can get nearer and nearer, so to speak, to reality: but you never get near enough because reality is an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable. You can know more and more about one thing but you can never know everything about one thing; it's hopeless. So we live surrounded by more or less ghostly objects...'

All of the many ways of approaching nature ought to be admissible. None will offer the last word. A new poem on a blackbird can say as much (or as little) as David Snow's beautiful monograph on the birds he studied in the Botanic Gardens in Oxford in the 1950s. Both, and all Nature Writing, will always and only be approaches or impressions. Nature's writing is not Nature Writing. Nature writes *itself* not a version or replica. Its evidence is its reality, its hard matter in the world, as Thoreau called it. Nightingales sing and wildebeest migrate. Their existence and their actions is their language and their writing. Song phrase and hoof print. We are not the same. 'Whereas I write a poem by dint of mighty cerebration,' Aldo Leopold said, 'the yellow-leg walks a better one just by lifting his foot.' Nature Writing is predicated on our separation from its subject; it is coterminous with the origins of the man-made mediated world. As we moved away from the animals and their lives that we started among, as we broke from what Edwin Muir called 'that long lost, archaic companionship,' we began depicting them.

The mountains of the Brandberg massif in west central Namibia rise from a flat plain in bare and jagged stabs of red rock. The desert laps at them like a calm sea. In this eye-stretching wide space the Brandberg's thirty-mile corona of slashed granite rushes upwards like a child's drawing: Moominland or Mordor, an ur-mountain, with near sheer sides and toothy tops. In the caves and overhangs of the Brandberg are many paintings of oryx and ostriches, giraffes and zebras. The best known is called The White Lady, though the human figure depicted among the animals is now thought to be neither white nor a lady. It is probably a teenage boy hunter at the point of initiation, decorated and adorned and being pushed (the man behind him seems to be poking him with a stick) into a seeing state by an elder. Hunting was made possible by visions. The frieze of animals and people, of half-men and half-antelopes, moving together and apart, was made sometime between 2000 and 6000 years ago. Homer or Hesiod, or the writers of Genesis, would have understood it. It might be a shopping list, a menu, a diary, a dream catcher, an altar, or none, or all of these things. What is certain is that it represents a human negotiation with the world outside the cave, field notes that are both accurate and imagined, a beautiful ochre projection of a human understanding incomprehensible to the non-humans it depicts. Isn't that Nature Writing? To this day there are still oryx and ostriches at the mouth of the valley down which The White Lady is running. I watched them across the winnowing haze through binoculars from the passenger seat of a 4x4 bakkie. I counted them and wrote the tallies in my notebook. That is Nature Writing too.

Because nothing can capture and hold the oryx or the ostrich sufficient to replace the living thing every attempt – my counts, the cave paintings – can seem relevant. No single definition of Nature Writing will stick. The world is everything that is the case. Meanwhile, it is in our nature to make writing about nature. It is a definition of us and of the gap between the rest of the natural world and us. To this end I might stop fretting about my shelves and we might withhold from adjudicating whether a species list of moths caught in a trap at Portland Bill or Shakespeare's poem about a phoenix can be Nature Writing and whether one is truer than the other. When something pushes through and sticks, the accidental truths of the guidebook are as valuable as the baffled wrongness of phoenix poems, the polished words of a poet as good as a scratched field note.

Nicholas Redman has compiled an extraordinary book called *Whales' Bones of the British Isles*, a directory and gazetteer of all the whale skulls, vertebrae and rib bones that are strewn across the country, some visible, many lost, a few remembered, most forgotten. He is not interested in whales though; the celebrated and much mourned northern bottle-nosed whale that strayed up the Thames in 2006 came within a few yards of his files and photographs of whale remains but he didn't go to see it. It was still alive. His fascination is for what people have thought to do with whalebones. No more than that, but no less than that either. Living whales don't interest him but his is a true work of Nature Writing. An answer to the call.

Tim Dee