

A NATURE-LOVER'S NOTEBOOK

Henry Williamson

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THE DWELLER ON THE HILLTOP

Down there in the village, revealed in the darkness by a solitary light in one of the new Council cottages, they say that only a "mazed" man would want to live on the top of a hill.

They say that the winds must blow everything away, and the usual remark is that it must be very cold up there.

This morning the sun was shining in clear air over the hill when the villages below were drowned under white mist filling all the valleys. And what exhilaration there is tonight for the dweller on a hilltop!

I can see the lights of Appledore and Bideford and the shore lights of Instow ten miles away and below.

The lighthouse of Hartland Point flicks and swishes across Bideford Bay to the West, and the lights of Lundy flash like large stars.

I can hear the sound of tides on this Atlantic coast as though night itself were roaring at the earth.

Walking down the hill to the village, a feeling arises in the breast that the earth indeed was created for man, that all the elements are his servants. One does not get this feeling when living at the bottom of a valley.

Halfway down the hill the flashes of Hartland lighthouse became dull; I was now beginning to enter the mist.

The young moon which had been clearcut and purple-bright from the hilltop now looked like the corroded yellow horn of a black-bodied bull in the black clouds over Hartland.

The image was so startling that I stopped and leaned over a gate, watching the horn shrinking and the bull losing form and spreading darkly down until the flashes of the lighthouse were put out, and the whooping bellow of its siren arose above the roar of the sea.

The lane was streaming with water, for all the hill springs had broken with the rains of the past fortnight. It was pleasant to walk on the gleaming roadway with the soft trickle and splash of water running everywhere.

And so I came to the village, a dark and starless place under dripping elms, and to the inn, where the eyes were hurt by the hard, bright light from a modern lamp, and the wall of heat momentarily seemed to stop the breathing.

"Like to be where you've just come from" said the landlord.

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WHEN DAWN BREAKS OVER EXMOOR

A star burned brightly over the tops of the spruce firs where the wild pigeons had not yet awakened. A star? Such a steady shine surely was of a planet. It had not the soft lustre of Venus, which would soon be rising behind my head, in the Eastern sky over the distant hills.

I had not looked at a star-map for years. This planet was a stranger.

And yet not a stranger: for during several mornings I had awakened at the end of the night, while the stars were shining and a dark blueness was filtering into the sky, and watched it moving slowly towards the West.

If I turned away for a while, closing my eyes and breathing deeply of the cold air stirring to life again - for the airs of night and day are different - the star would be gone, to be found again by moving the head sideways, when it would glitter among the topmost branches of a fir.

It was not yet songlight, but birds were beginning to whisper to one another. A pair of greenfinches which roosted in one of the yews on the lawn below began a low rapid under-twitter, a flow of subtle inflexions, which surely was an inflowing of mutual joy.

They nested every year in that tree; either the same pair, or their offspring. For them, as for us, this was the happiest time of the year, and one small bird was expressing to another small bird, the one to the other, their song-talk intertwined, what I was feeling, but in a lesser, duller way.

An owl flew across the window, not seen, but sensed; and a hooting, rattling cry filled the coombe. It was one of those dwarf owls which were introduced into England about eighty years ago, and have since increased a millionfold.

A moment later, it seemed, I opened my eyes and saw a sky of azure, white clouds trailing high in sunshine, rooks noisy, blackbirds, thrushes, and pigeons singing, and the other end of the house filled with bumps and cries of laughter - the children having the early morning rough-and-tumble.

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STORY OF A STICKY BUSINESS

This is Cranmere, which I refuse, pot-boiling writer though I be, but no imitator, to describe as the Mecca of Dartmoor pilgrims.

Neither shall I describe it as a dump of orange peel and other litter, including bottles and ourselves. We came to Cranmere after prolonged goat-like hoppings from peat hag to peat hag, linked and arising out of the brown bog.

I had forgotten the exact location of Cranmere, so we went round and round in ignorant circles until we saw a figure, accompanied by a dog, walking rapidly up the slope from another direction.

We went towards him, and our goat-like hoppings ceased when we realised that the stranger was walking on the brown patches of bog, into which his boots pressed firmly to the welts only. We followed him here.

Far away beyond Great Mis Tor and Maiden Hill lying to the South, a mist, or cloud, or fog, seemed to be rising unevenly, and I felt glad that my Service prismatic compass was in my pocket. The wind had dropped, the sky was overcast, and visibility seemed to be growing less.

There's a story of a man shooting snipe just about here, who seeing a hat on the ground absent-mindedly gave it a kick. A voice came from under the hat, saying "what be kickin' me 'at vor, you?" "Aw, be theer a mun under thaccy 'at?" "Ess, and 'oss under 'ee, too".

The sportsman inquired what the hat was doing there, and the voice under it said, "feyther was upalong looking vor sheep with Billy Budd, but Billy Budd came rinning back to the varm, saying 'Varmer be vallen into th' moire; do 'ee come quick and pull'n out, or er'll be a-go.'"

"Aw, Billy. 'Ow var be 'er vallen in tho'?"

"'Er be right uin up to 'er ankles, 'er can't get out."

"'Er can't get out, Billy, did 'ee zay, surenuff?"

"'Ess fay."

"'Aw Billy, so'er be right in up to 'er ankles, tho! If 'er be vallen in up to 'er ankles, Billy, 'er can get out, surely?"

"Naw, 'er can't, I tell 'ee, 'er'll be a-go."

"Which way be 'er vallen in, tho'?"

"'Er be vallen in 'ade (head) virst."

"So us both jumped on th' ould 'oss an' yurr us be, looking for feyther."

With that the hat disappeared in the mire and the sportsman continued his interrupted search for snipe.

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THE LONELIEST CORNER OF DEVON

The other morning I went to visit someone living in a village which is farther from a railway than any other village in England. My friend was out, and would not be returning until evening, so I went for a walk by

myself, following a small stream down the valley to where it fell over the cliffs into the Atlantic.

In summer this runner or brook shrinks to a mere thread. In winter it is only three feet wide and less than a foot deep, but like its largest brother that falls over the cliff a mile or so Southward, it nourishes trout up to three-quarters of a pound in weight - small headed trout, too.

By their small heads one knows that they are fly-feeders, they are not bottom feeders, eating mullheads and smaller trout. They are the fattest trout in Devonshire.

Lifting up a stone in the bed of the rillet, I perceived the reason of their fatness.

On the smooth, dark, algae-covered part of the stone, which was touched by water, several small nymphs of the blue dun were wriggling; and on the lower part of the stone which had been embedded in clay were no fewer than seven yellowish-white grubs, with brown heads, each concealed in a sort of muddy silken sack, tacked to the stone.

Were these the grubs of the mayfly, I wondered. They looked like those grubs which bore into the bark of spruce trees, except that they were more lively and slightly thinner.

I wandered down the valley of rough grazing and storm-sheared trees towards the edge of the land. The stream fell from the slanting crevice in a pool and from the pool it leapt and bubbled on the boulders of the shore.

I slid down the rocky sheer and sat beside the pool. The shore was strewn with great pieces of rock which the Atlantic storms had broken from the cliffs.

Some of the rocks would be ground smooth by the tides and rolled along the base of the promontory until washed up on the beach of Westward Ho! Perhaps in twenty-second century A.D.

*There are pools on this wild shore where conger eels and
lobsters move, black and sodden timbers of ships lie there
under the weed; gulls cry their cadaver cries overhead.
There was a strange feeling of alone-ness on this inhuman
coast.*

I went up a cliff-path and climbed towards the sun. There is a footpath, continuous except for towns and where it has been widened into roads, around the entire island which is called Great Britain. This particular section of it led on South into Cornwall.

I came to another valley, where the larger stream fell over a break in the cliff to its pool in the rock below. At my approach a heron flew up the valley.

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