WORDS ON THE WEST WIND

Henry Williamson

MOST OF MY TIME NOWADAYS IS SPENT WITHIN A SMALL HUT built years ago of oak, straw, plaster and elmwood at the south-western corner of a two-acre field on a Devon hilltop, near the Atlantic coast. My nearest neighbours, of any sort of permanence, are a pair of carrion crows which own and live in a beech spinney across the lane at the top of the field. They nest every year in the top of one of the beeches. The female has a voice of high pitch, almost treble. She calls her mate and young in a throbbing caw which is uttered quicker than the deeper and slower caws of the old cockbird. I have heard that neighbourly voice during the past three years. The birds roost in the wind-writhen beeches, and awake cawing when the first light comes from beyond the blue hill-line of Exmoor lying under the eastern sky.

Four lanes meet at the lower point of the beech spinney. In old deeds the 2-acre field is called Down Close. Another name is Ox's Cross, corrupted to the modern Oxford Cross. The signpost outside the western gate, once of wood and now of cast-iron, bears along its vertical length a chipped iron lettering of the longer name, now covered by white paint. The letters OXFORD CROSS were knocked off by a cold chisel in 1940, when also the arms of the post, pointing to Ilfracombe, Braunton, and Georgeham, were removed. It was done during that (to most) fearful summer, when throughout Britain names of villages, towns, and telephone exchanges were being removed from lorries, shops, and factories, while place-names upon memorials to the dead of previous wars were obliterated.

Owls come to the beech plantation at night, calling to others in the valleys below. Sometimes buzzards perch among the lichened and wind-swept upper branches, uneasily swaying in the wind, while the yellow-ringed eyes in the small heads glance about. Rabbits nowadays are not numerous as in days before the war, and the great dusky-winged hawks are fewer, too, in this country of the sea-winds. In the old days as many as a dozen were to be seen at once, wheeling in spiralling tiers above the hills, in the warm airs ascending; sometimes plunging down the blue halls of the wind, crying their plaintive cries, and on uptilted wings sweeping up again, or, falling away to the east, to the pine and oak woods of the valley where they nest, growing smaller and smaller until but a tawny speck showed at the turn, from the dun undersides of out-stretched wings.

During the months of winter, on opening the door of the hut, the constellation of the Plough lies above the eastern edge of the beech spinney, pointing to Polaris, the constant star of the north. In frosty weather, at the turn of the year, owls often hoot with a throbbing softness; they seem to be playing in the trees, their cries are soft with pleasure. I have called them to the lesser trees about the hut; and once, during a late September night, felt mean at my action in deceiving

what appeared to be a young bird, seeking a mate after its first moult, when its plumage assumed hues of bark, tinder, brown leaf and yellow sedge.

Three of us, two small boys and myself, were dining in the hut by candlelight, the door being open to the quiet evening, and the gentle airs of the early autumn sky. When I say dining, we were eating kippers grilled on the embers of the oak fire in the open brick hearth. The boys with their elder sister and brother had been camping in the field for the summer holiday; but the older children had departed, and I, as father, was clinging to the little ones for as long as I could. So wet was it, day after day of rain, that we gave up wearing shoes and stockings, and went through the clumps of cock's foot grass and down the muddy paths bare-footed. And the only food was kippers, with bread and butter and marmalade, an occasional apple, with soup of potatoes and cabbages boiled in the cast-iron crock hanging from the bar across the chimney.

We were sitting in the yellow haze of candlelight when an owl called almost with flute-like quality of note in the spinney, a hundred yards away up the field. It was the bubbling, quavering call, a little uncertain, of a young bird. We answered with a short, clear note. After awhile the quaver-cry came again; and upon being called once more, the bird flew nearer. The conditions for mimicry, or art, were perfect: the upright, solitary candle-flame: the immobility of the boys, their alert faces: the windless night, with sounds travelling far - we heard an owl crying in the Spreacombe valley, a mile away, distinctly. The corn harvest was nearly gathered in; there had been no rain for three days, the stubbles were dry, gossamers strewed the fields, mushrooms were appearing on the sheep pastures.

The voice of the owl seemed to become more tender, as it cried through the warm darkness. I played on the feelings of the boys, who were used to father's ways. "She has almost forgotten the owl in the valley. She has heard the perfect hoot; she dreams of wonderful eyes, of the tenderest beak preening her new feathers." The kippers on the plates remained unpicked (we were sick of kippers, anyhow). There was now complete sllence within the hut, the door open wide to the night. We dared hardly to breathe: for with a stir of leaves in the birch immediately outside, we knew that the owl had flown there. After a few moments, the mellow quavering came again, startlingly near. A soft answer came from the hut. Far away in the valley, the other owl was calling.

We were by this time overcome by our own sentiment. We dared not move our eyes, as we held our glances to the plates before us, with their creosote-flavoured wreckage of bony fish. Then the owl hooted again; hopefully, thrillingly, trustingly. Was she awaiting her bird of paradise?

The candle flame began to quiver. Richard, ten years old and; Celtic, was silently a-giggle. Whereupon Robert, thirteen, blue-eyed and Germanic, assumed his clown-face, and stared at his brother, his face owl-like. Hush, I breathed, don't disillusion the bird. What can

we do? How can we get out of it? *Oo-oo-woo-loo-woo*, came the soft throbbing just outside the door, as the egg-shaped swelling in the bird's throat subsided. The owl down in the valley had ceased to call. We shook with silent laughter.

Then Robert gave a perfect imitation of a cuckoo. After awhile came a reply from the owl in the silver birch tree: but a note of doubt was in its foreshortened hooting. *Cuck-oo* cried Robert again.

The next cry came from the spinney. There seemed a half-sad melancholy, half-hopeful note in the bird's voice now. Robert replied with a dunghill cock's crowing. Our laughter broke. After awhile, we heard two owls bubbling and wauling and baying among the trees.

Well it was fun, and no harm done; and perhaps the pair that nested the following spring at the base of a beech tree had come together that mellow September night.

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One day, as I sat at my door, mending a willow basket, the behaviour of crows over the hedge, and the constant cawing, with black ragged shapes flapping up and dropping again, made me hasten across the field, to the eastern gate. They're mobbing a stoat, I thought, and opening the palisade gate quietly, slipped through, and crept beside the bank, to my neighbour's gate. Glancing between hanging post and bank, I saw that four birds were flying about something in the hedge Devon hedges, as you may know, are raised banks of earth and stone, topped with beech or thorn, ash, and bramble. Rabbits tunnel into them. Sometimes a smallholder from the village below set traps in the banks of his five acres, to save his corn and roots. He is a good farmer, in that his land is always improving; he keeps sheep, as well as bullocks. Opening the gate, I saw a lean crow hanging by its foot head-downwards. It flapped about, held in a gin. It was a thin, scared-looking bird, with comic eyes; and the other crows were its nestling brethren, who still flew about with their parents. It looked pathetic, and was too frightened to peck me as I took it out of the gin-trap. I stroked its poll, then let it fly, which it did with a gawping cry, while its brothers and sisters circled in the air above me, cawing. It flew down to the valley, where later the other birds followed, together with the parents, who had been flying high in the sky above their troubled young. And that evening, I heard the treble throbbing-caw of the old hen with her brood in the treetops. Telling the smallholder of the incident later on, he said, "They're bliddy craws, they'm all flamin' thieves, my gor, wan last year found a yaw (ewe) of mine on her back, and before you could say knife, her guts was pulled out yards and yards. Bliddy craws, they'm worse than thievin' bliddy rats or magpies."

It is one thing to have your eggs and poults taken by flamin' bliddy craws; another to watch them benevolently.

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The smallholder is a weather-tautened man of sixty years or seasons, who has had a hard struggle since leaving the Royal Navy about thirty years ago. We have known each other since 1921. The second "Global War", with fixed prices for mutton, corn, and potatoes, has made him feel more or less secure. He likes things to be proper, and is the opposite of what in Norfolk they call a slobberer. His voice is to be heard over many fields while he is working with his fat and energetic horse, either harrowing with the deep-tined cultivating harrows, or scuffling cabbages or roots between the rows. The horse pulls strongly, snatching at the growing oats at the end of the row; then I hear the hoarse cries of the smallholder hanging to the stilts of the wheeled-hoes begind. "You booger, you! You flamin' bliddy rogue, I'll trim 'ee, grr-rr-t you, come up, aaa-aaa-ah!" But there is no call for an R.S.P.C.A. inspector, for he is all bark, and no bite. He is a kind man; the bitter years are past; and one sees him on Saturday nights, dancing in the Village Hall, in his broad-striped brown suit, a happy grin on his face as he bobs and prances, the ruts and wrinkles gone from his face, while his skull seems to be a different shape - the hair no longer wild and brambly, but smoothed close to the flat pate with oil. That is what the war has done for him as for others - opened up the social instinct of the village, opened up the home market for the farmer.

Contrast him with the man I call, with superficial lack of sympathy, the Human Hedgehog - that small man with the sunken, uneasy eyes under ferny eyebrows, the near-tortured face, the dyspepsia, the market-gardener who rents old splatts or parcels of land and grows, in rotation, year after year, without muck from bullock, sheep, or pig, potatoes, potatoes, potatoes, potatoes - his idea of the four-course shift. There was an acre or two of virgin land in the valley of which the humus was two feet deep. Therein he grew potatoes season after season for over 20 years, using only chemical manure, until a panned soil suddenly gave up blossoming. Even thistles would not grow out of the sour, gritty, ironstone subsoil, whose fertility had become meanwhile a row of black figures in a bank ledger.

Chicago Wheatpit, or the little man's account with the National Urban and Speculation Bank Ltd., it is the same thing - a state of mind. The U.S.A. dustbowl - the "cranks'" favourite verbal playground of a year or two back - once fertile prairie, now literally covered with sand and grit, blown by winds, nearly three thousand farms a year blowing and washing away, 8,000 acres a day. In but 25 years thousands of millions of tons of humus have been washed as sewage into the rivers of Britain; in the U.S.A. seventy-five billion tons of topsoil, after ravagement by the almighty dollar, have either roared away in floods, or been blown as deserts; while since the time of the wheatships of the New World beginning to cross the ocean - since the boyhood of Richard Jefferies - over a thousand million acres have been lost as food-growing areas. How many connect that fact, and what it arises from, as one of the chief causes of the recent "Global War"? If Hitler had never been born, or Churchill, the war for raw materials, for food or living space, between the 'haves' and the 'have nots', between the productive power of the people and the international gold that enslaved them, would have come just the same. How many, living to-day, connect the looming shadow upon the living of

Eastern and Western worlds with the fact that the Yellow River washes 2,500,000,000 tons of soil away every year; that in Australia the sheep farms are taking to the air as clouds of dust; that the Roman Empire fell when its wheat-fields in Northern Africa became deserts, and spivs and sub-types flourished automatically in the decay of natural truth and virility inherent in a sexy little pavement civilisation based on the freedom of gold? Why does the smallholder, lean and sinewy from half a century of manual labour, with no pot-belly, or 'middle-aged spread' never tell, or want to hear, smutty jokes? "Only connect..."

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Dear Friend,

Thank you for your news, it's nice to get in touch with the old country again, and The Adelphi *is something to look forward to with genuine pleasure....I built a cabin here in New Zealand in an isolated valley a bit back for an Englishman, a well-educated man - you've heard perhaps of H.G.Wells' book* Sanderson of Oundle *- well, he had his school days there - one of these queer fellows you are liable to meet here and in Australia, embittered by four years' concentration camp as an alleged fifth-columnist in the last war. His particular line is redeeming what he terms poisoned or ruined soil , and he certainly gets great results. His humus heaps with their leavening of seaweed and sharks are most potent, and some of his carrots would almost do for gate-posts.*

This is an orange and citrus growing country - also sheep, the lambs are skipping around in hundreds happily unaware that before long they will be en route, cold and stiff, to help feed Britain. That is if our tired wharfies can muster up strength to load the them. We have had some extraordinary strikes here, but I think Australia can claim the queerest. The miners there at one mine 'walked out' in a body because they said that a pit pony had 'halitosis'.

How is London now? Is it true that during the war a nightingale sang in Barkly Square? I was down in Auckland last month and a Cockney stoker off one of the Home boats assured me that was correct, and furthermore, that when one night a passing doodle-bug stripped it of every feather it still sang gamely on. I suppose an extraordinary fowl like that will become legendary, in the "Mons Angels" way. Well, thanks again for a link with home, and I look forward to The Adelphi *keenly.*

Well, thank you, dear Friend, for your kind remarks. Another letter, beginning "Dear Friend', was not quite so friendly: for it informed me that it would no longer take copies of *The Adelphi* for its pacific bookshop, since, apparently, this disreputable personality had become its editor. (And *The Adelphi* needs all the sales it can get, if it is to continue; at present *Tarka*, *Salar* etc., are keeping it going. The more 10s. subscriptions we receive, the nearer we will be to illustrations, photographs, and a merrier format: even as we want to see a Merrier England.) But to natural history: - Is it true about the nightingale in that London Square? Personally, I doubt it, as I doubt many other 'facts' about the recent war. I can tell you one fact, how-

ever: the idea was seriously considered in Washington, after Pearl Harbour, of fixing small incendiary pellets to bats, and loosing thousands of the little winged insectivores (whose bony framework so closely resembles that of the human species) over Tokio which, being built mainly of wood, would burn up, together with the human beings inside the houses, and presumably the bats. O brave new auric world...

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Before my fire, as the sea-wind roared in the trees outside, I have been reading David Smith's *The Same Sky Over All* (Dent, 12s.6d.). I remember his first book, *No Rain in Those Clouds*, which came out five years ago, when I reviewed it in a Norfolk newspaper, *The Eastern Daily Press*, wherein I wrote a weekly column. It was an excellent farming book, by a man who carried on the Essex tradition of farming from many ancestors. Mr. Smith wrote of that interesting man, Father, with truth and affection. In the new book, Father has left the place where the Smiths had farmed for over a hundred years, and begun again near Chelmsford. Good photographs illustrate the story, which deals with all aspects of the farmer's life, including a chapter on old-fashioned implements, with sketches. It is the book of a bodily active man, no sedentary ball-up of intellectualism or theory-splitting in his writing.

Likewise Mr. R.M. Lockley, in his new book, *The Golden Year* (Witherby, 10s.6d.), aptly titled. Mr. Lockley is a working farmer (proudly he calls himself peasant), well known for his Skokholm island adventures, and later for his pioneering on the mainland. Like most men, he has had his troubles, and come through them. *The Golden Year* is the best of his farming books, in my quiet opinion. The experimental community has got rid of itself, the slackers and suckers and escapists have gone (Mr. Lockley does not say this; but how else could he have had so lovely a year?), a hard harmonious core of genuine co-operating workers remain. Mr. Lockley has found love; it shows itself on every page, from the beginning where, in the terrible winter of 1946-47, he stands and watches his entire ewe flock swept away over the Welsh cliffs by an avalanche of snow, dog and all, into the sea, to the end of the year, when a bumper harvest is carried. In between, he works and fishes, has time - the mental-freedom which is an aspect of time - to relax and watch clouds, lie on the headland with his companion-wife, seek flowers for his herbarium, and to write books. The lyric has come shiningly into his life: his prose reveals it. And in the harmonious rhythm of his time he has written, also, a charming story of six pairs of canaries , of differing colours and hues, turned free on Skokholm, and making their nests in the stone walls and wind-swept trees he planted years ago. This second book has the striking title of *The Cinnamon Bird* (Staples Press, 8s.6d.), and famous artist C.F. Tunnicliffe has beautifully, that is truly, illustrated it with pages in colour. The names of the birds immediately attract - Green Brother, Clear-white, Gold Cock, Bully (blue), Sea-blue, etc. It is a true story; the birds came to the island lying off the Welsh coast from a London sewer, where canaries are kept to detect (by their quick dying) deadly gases, for the protection of sewermen. Hawks came to the island, following migrations of wild finches, buntings, and other small passerines; a wild goldfinch was courted by

Kitty, a pleading lone hen-canary, who wanted to nest. He yielded, but flew away, on migration. Only one of the hen's four eggs hatched; the other three were infertile. The chick was "a typical canary-goldfinch mule - of a warm, almost a rosy, buff colour...the beautiful hybrid grew rapidly". In the end, Mule, as he was called, chased a sparrowhawk pursuing his mother. Mule was a courageous and loyal bird; he followed and vainly struck the hawk in the back. Alas, Kitty died: one of the many little tragedies on the island.

Skokholm proved too bleak and bushless a place for wild canaries. And one day "a mine drifted against the island cliffs. A terrible explosion shook the house. Pieces of red rock and metal were flung into the sky and spattered the sea and land". Mule went with other birds to the mainland for Skokholm was required for defence purposes. *The Cinnamon Bird* is a lovely little book: copies of which shall go as New Year presents to several of my children-friends.

One book which I shall certainly keep for myself is Robert Gibbings' *Over the Reefs*. His series of travel-adventure books, illustrated by his own wood-cuts, are well known; after years of hard work, he is a best-seller in the U.S.A. He reminds me of one of my favourite movie-actors, Monty Woolley, being likewise bluff, bearded, and immeasurably genial. I have recently read his *Lovely is the Lee*, which has made me plan to go to the West of Ireland for a spell. I would like to go farther, to the country of his new book; *Over the Reefs* (Dent, 15s.) is about the isles of Polynesia, from Tonga to Tahiti. It is the best kind of travel book, wherein the author wanders free and easy, but seldom rough, though he could do what most men do in that way, without feeling any change. There's plenty of vitality in our part of the Western world yet, with which to replace what had had its day, if these clear and forthright books are any indication.

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