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THE GREEN DESERT
Henry Williamson

ON MY FIRST VISIT TO NORTH DEVON in the late spring of 1914 the return third-class fare, from Waterloo station, was 9s 6d. I spent my holiday alone, walking up to 15 miles every day in sunny weather. Cuckoos were calling on the sandy heathland above Woolacombe bay; I passed hours watching them; but the greatest excitement came to me while lying on the thyme-scented sward above Baggy headland observing a pair of peregrine falcons.

I could see the male, called tercel (he was smaller than the female by one *tierce*, or third) brooding the young eyasses in the immemorial eyrie above the sea-cave called Baggy Hole. The female, called falcon, did the hunting. Any moment she would come in at about a thousand feet and utter the *chak-chek-chak* call. Out would fly the tercel, she dropped her prey, he dived to catch it in mid-air; and returned to pluck pigeon, or plover, or maybe partridge and feed the eyasses on their rocky ledge.

Roaming the broad, two-mile length of sandy shore day after day, I saw, unlike Robinson Crusoe, only my own footprints above the tide-line. Wandering back to the village at twilight, I lingered to watch white owl fanning over the mice-runs in thistly grazing fields. Under moonlight milky in the vapours of the night, corncrakes called and recalled in those fields which were shut up for hay to be cut at any time now. I wanted to stay and ask to be allowed to walk before the cutter, lest partridge chicks and little corcrakes die. But my time was almost up.

Conscious of an imminent return to London, I, by day and by night, was out of doors dreaming beside the waves breaking on the rocks; or on higher ground, listening to nightjars churring on salt-blasted branches of thorn-trees standing grey-lichened amidst the bracken of inland coombes. I found a nest of the long-eared owl, and fed its young on tiny pieces of steak, while the old birds waited for this human cuckoo-in-reverse to quit. And on the last day I visited all my favourite places, saying aloud with the poignant melodrama of youth, "Goodbye, goodbye! I shall return to you all one day."

During the slow all-night journey back to London, sitting with nine other passengers in one compartment, I remained entranced. It was a fine summer which ended, for many of my generation, some weeks later on August Bank Holiday of that year. I had been a Territorial soldier since the past winter; and now my battalion was mobilised with others of the London Regiment. And so to Flanders, where we were brigaded with unshaven regular soldiers of the B.E.F., or what was left of the 'red little dead little army' after Mons, Le Cateau, and the turning battles of Marne and Aisne.

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It was a vanished world to which one returned in 1919, after five years in the army; but it was the same wild and remote country of North Devon. Cuckoos still called about the sandhills along the shore, corncrakes still rasped to one another under the moon. Big buzzard hawks sailed over in rising spirals, uttering wild mewling cries above the valley oakwoods. Ravens flew in pairs, cronking and half-rolling with joy at being alive; and, best of all, peregrine falcons still nested in the centuries-old eyrie of Baggy Point. There I found, to my excitement, a colony of swallows nesting along the cliffs.

Everything was as reborn for me; the war might never have been. (Only later did one realise that the shocks were deep in the subconscious mind.) If I did not walk at least a dozen miles every day, the sunlight was wasted. At evening, chains of swifts screamed around the church tower as they drove their hens to nests under the eaves of thatched cottages. Then up went the male to far heights of the sky, where, some said, they flew all night, sleeping on the wing. All the migrants were home again with me, having followed ancestral routes by inherited star-prints of their minds. The wryneck had arrived just before the cuckoo, to utter his ringing cry of *peel-peel-peel* nine times in quick succession, thus earning his name of cuckoo's mate.

Primroses bloomed under the hedgerows in the sunken lanes, where by night one saw the pale-green fires of glow-worms seeking, I was told by the local doctor who was a great naturalist, the yellow-banded snail, which they chloroformed by a bite before eating.

One morning a flying-boat passed thundering over - the first to be seen in the village where now I rented a thatched cottage for £5 a year. With squawks of terror all hens flew to cover, never having seen such an apparition!

And as the years went by I wrote my books in that village and reared a little family. In 1928 I was awarded the Hawthornden Prize for a book about an otter, and with the money (£100) bought a two-acre field on a hilltop, where I built an oak-framed, slate-roofed hut with an open hearth across one corner. And there, during forty years, I have written most of my books; and seen some changes in the countryside, which is the subject of this memoir.

I am an optimist about English country. So much which has appeared disastrous at any one time has later come to be accepted as a basis for adaptation. To give one example: during the Hitlerian war great acres of land were ravaged by bulldozers (then a new and imported type of machine) to obtain gravel for runways of bomber stations - 600 of them. And to one of the pits flew a rare bird, a lesser ringed plover, to make its nest. Mr Kenneth Allsop, then invalided from the Royal Air Force, wrote a book about this bird, which won the Llewellyn Rees Prize, and thus started his literary career. Today, many a worked-out gravel depression has become a restful lake, set with islets planted with willows, with trout and the sanctuary of wildfowl. Even war is not wholly evil...

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RABBITS were a plague when myxomatosis was brought from the Continent by some furtive farmer, during the fifties. A horrible sight - infected rabbits crawling about, puffy-faced before swelling up and dying. Other forms of life, which had existed on rabbits, also died - of starvation. In my part of Devon I saw buzzards - those large soaring hawks of the moors and forests - perched on pole after telegraph pole along lesser lanes, too weak to fly. From these last refuges they watched for small birds below, even beetles: down they flopped, lost to the air.

Many a newspaper story of a great hawk attacking hens was the reverse of truth: the hens were pecking a fallen enemy to death.

Stoats, which also had lived on rabbits, were soon starving. So was the smaller weasel, hunter of rats, mice, and birds. One day I came across four stoats hunting one small weasel, wich screamed with rage, thus to be treated! Some time later I came upon the bodies of the stoats. Like racing-car engines, which need immense volumes of fuel , they had run out of 'juice'.

After myxomatosis, no hawks, no owls, no stoats. Rats appeared to have gone out, too, with field mice and voles. Beautiful soft-flying barn-owls found nothing to grab as they floated over mice-runs in the pastures I had known for 30 years...What a change in the yield of farmers' corn crops! Before, the green corn was shorn for many yards inside field boundary banks, once the homes of thousands of rabbits.

How many know what caused the plague of rabbits upon agricultural England in the early part of the century? The plague began with the introduction of the steel gin-trap. These traps caught the old bucks which were the first to come out of their holes in the half-light of evening, to feed. The old bucks were cannibals; they dug up and ate nests of young rabbits. With the cannibal bucks out of the way, young rabbits increased in geometrical progression, so that my small field swarmed with scores of grey objects on a summer evening. Elsewhere I have counted over 400 in one 10-acre field, and that didn't include the does with their young in underground nests.

About the time of the disappearance of rabbits, scientists took over the arable fields of England with their toxic sprays. Even before this, I had found dead partridges squatting in fields of young corn after machines spraying DNC had passed over. This was soon after the war in Europe ended. Some of the men who drove the machines died. One of my sons, who had left home when our eight years of family farming in East Anglia had ended, drove one such machine. The spraying killed, by withering, all plants except those of wheat, barley, and oats, the narrow leaves of which allowed the liquid to run down. Thus the tips alone withered. The drivers were told never to eat their lunches unless they held the sandwiches in tissue paper. Two Irishmen working in his gang died. They hadn't bothered about paper.

In the years which followed, public outcry forced chemists to find less noxious mixtures. Yeoman farmers, especially those of the premier

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game-shooting country of Norfolk, weren't going to see their stocks destroyed!

There were sprays to kill insects - 'parasites' - on which small birds fed. Struggling weakly before death, many were seized by the brown hovering kestrel hawks, which in turn died. It affected owls differently. They ate the mice which ate the sprayed insects. During an interval of five years tawny owls - the ones which hoot - brought off no young from eggs laid in hollow tree or old magpie nest. Sterility was certainly the cause of the two tawnies failing to have young in my field. They lived in the northern gable peak of my studio - a building extra to the hut -and entered through a hole in the masonry to a special box within. After laying three white eggs, the hen sat for eight weeks without hatching. The following year she laid again, faithfully fed by her mate during the hours between evening twilight and dawn. Owls pair for life. While I lay in my bed in the studio loft I heard them talking in gentle, dove-like under-voices.

He was tender with his low notes, she was anguished. As the weeks went on he would fly in broad daylight from his day-roost in a pine-tree, to console her. Crows pursued and harried him. Her cries became more mournful: the crows' calling-notes more urgent. I understand owl-talk, having listened to my pair during scores of nights, just over my head. So I knew when she was on the point of giving up. When she had forsaken the nest I put the ladder against the gable and put my arm into the hole and drew forth the addled eggs. Within one shell was an embryo with an incipient second head.

About this time, it was reported that salmon in a hatchery beside the Hampshire Avon were breaking out of their small, grape-like eggs with two heads. I wondered at the time if there were a connexion between mice feeding on poisoned insects and storing toxin which, transferred to my familiar tawny owls, produced at first monstrosities, and then sterility during the following years.

One evening, wandering about my field, I thought that my sight was affected after prolonged writing at night by candlelight: for, on looking ap at the owl-hole in the gable, I could see only a grey blur where before the hole had been dark. I rubbed my eyes again and again. The greyness persisted. Was a cataract forming across one retina? I looked again. The hole was dark. I stared, it became grey once more. I ran for my Zeiss monocular (removed from a German field-gun during the first war) and focused: there, in the hole, was a fluffy grey face of an owlet, examining me intently!

Now the odd thing was that other observers, more organised for bird-watching than I, told me that they knew of no tawny owl bringing off eggs for some years; but in 1966 owlets were being seen about the woods again. And not only seen - for the owlet perched on some branch will utter a series of prolonged wheezing cries, ending in a flutter of wings as a dark form suddenly glides silently upon it - causing the owlet to snap its beak in fear, before snatching what has been brought...while

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the dark form of its parent merges into night.

Then there is the white or barn owl, most beautiful of birds to me which, as I have said, disappeared during the time of myxomatosis. I saw several borne down by a starving buzzard. Today he is back again, quavering my field in weak sunlight, hunting for his owlets in some ruinous field barn or linhay.

Once, in a time of ice and snow, I surprised a stag 'harbouring' in an abandoned linhay overlooking the sea. Many wild red deer had been driven by hard weather to seek food far from their usual paths. Now, hunting the deer with hounds is a subject which causes much controversy. The hunters say, with some truth, that deer do much damage to crops, and that without an organised system of regular hunting in season, the deer would disappear; and in the process suffer much anguish from steel traps, nooses, and indiscriminate shooting by gangs. A shotgun wound, as I have seen, breaks skin and flesh; and in summer a deer will die slowly while being eaten alive by maggots.

The anti-blood sports section of the public objects to hunting on grounds of cruelty. I have long seen, and felt, both sides of this vexed question of to hunt or not to hunt: and would with respect point out that a third way exists, by which deer are kept both in check and in existence, as I learned during a recent visit to Frankfurt. Both wild red deer and boar roam the forests around that city, under protection of game wardens. Annually, mature animals of both species are shot from stands erected in trees. Before a sportsman can buy a licence to shoot, he must pass a marksman's test. The rent he pays for his shoot includes an insurance premium against damage done to crops around his part of parcel of forest. It does not matter whether the damage is caused by his or a neighbour's game. All claims are settled and paid by government assessors. So everyone is content.

Before your stand, up a tree, is an open space. Here food is scattered during several days before a shoot. The quarry is shot by a high-velocity bullet. That is all. You shoot so many, and that is the limit. Thus you have tender steaks for your deep-freeze, or from your butcher. And there is no suffering, as with domestic cattle driven into slaughter yards, terrified by the smell of blood.

Wild deer in this island are probably more numerous than has been the case for centuries. Afforestation has provided great areas wherein deer can find sanctuary. In some counties the Green Man of Elizabethan times has returned. He watches the deer in his area, knows their habits and trackways. In the season, he carries a high-velocity rifle.

What of the otter? I never cared for otter-hunting; I used to follow hounds as an observer only, in tose days when I had an idea to write the biography of an otter called Tarka. This large water-weasel is now thought by many to be on the way to extinction. If left to otter-hunters only, otter might survive; but nearly every man's hand is against the odd-looking creature. Also, its skin is worth money.

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Perhaps today the rare brown beast's worst opponents are the rod fishermen *en masse* numbering, in clubs and associations, possibly over a million.

Another species, so marvellous in the days of youth, which has come also to the fate of joining the great auk and the dodo, is the peregrine falcon. Its near extinction is due to two causes: the first being the necessity, during World War Two, of keeping wireless-silence in Sunderland flying-boats during anti-submarine patrol duty in the North Atlantic. Pigeons were used for messages; and all around the south-western coasts of England were the immemorial eyries of the noble falcon. But human life in sea-warfare of 1941-1944 must come first; so the peregrines, which hunted pigeon, were shot above their cliff castles. The very few which survived vanished during the toxic corn-spraying of the late Fifties, presumably after eating contaminated partridges and doves.

Finches, warblers, larks - where were they? Laments for the diminution of species arose on all sides - even in the Landes district of France, where the smallest migrants are still netted for the decadent gourmand. But at the nadir, the lowest point of the degradation of *homo sapiens*, as Henry S. Salt described us half a century ago, things began to improve. Preservation societies have grown up, headed by the World Wildlife Fund. Laws of protection have been passed. In Britain today not only are the eggs and young of *all* hawks and owls, which had come almost to extinction, protected by law; but it is illegal, and rightly so, to photograph the nests and eggs of these birds without a permit. I say "rightly so" because all birds, and flowers, and butterflies, the fish in our rivers and lakes, together with our trees and downs, mountains and valleys, are all part of the English, and the Scottish, and the Welch (or Welsh) heritage.

Disasters, to wild as well as to human life, are or were perhaps necessary steps preceding better manners towards all children of Mother Earth. So let us see all things without shadows, as the sun sees them.

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