

## FIELD GARDEN

### Henry Williamson

O waft me hence, to some neglected vale;  
Where, shelter'd, I may court the western gale.

Richard Payne Knight: *The Landscape*  
1794

ABOUT TWO HUNDRED YEARS before I became the owner of the land where, with many vicissitudes during a number of years, a garden eventually was brought to being, the parcel of land at the four cross-ways was a park for oxen, what was called in law, accommodation land. It stood between five and six hundred feet above the sea, which was about three-quarters of a mile to westward as the falcon glided.

Originally, before the intake, the parcel, - locally called a splatt - was part of the Vuzzy Down: incult, half-moorland, grown with rush, brake-fern, heather, furze - rough spring and summer grazing for cattle, and perhaps horned sheep.

When the parcel was enclosed, banks of earth, faced with ironstone from a nearby quarry, were raised as wind-breaks and stock-barriers. Here cattle were herded overnight on their way to market eight miles away, driven there on the hoof.

On top of the banks, or dry-ditched walls in the local Devon term, wildling trees grew - blackthorn, ash, whitethorn, and an occasional beech. The beech was not an indigenous tree; it was brought to Exmoor by a Worcester ironmaster named John Knight, who spent over a million pounds, it was said, to 'reclaim' the moor (part of the forest of Exmoor, which was then much as it had been since the reign of William Rufus) and make it arable land. He planted groves and hedges of beech, fir, and in the valleys ornamental trees; he mined for iron and other minerals; brought in pedigree stallions to improve the stamina and speed of the semi-wild moor ponies; built farmsteads and barns for arable farming; brought down from Scotland crofters and farmers to withstand the climate of winds and rain upon that high land; and after a few years lost most of his capital. The corn did not ripen, heather and rush advanced upon the areas broken by the plough, red deer ringed the bark of the conifer plantations, the iron ore did not pay for haulage to the railway. It was a not unusual story of a successful man in industry attempting similar success in a medium of which he knows little or nothing.

My splatt of two acres within the dry-ditched walls topped by ash, willow, beech and thorn, lay to the far west of the moor, the tallest hill of which, Dunkery Beacon, could be seen on clear days as a dark brown, sometimes blue, slightly convex line under the distant sky. It was an enchanting thought that the Beacon, famous in *Lorna Doone*, was visible from my field, which one day would have an orchard, a drive,

a house, a well, and a family to succeed me when my time was come to leave; and, I hoped, a pleasance.

When the field became mine it was down to mowing grass. The late owner offered to rent it from me. I thought it good business to let him have the field for three pounds a year, as he had offered. I bought the land in early June; within a few weeks he had cut and carted away, according to a neighbour, nine pounds' worth of hay. This neighbour also informed me that my tenant would have next season's hay unless I looked out: and was my tenant prepared, he asked, to spread twenty tons of bullock dung on my two acres? If not, he would have the heart out of the land before I could say knife.

"Knife? I thought that was an expression from a boys' story book of twenty years ago."

"So it med be, I ban't no scholar, but knife or no knife, midear, that feller wull 'ave the meat-soil off this yurr viel neat as a knife cut if you don't look out!"

My tenant, having already taken the meat out of the field, generously suggested that I might enjoy, during his tenancy, sitting in the body of an old rusty motorcar he had left for me, a present he declared, in the field.

The following year I took one and a half tons of hay off the field, which someone from the village offered to sell for me. He got me three pounds. For all I know he sold it at a profit, just as it stood inside the broken gate, in a sad little stack with an almost flat roof - the buyer had thatched it for me. Anyway, someone else came and carted it away seven months later, when the weather was hard and hay fetched, I read in the local paper, six to seven pounds a ton. I was learning, even as the Worcestershire ironmaster, John Knight, had learned. And his successor to the title of Exmoor had learned too, I was told later on: for John Knight had sold his thousands of acres to an adjacent landowner, whose family had come over with the Conqueror, for an annuity of fifteen thousand pounds per annum during his, John Knight's, lifetime. Squire Knight was then in his late seventies: he lived beyond ninety years; and the noble Norman landowner was forced to sell land lying south of his home by many miles, beside the Torridge river; thousands of acres in lot after lot of good arable as the years went on, in order to pay for his new acid-sour peaty acres; and only when the nobleman's original estate was mortgaged did Mr Knight give up.

I considered that I had bought my experience, so far, rather cheaply, since I had known nothing about business. But what had decided me to retire into my own castle and as it were raise the drawbridge was that the mower of my second crop of hay ran over a nest of very young partridge chicks, and killed all except one, which lost a leg. We did our best to put on a splint, and keep it warm and fed in cotton wool, but it died.

My next operation to keep the field tidy, while planting out trees as wind-breaks for my orchard and garden to-be, was to mow the rising

grass of the following summer with a scythe, and leave the swathes to rot down, and so maintain the heart of the land.

The little plantations of trees were set out by myself and my wife down three sides of the field - oak, ash, beech, pine, sycamore, birch, and mountain ash. Rabbits soon gnawed the slender stems. We staked wire-netting round each sapling, and watched them anxiously as the salt gales of the early winter burned their foliage, and vagged the little stems in their holes. It was a hard winter. Rats climbed over the wire-netting and gnawed the bark, sometimes paring it completely round, so that the sap was unable to rise in the spring, and the tree died.

After three years the grass was rough, tufty, coarse, the white clover becoming dwarfed, a sign of acidity. This was in the early 'thirties, when farming had become depressed. The old lime-kilns built along the coast a century before were used no more; it did not pay to bring chalk from France, or limestone boulders across the Severn Sea from Wales to burn for lime. Many a disused kiln became a tea-house for the increasing flow of summer visitors along the coast of Devon.

The field was now a refuge. I had built myself a hut in one corner, and dug a well, over a hundred feet deep, in the top corner. This work was arduous. It consisted of digging down with an iron bar into the ironstone layers, scooping out the dusty soil with a bent egg-spoon on a stick, then ramming down black powder and a fuse. Three of us laboured at this work all one summer, my help being voluntary, since two young men had taken the work, on contract at a pound a foot. Davy built a windlass; and while Jack went down standing in a bucket and holding to the rope, to bore the blasting hole, Davy waited above for his turn. When a charge was tumped down and fuse lit, he began to wind the windlass with all his strength, while his mate, wobbling to the top, invariably cried, "Don't 'ee bind my hands in", for Davy was by now desperately turning the crank lest his mate be blown skywards before he could get out and help cover the hole with old rusty corrugated iron sheets, and run for life.

The fuse burned away at the rate of a foot a minute, then...boom!... up flew clattering iron sheets, and that excitement was over. Bucket loads of spoil then came up, and we were, at the end of a day, perhaps ten or eleven inches farther down into the red shaft.

That year I made my first garden in our field. It was not large; about two square yards enclosed within netting, against the rabbits which were then a plague. I went to my hut to write during the summer months, and being a vegetarian by necessity - one doesn't want to cook anything after hours of writing - fed on lettuces and radishes with cheese, butter, and brown bread, and eggs, which hardly need 'cooking'. For the vegetables I collected a couple of pails of sheep dung from my neighbour (thus getting some of my field's fertility back, since the neighbour had 'done' me over that first crop of hay) and laid a thick layer six inches under my crops. The result was monstrous: radishes like red toy balloons, filled with air and inedible fibres, and lettuces that flopped before turning a sick yellow.

The field became wild again. Docks and many grasses grew there; and we were rewarded by the visitations of many birds. Some nested in the little trees, which had somehow survived the gales with the aid of ex-W.D. camouflage netting staked on the western hedge to check the violent winds which, when it rained, drove bubbles under my window frames, while the hut hummed like an aeolian harp. I had built an open hearth across one corner, and the flames were a comfort in the wildest weather.

The field was beloved by a barn owl. Year after year he was there, curling over the hedge to quarter the field above the mice runs. During the late summer he fanned over the bleaching stalks of the wild grasses, sometimes in broad daylight, wafting himself up and down, pausing, turning, hovering, his dark eyes peering below; then he was volplaning down, lost in the forest of grasses nearly three feet high - foxtail, cocksfoot, plantain among the docks and thistles - to flutter up and sail over the bank and away.

My partridges, too, nested every spring somewhere among the grasses. One day late in May, as I was writing in the sun outside the hut, I noticed a dark patch of leaves in the grass, only eight or nine inches tall there, for I kept a path scythed to my summer abode. I went inside to put on a kettle, a heavy cast-iron farmhouse kettle hanging from a lapping crook suspended on an iron bar across the chimney up above, and heated it on some dry driftwood brought up from the beach. When I returned to write - always a difficult job in the sunshine which lures one away from the unnatural habit of living in the imagination apart from one's real surroundings - I noticed that the leaves had changed their pattern; they were light brown (old) beech leaves. I had heard the call of a cock partridge some time before, but had not connected it with a nest so near to my hut door. So I waited inside, for the kettle to boil, while standing back from the open window. After some minutes I was rewarded by the sight of a hen partridge moving, slow as a tortoise, through the grasses. As slowly she set about plucking the camouflage, leaf by leaf, and piling each leaf upon another, at an angle to the sky, so that the thin edges slanted upwards. Blown beech leaves, which usually fall with the new buddings, looked, as she was placing them, as when the wind lodges them against a tuft. Having thus disposed of them she substituted her own mottled dead-leaf plumage over her eggs, which later, when she was again called away by the sentinel cock watching on a raised ant-heap for sight of the dreaded carrion crow or magpie, she replaced the leaves, one by one, upon her sixteen olive-brown eggs, thus covering them completely from the sharp eye of a winged predator.

One day I saw a pair of weasels running through the grass. They had a nest in a pile of stones near the west gate - no longer the broken ruin left by the previous owner, but a new palisade barrier six feet high, hung on chestnut posts a foot square and nine feet long. By this strong gate I watched first one small pair, then another, peeping out of the stone-heap, only to disappear before the wink of an eye and reappear elsewhere. Screams often came from the long grasses in the field, where young rabbits were pounced upon, to be bitten in the big neck vein and drained of their life blood.

Other beasts and birds visited my garden site of the future. I found the five-toed, bean-shaped padmark of a badger in the soft mud of the drive, after rain; but the most thrilling sight was a red kite circling above the yellow autumn grass-clumps. Its forked tail was unmistakable. Perhaps it was on migration, or had sailed across the sea from Wales; it was said to be extinct in England. And one night, as the moon rose, swollen and brown-yellow over Exmoor, there was a dark donkey-shape near my low-netted enclosure of lettuce. Only this donkey had horns. In a moment it was away over the blackthorn bank, and across the next field, making for the valley, a wild stag, heir to an unbroken line straying in pride of antler thousands of years before the Danes sailed up the estuary below, led by Hubba with his raven pennant, to die with his men at what is now called Bloody Corner.

My trees were now as tall as myself. *Pinus insignis* and *macracarpa* on the western edge; beech, rowan, hazel and spruce behind their shelter, with Japanese larches. They were growing too close; but I did not thin them. They held, in spring, too many nests. I wanted to top the *insignis*, but was told they would die if I did so. (I did top two, and today, thirty years and more after we set them out, they are growing green and bushy, perfect stops of the wind, but *behind* their tall and hollow brethren facing the sea.)

The garden was still to be. We lived in a valley beside a trout stream a score of miles to the east; the field remained a *pied-à-terre*, where one could retire - behind padlocked gates! - to strive to write with the imagination forcing itself away from outside influences - the pleasure of wandering out of shadow into hot sunshine, to lie in the grass and watch the red soldier flies climbing up a stalk of vernal grass, a grasshopper sipping dew on a flower of clover, or its honey; the sweet *musical* tinkling of young goldfinches in their nest in a larch tree as they awaited the return of their parents with beaks packed, as neatly as the partridge had packed the dry beech leaves over her eggs, with seeds of thistle, sheep's-sorrel, or dandelion. And later, a sad small happening in the same benevolent sunshine - one of the goldfinch fledgelings, on top of the larch chipple-chipple-chipping for food, suddenly to be swept off in the sideways strike of a sparrowhawk's leg as it glided past and above my still figure with what seemed to be a silent brown flick, and then it was gone.

Other sights, other emotions. One July morning, soon after dawn, which I was watching through the narrow window of my shelf-bed, partridges began to call in the field below. At the same moment gulls, black against the dusky distinctness of the eastern sky, flew slowly across. They had come from the headland cliffs and were peering for rabbits, trapped, maimed, or snared.

Three gulls, I had noticed, arrived at the same light every morning, always flying the same way and height above the fields. Other gulls patrolled other fields.

I turned to sleep again, and dozed off, to be awakened by the stealthy cluck of a partridge. Quietly I rose on an elbow and moved my head slowly to look down through the narrow space of the window.

Presently, while I was waiting for clouds to move from the morning star, I heard the sub-vocal talk of the birds very near, so near indeed that through the cold space of the window the hen-like gock gock gock was distinctly loud. After a while a mottled movement as of dead leaves on top of the bank among the thorns made me stare and blink (not daring to move a knuckle to cidity eyes). I saw not one bird but two birds, and another, another, another - more than a dozen birds were crouching on the bank, in line. The month was August, the day the nineteenth. These grown birds were being kept still in line like troops on parade, by the clucking of one parent bird on the flank of the covey. Only this bird's neck was upright, showing anxious authority. The other parent-bird, also sentry-like, stood on the other flank. Both birds began to speak to their big children, telling them to wait there until it was safe to go down into the field below, which was the southern boundary of my splatt.

For fully a minute the line waited there, until a cautious gock gock gock - come, come, come - made them follow the right-flank bird down the slope of the bank, through long grasses and knapweed stalks to the ground below, five feet in all. One close behind the other, looking like tortoises, they moved down the slope. When all were on the ground, they spread out in line once more, a parent bird on either flank, and began feeding. What they were taking, I do not know: they picked seeds or insects from among the dewy grasses at the rate of two or three pecks a second.

They began a slow procession around the base of the hut, where, as has been mentioned, the grass was kept cut; and when the last bird was out of my sight, I changed position in order to look over the tie-beam of that end of the hut and so through the open western casement below. There I saw them sitting round a beech sapling.

At last I must have moved, or one parent bird glimpsed my eye, for one of them shot up its head. She could not see clearly, it seemed (for was I not inside the darker hut?), but obviously this bird didn't like the look of things. She stared intently, stretching out her neck further. The others sat still but alert. I moved my head, I was hanging over the beam rather uncomfortably, still marvelling at her sight; and then realised that my head was silhouetted against the sky beyond the open loft window. She stared, she moved her head up and down and sideways, as a wood owl does before taking off from a branch, or a boy does to fix the position of branches and twigs in a tree before him when he is trying to find (focus on) something beyond. I could imagine that bird almost frowning with puzzlement. What was it, for goodness' sake? And suddenly with a screech and whirr of wings the covey leapt together into the air: and there swishing black-tipped tail and sinuating flat little head while it grizzled and chattered with rage, stood an albino stoat.

Later a furious but lighter chattering told that this animal had come into the territory of the weasels; and up flew some magpies to add to a general indignation among the predators.

The weather was not always fine on that hilltop; but there were many clear early mornings when the morning star was shrinking into the light of the sun led over the rim of the world. Exhilarating it was to see, from high ground, the village below drowned under white mist filling all the valleys! Night, too, in the field had its feelings of romance, watching the distant lights of Appledore and Bideford, and the shore lights of Instow at the meeting of the Two Rivers. Farther away still, the lighthouse at Hartland Point flicked and trailed its beam across the bay to the west, while the twin lights of Lundy flashed like large stars. To youth it was grand to hear the tides of this Atlantic coast roaring upon the rocks, as though the night itself were alive.

Often after my day's work I walked down the hill to the village, feeling that the earth was indeed created for man, that all the elements were his servants. This feeling is given by the hills, it is seldom in the valleys, or in a town.

Halfway down the winding road the flashes of Hartland lighthouse became dull; one was beginning to enter the mist which sometimes had a slight smell of coal-smoke. The young moon, which had been clear cut and bright with that suggestion of the blueness of old silver, now began to look like a corroded brass horn. Small black clouds slowly formed into the shape of a bull - a black animal with one yellow horn over Hartland. The image was so startling that I stopped and leaned over a gate, watching the horn crumbling and the bull losing form darkly until the lighthouse flickers were put out. From over the sea came whooping bellows - foghorns announcing the death of the bull.

The lane was murmurous with running water; the hill springs had broken with the equinoctial rains, it was not past Old Michaelmas Day. My well, which had been abandoned after going down seventy feet because of the foul air which a pair of bellows attached to a long rubber pipe had not cleared (how could it: where would the heavier foul air lie but at the bottom?), was filled with clear water to within four feet of the top. There was keen enjoyment of a writing job done; one's feelings bubbled with the sounds of water running in the rocky sides of the lane.

I came to the village, a misty dark place under dripping churchyard elms, and to the inn, where the eyes were hurt by the hard bright hissing of a petrol vapour lamp. The wall of heat pushed back by the door was almost choking. Dully, screwing up my eyes, I asked for beer which, suddenly, I didn't want.

"Wouldn't like to be up where you've just come from," said the landlord.

And now my story of the field is almost ended. Soon after that autumn, weary of writing and wearier still of an England that was sinking down under unemployment, its countryside falling into dereliction, I decided to go to another part of the country and teach myself to farm, in the hope of being able to write about my experiences and so plead for another conception of living, in a world descending to war through lack of stabilised markets, as it seemed to me. After eight years of farming, six of them in the war, I returned to my field to



live out my days; and then we began to put the splatt in order, using compost heaps and trying to combine head-work with body-work, to achieve a balance which would create a harmony of both worlds. The trees were now tall, keeping out the winds from the small orchard and the garden which grows the old flowers of sweet william, stock, wallflower, pansy, pink (with lime sand from the shore) and lily, as borders to the vegetables on which we mainly live. Slowly the fertility of this once acid heath-land has been built up; but it was a laborious business keeping the grass cut and stacked six times a year, to be rotted down for the half-acre of garden. Then, one day, we saw a modern rotary cutter, a light machine which worked with the heart of a weasel, mulching rough grass which lay to increase the fertility of the soil.

Now at long last we had lawns, which, to cut, were no effort at all; lawns first of daisies, then of clover whitening the dark green grass. Half of the mulch was swept up, to be rotted down to give us the finest peas, lettuces, roses, apples, potatoes, brassica of various kinds, marrows, tomatoes and other fruits of the earth. While in the centre of the field the wild grasses grew, for their grace in spring and the seeds to feed the summer flocks of gold-finches and other songbirds.

A pair of partridges nest every May somewhere in that sanctuary, and last year, to our great delight, we had a pair of quails, whose liquid cry of wet-my-lips, wet-my-lips, sounded through the summer nights with the cries of owls. As for winter, most days beside the western seaboard are mild; and we sit by the open hearth burning our own wood, giving its flame cheer, and boiling the old cast-iron kettle for cups of tea, while from the wireless set on the chimney shelf comes the music of the spheres.

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IN THE NEXT ISSUE OF THE HWS JOURNAL:

Tony Evans writes about the repairs made to the writing hut.

A review of Daniel Farson's book, *Henry*.

Henry Williamson on his own schooldays.