

THE NATURE WRITER

BY DALLAS LORE SHARP

DWELLING inland, far from those of us who go down to the sea in manuscripts, may be found the reader, no doubt, to whom the title of this essay is not anathema, to whom the word nature still means the real outdoors, as the word culture may still mean things other than "sweetness and light." It is different with us. We shy at the *word* nature. Good, honest term, it has suffered a sea-change with us; it has become literary. Piety suffers the same change when it becomes professional. There has grown up about nature as a literary term a vocabulary of cant—nature lover, nature writer, nature—Throw the stone for me, you who are clean! Inseparably now these three travel together, arm in arm, like Tom, Dick, and Harry—the world, the flesh, and the devil. Name one, and the other two appear, which is sad enough for the nature writer, because a word is known by the company it keeps.

The nature writer deserves, maybe, his dubious reputation; he is more or less of a fraud, perhaps. And perhaps everybody else is, more or less. I am sure of it as regards preachers and plumbers and politicians and men who work by the day. Yet I have known a few honest men of each of these several sorts, although I can't recall just now the honest plumber. I have known honest nature writers, too; there are a number of them, simple, single-minded, and purposefully poor. I have no mind, however, thus to pronounce upon them, dividing the sheep from the goats, lest haply I count myself in with the wrong fold. My desire, rather, is to see that nature writing pure and undefiled may be, and the nature writer what manner of writer he ought to be.

For it is plain that he has now evolved into a distinct, although undescribed, literary species. His origins are not far to seek, the course of his development not hard to trace, but very unsatisfactory is the attempt, as yet, to classify him. We all know a nature book at sight, no matter how we may doubt the nature in it; we all know that the writer of such a book

must be a nature writer; yet this is not describing him scientifically, by any means.

Until recent years the nature writer had been hardly more than a variant of some long-established species—of the philosopher in Aristotle; of the moralizer in Theobaldus; of the scholar and biographer in Walton; of the traveler in Josselyn; of the poet in Burns. But that was in the feudal past. Since then the land of letters has been redistributed; the literary field, like every other field, has been cut into intensified and highly specialized patches—the short story for you, the muck-rake essay for me, or magazine verse, or wild animal biography. The paragraph of outdoor description in Scott becomes the modern nature sketch, the "Lines to a Limping Hare" in Burns run into a wild animal romance of about the length of "The Last of the Mohicans;" the occasional letter of Gilbert White's grows into an annual nature volume, this year's being entitled "Buzz-Buzz and Old Man Barberry; or, The Thrilling Young Ladyhood of a Better-Class Bluebottle Fly." The story that follows is how she never would have escaped the net of Old Man Barberry had she been a butterfly—a story which only the modern nature-writing specialist would be capable of handling. Nature writing and the automobile business have developed vastly during the last few years.

It is Charles Kingsley, I think, who defines "a thoroughly good naturalist" as one "who knows his own parish thoroughly," a definition, all questions of style aside, that accurately describes the nature writer. He has field enough for his pen in a parish; he can hardly know more and know it intimately enough to write about it. For the nature writer, while he may be more or less of a scientist, is never mere scientist—zoölogist or botanist. Animals are not his theme; flowers are not his theme. Nothing less than the universe is his theme, as it pivots on him, around the distant boundaries of his immediate neighborhood.

His is an emotional, not an intellectual,

point of view; a literary, not a scientific, approach. Which means that he is the axis of his world, its great circumference, rather than any fact—any flower, or star, or tortoise. Now to the scientist the tortoise is the thing: the particular species *Thalassochelys kempfi*; of the family Testudinidæ; of the order Chelonia; of the class Reptilia; of the branch Vertebrata. But the nature writer never pauses over this matter to capitalize it. His tortoise may or may not come tagged with this string of distinguishing titles. A tortoise is a tortoise for a' that, particularly if it should happen to be an old Sussex tortoise which had been kept for thirty years in a yard by the nature writer's friend, and which "On the 1st November began to dig the ground in order to the forming of its hybernaculum, which it had fixed on just beside a great tuft of hepaticas.

"P. S.—In about three days after I left Sussex, the tortoise retired into the ground under the hepatica."

This is a bit of nature writing by Gilbert White, of Selborne, which sounds quite a little like science, but which you noticed was really spoiled as science by its "tuft of hepaticas." There is no buttonhole in science for the nosegay. And when, since the Vertebrates began, did a scientific tortoise ever *retire*?

One more quotation, I think, will make clear my point, namely, that the nature writer is not detached from himself and alone with his fact, like the scientist, but is forever relating his tortoise to himself. The lines just quoted were from a letter dated April 12, 1772. Eight years afterwards, in another letter, dated Selborne, April 21, 1780, and addressed to "the Hon. Daines Barrington," the good rector writes:

"Dear Sir—The old Sussex tortoise, that I have mentioned to you so often, is become my property. I dug it out of its winter dormitory in March last, when it was enough awakened to express its resentments by hissing, and, packing it in a box with earth, carried it eighty miles in post-chaises. The rattle and hurry of the journey so perfectly roused it that, when I turned it out on the border, it walked twice down to the bottom of my garden."

Not once, not three times, but *twice*

down to the bottom of the garden. We do not question it for a moment; we simply think of the excellent thesis material wasted here in making a mere popular page of nature writing. Gilbert White never got his Ph.D., if I remember, because, I suppose, he stopped counting after the tortoise made its second trip, and because he kept the creature among the hepaticas of the garden, instead of on a shelf in a bottle of alcohol. Still, let us admit, and let the college professors, who do research work upon everything except their students, admit, that walking twice to the bottom of a garden is not a very important discovery. But how profoundly interesting it was to Gilbert White! And how like a passage from the Pentateuch his record of it! Ten years he woos this tortoise, and wins it—with a serene and solemn joy. He digs it out of its winter dormitory (a hole in the ground), packs it carefully in a box, carries it hurriedly, anxiously, by post-chaises for eighty miles, rousing it perfectly by the end of the journey, when, liberating it in the rectory yard, he stands back to see what it will do; and, lo! *it walks twice to the bottom of the garden!*

By a thoroughly good naturalist Kingsley may have meant a thoroughly good nature writer, for I think he had in mind Gilbert White, who certainly was a thoroughly good naturalist, and who certainly knew his own parish thoroughly. In the letters from which I have quoted the gentle rector was writing the natural history of Selborne, his parish. But how could he write the natural history of Selborne when his tortoise was away over in Sussex!

A tortoise down by Sussex's brim
A Sussex tortoise was to him,
And it was nothing more—

nothing at all for the "Natural History of Selborne" until he had gone after it and brought it home.

Thus all nature writers do with all their nature in some manner or other, not necessarily by post-chaise for eighty miles. It is characteristic of the nature writer, however, to bring home his outdoors, to domesticate his nature, to relate it all to himself. His is a dooryard universe, his earth a flat little planet turning about a hop-pole in his garden—a planet mapped by fields, ponds, and cow-paths, and set in

a circumfluent sea of neighbor townships, beyond whose shores he neither goes to church, nor works out his taxes on the road, nor votes appropriations for the schools.

He is limited to his parish because he writes about only so much of the world as he lives in, as touches him, as makes for him his home. He may wander away, like Thoreau, to the Maine woods, or down along the far-off shores of Cape Cod; but his best writing will be that about his hut at Walden.

It is a large love for the earth as a dwelling-place, a large faith in the entire reasonableness of its economy, a large joy in all its manifold life, that moves the nature writer. He finds the earth most marvelously good to live in—himself its very dust; a place beautiful beyond his imagination, and interesting past his power to realize—a mystery every way he turns. He comes into it as a settler into a new land, to clear up so much of the wilderness as he shall need for a home.

Thoreau perhaps, of all our nature writers, was the wildest wild man, the least domestic in his attitude. He went off far into the woods, a mile and a half from Concord village, to escape domestication, to seek the wild in nature and to free the wild in himself. And what was his idea of becoming a wild man but to build a cabin and clear up a piece of ground for a bean patch! He was solid Concord beneath his war-paint—a thin coat of savagery smeared on to scare his friends whenever he went to the village—a walk which he took very often. He differed from Gilbert White as his cabin at Walden differed from the quaint old cottage at Selborne. But cabin and cottage alike were to dwell in; and the bachelor of the one was as much in need of a wife, and as much in love with the earth, as the bachelor in the other. Thoreau's "Walden" is as parochial and as domestic with its woodchuck and beans as White's "Natural History of Selborne" with its tame tortoise and garden.

In none of our nature writers, however, is this love for the earth more manifest than in John Burroughs. It is constant and dominant in him, an expression of his religion. He can see the earth only as the best possible place to live in—to live *with* rather than in or on; for he is

unlike the rector of Selborne and the wild tame man of Walden in that he is married and a farmer—conditions, these, to deepen one's domesticity. Showing somewhere along every open field in Burroughs's books is a piece of fence, and among his trees there is always a patch of gray sloping roof. He grew up on a farm (a most excellent place to grow up on, one college president to the contrary notwithstanding), became a clerk, but not for long, then got him a piece of land, built him a home out of unhewn stone, and set him out an eighteen-acre vineyard. And ever since he has lived in his vineyard, with the Hudson River flowing along one side of it, the Catskills standing along another side of it, with the horizon all around, and overhead the sky, and everywhere, through everything, the pulse of life, the song of life, the sense of home!

He loves the earth, for the earth is home.

"I would gladly chant a pæan," he exclaims, "for the world as I find it. What a mighty interesting place to live in! If I had my life to live over again, and had my choice of celestial abodes, I am sure I should take this planet, and I should choose these men and women for my friends and companions. This great rolling sphere with its sky, its stars, its sunrises and sunsets, and with its outlook into infinity—what could be more desirable? What more satisfying? Garlanded by the seasons, embosomed in sidereal influences, thrilling with life, with a heart of fire and a garment of azure seas and fruitful continents—one might ransack the heavens in vain for a better or a more picturesque abode."

A full-throated hymn, this, to the life that is, in the earth that is, a hymn without taint of cant, without a single note of that fevered desire for a land that is fairer than this, whose gates are of pearl and whose streets are paved with gold. If there is another land, may it be as fair as this! And a pair of bars will be gate enough, and gravel, cinders, grass, even March mud, will do for paving; for all that one will need there, as all that one needs here—here in New England in March—is to have "arctics" on one's feet and an equator about one's heart. The desire for heaven is natural enough, for how

could one help wanting more after getting through with this? But he sins and comes short of the glory of God who would be quit of this world for the sake of a better one. There isn't any better one. This one is divine. And as for those dreams of heaven in old books and monkish hymns, they cannot compare for glory and for downright domestic possibilities with the prospect of these snow-clad Hingham hills from my window this brilliant winter morning.

That "this world is not my resting-place" almost any family man can believe nowadays, but that "this world is not my home" I can't believe at all. However poor a resting-place we make of it, however certain of going hence upon a "longe journey," we may not find this earth anything else than home without confessing ourselves tenants here by preference, and liable, therefore, to pay rent throughout eternity. The best possible use for this earth is to make a home of it, and for this span of life to live it like a human, earth-born being.

Such is the *credo* of the nature writer; for not until it can be proved to him that eternal day is more to his liking than the sweet alternation of day and night, that unending rest is less monotonous than his round of labor until the evening, that streets of gold are softer for his feet than dirt roads with borders of grass and dandelions, that ceaseless hallelujahs about a throne exalt the excellency of God more than the quiet contemplation of the work of His fingers—the moon and the stars which He has ordained—not until, I say, it can be proved to him that God did not make this world, or, making it, spurned it, cursed it, that heaven might seem the more blessed—not until then will he forego his bean-patch at Walden, his vineyard at West Park, his garden at Selborne; will he deny to his body a house-lot on this little planet, and the range of this timed and tidy universe to his soul.

As between himself and nature, then, the thoroughly good nature writer is a lover—a purely personal state; lyric, emotional, rather than scientific, wherein the writer is not so much concerned with the facts of nature as with his view of them, his feelings for them, as they environ and interpret him, or as he centers and interprets them.

Were this all, it would be a simple story of love. Unfortunately, nature writing has become an art, which means some one looking on, and hence it means self-consciousness and adaptation, the writer forced to play the difficult part of loving his theme not less, but loving his reader more.

For the reader, then, his test of the nature writer will be the extreme test of sincerity. The nature writer (and the poet) more than many writers is limited by decree to his experiences—not to what he has seen or heard only, but as strictly to what he has truly felt. All writing must be sincere. Is it that nature writing and poetry must be spontaneously sincere? Sincerity is the first and greatest of the literary commandments. The second is like unto the first. Still there is considerable difference between the inherent marketableness of a cold thought and a warm, purely personal emotion. One has a right to sell one's ideas, to barter one's literary inventions; one has a right, a duty it may be, to invent inventions for sale; but one may not, without sure damnation, make "copy" of one's emotions. In other words, one may not invent emotions, nor observations either, for the literary trade. The sad case with much of our nature writing (and versifying and North-Poling) is that it has become professional, and so insincere, not answering to genuine observation nor to genuine emotion, but to the bid of the publisher.

You will know the sincere nature writer by his fidelity to fact. But, alas! suppose I do not know the fact? To be sure. And the nature writer thought of that, too, and penned his solemn, pious preface, wherein he declares that the following observations are exactly as he personally saw them; that they are true altogether; that he has the affidavits to prove it; and the Indians and the Eskimos to swear the affidavits prove it. Of course you are bound to believe after that; but you wish the preface did not make it so unnecessarily hard.

The sincere nature writer, because he knows he cannot prove it, and that you cannot prove it, and that the Copenhagen scientists cannot prove it, knows that he must not be asked for proofs, that he must be above suspicion, and so he sticks

to the truth as the wife of Cæsar to her spouse.

Let the nature writer only chronicle his observations as Dr. C. C. Abbott does in "A Naturalist's Rambles about Home," or let him dream a dream about his observations as Maeterlinck does in "The Life of the Bee," yet is he still confined to the truth as a hermit crab to his shell—a hard, inelastic, unchangeable, indestructible house that he cannot adapt, but must himself be adapted to or else abandon. Chronicle and romance alike we want true to fact. But this particular romance about the Bee will not thus qualify. It was not written for beekeepers, even amateur beekeepers, for they all know more or less about bees, and hence they would not understand the book. It was written for those, the city-faring folk, like my market-man, who asked me how many pounds of honey a bee would gather up in a year, and whether I kept more than one bee in a hive. A great many persons must have read "The Life of the Bee," but only one of them, so far as I know, had ever kept bees, and she had just a single swarm in between the wall of her living-room and the weather-boards outside. But she had listened to them through the wall, and she sent me her copy of "The Life," begging me to mark on the margins wherever the Bee of the book was unlike her bee in the wall. She had detected a difference in the buzz of the two bees.

Now the two bees ought to buzz alike—one buzz, distinct and always distinguishable from the buzz of the author. In the best nature writing the author is more than his matter, but he is never identical with it; and not until we know which is which, and that the matter is true, have we faith in the author.

I knew a big boy once who had almost reached the footprint in "Robinson Crusoe" (the tragedy of *almost* reaching it!) when some one blunderingly told him that the book was all a story, made up, not true at all; no such island; no such Crusoe! The boy shut up the book and put it forever from him. He wanted it true. He had thought it true, because it had been so real. Spoiled of its reality, he was unable to make it true again.

Most of us recover from this shock in

regard to books, asking only that they seem real. But we are eternally childish, curious, credulous, in our thought of nature; she is so close and real to us, and yet so shadowy, hidden, mysterious, and remote! We are eager to listen to any tale, willing to believe anything, if only it be true. Nay, we are willing to believe it true—we *were*, I should say, until, like the boy with the book, we were rudely told that all this fine writing was made up, that we have no such kindred in the wilds, and no such wilds. Then we said in our haste, all men—who write nature books—are liars.

"How much of this is real?" asked a keen and anxious reader, eying me narrowly, as she pointed a steady finger at an essay of mine in the "Atlantic." "Have you, sir, a farm and four real boys of your own, or are they *faked*?"

"Good heavens, madam!" I exclaimed. "Has it come to this? My boys *faked*!"

But it shows how the thoughtful and the fearful regard the literary naturalist, and how paramount is the demand for honesty in the matter of mere fact, to say nothing of the greater matter of expression.

Only yesterday, in a review in the "Nation" of an animal-man book, I read: "The best thing in the volume is the description of a fight between a mink and a raccoon—or so it seems. Can this be because the reader does not know the difference between a mink and a raccoon, and does know the difference between a human being and the story-teller's mannikin?"

"This is the wandering wood, this Error's den,"

is the feeling of the average reader—of even the "Nation's" book reviewer—nowadays, toward nature writing, a state of mind due to the recent revelations of a propensity in wild-animal literature to stand up rather than to go on all fours.

Whatever of the Urim and of the Thummim you put into your style, whatever of the literary lights and the perfections, see to it that you make the facts "after their pattern, which hath been shewed thee in the mount."

Thou shalt not bear false witness as to the facts.

Nor is this all. For the sad case with

much nature writing, as I have said, is that it not only fails to answer to genuine observation, but it also fails to answer to genuine emotion. Often as we detect the unsound natural history, we much oftener are aware of the unsound, the insincere, art of the author.

Now the facts of nature, as Mr. Burroughs says, are the material of nature literature—of *one* kind of such literature, let me add; for, while fabrications can be made only into lies, there may be another kind of good nature literature compounded wholly of fancies. Facts, to quote Mr. Burroughs again, are the flora upon which the nature writer lives. "I can do nothing without them." Of course he could not. But Chaucer could. Indeed, Chaucer could do nothing with the facts; he had to have fancies. The truth in his story of the Cock and the Fox is a different kind of truth from the truth about Burroughs's "Winter Neighbors," yet no less the truth. Good nature-writing is literature, not science, and the truth we demand, first and last is a literary truth—the fidelity of the writer to himself. He may elect to use facts for his material; yet they are only material, and no better as material than fancies. For it is not matter that counts last in literature; it is manner. It is spirit that counts. It is the man. Only honest men make literature. Writers may differ in their purpose, as Burroughs in his purpose to guide you through the woods differs from Chaucer's purpose to entertain you by the fire; but they are one in their spirit of honesty.

Chaucer pulls a long face and begins his tale of the Cock and the Fox with a vivid and very realistic description of a widow's cottage,

"B'syde a grovë, standing in a dalë,"

as a setting, not for the poor widow and her two daughters, not at all; but rather to stage the heroic comedy between Chauntecleer and his favorite wife, the scarlet-eyed Pertelote.

It is just before daybreak. They are not up yet, not off the roost, when they get into a discussion about the significance of dreams, Chauntecleer having had a very bad dream during the night. The dispute waxes as it spreads out over medicine, philosophy, theology, and psychology.

Chauntecleer quotes the classics, cites famous stories, talks Latin to her:

"For, also sicker as *In principio*
Mulier est hominis confusio;"

translating it for her thus:

"Madam, the sentence of this Latin is—
Woman is mannës joy and all his blis,"

while she tells him he needs a pill for his liver in spite of the fact that he wears a beard. It is fine scorn, but passing sad, following so close upon the old English love song that Chauntecleer was wont to wake up singing.

It is here, at this critical juncture of the nature story, that Chaucer pauses to remark, seriously:

"For thilkë tyme, as I have understandë,
Bestës and briddës couldë speke and singë."
Certainly they could; and "speking and singing in thilkë tymë" seems much more natural for "bestës and briddës" than many of the things they do nowadays.

Here, again, is Izaak Walton, as honest a man as Chaucer—a lover of nature, a writer on angling; who knew little about angling, and less about nature; whose facts are largely fancies; but—what of it? Walton quotes, as a probable fact, that pickerel hatch out of the seeds of pickerelweed; that toads are born of fallen leaves on the bottoms of ponds. He finds himself agreeing with Pliny "that many flies have their birth, or being, from a dew that in the spring falls upon the leaves of the trees;" and, quoting the divine du Bartas, he sings:

"So slow Bootes underneath him sees
In th' icy isles those goslings hatch'd of
trees,
Whose fruitful leaves, falling into the water,
Are turn'd, they say, to living fowls soon
after."

But the "Compleat Angler" is not a scientific work on fishes, nor a handbook on angling for anglers. It is a book for all that are lovers of literature; for "all that are lovers of virtue; and dare trust in his providence; and be quiet; and go a Angling."

This is somewhat unscientific, according to our present light; but, wonderful as it seemed to Walton, it was all perfectly natural according to his light. His facts are faulty, yet they are the best he had. So was his love the best he had; but that was without fault, warm, deep, intense, sincere.

Our knowledge of nature has so ad-

vanced since Walton's time, and our attitude has so changed, that the facts of nature are no longer enough for literature. We know all that our writer knows; we have seen all that he can see. He can no longer surprise us; he can no longer instruct us; he can no longer fool us. The day of the marvelous is past; the day of the *cum laude* cat and the *magnum cum laude* pup is past; the day of the things that I alone have seen is past; and the day of the things that I, in common with you, have honestly felt, is come.

There should be no suggestion in a page of nature writing that the author penetrated to the heart of some howling summer camp for his raw material; that he ever sat on his roof or walked across his back yard in order to write a book about it. But nature books, like other books, are gone far that way—always and solely for the pot. Such books are "copy" only—poor copy at that. There is nothing new in them; for the only thing you can get by going afar for it is a temptation to lie; and no matter from what distance you fetch a falsehood—even from the top of the world—you cannot disguise the true complexion of it. Take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, and you will find nothing new there; ascend into heaven or make your bed in hell for copy, as is the fashion nowadays— But you had better look after your parish and go faithfully about your chores; and if you have a garden with a tortoise in it, and you love them, and love to write about them, then write.

Nature writing must grow more and more human, personal, interpretative. If I go into the wilderness and write a book about it, it must be plain to my reader that "the writing of the book was only a second and finer enjoyment of my holiday in the woods." If my chippy sings, it must sing a chippy's simple song, not some gloria that only "the careless angels know." It must not do any extraordinary thing for me; but it may lead me to do an extraordinary thing—to have an extraordinary thought, or suggestion, or emotion. It may mean extraordinary things to me; things that have no existence in nature, whose beginnings and ends are in me. I may never claim that I, because

of exceptional opportunities, or exceptional insight, or exceptional powers of observation, have discovered these marvelous things in the wilds of Hingham. My pages may be anthropomorphic, human; not, however, because I humanize my bees and toads, but because I am human, and nature is meaningful ultimately only as it is related to me. I must not confuse myself with nature; nor yet "struggle against fact and law to develop and keep" my "own individuality." I must not anthropomorphize nature; never denature nature; never follow my own track through the woods, imagining that I am on the trail of a better-class wolf or a two-legged bear. I must never sentimentalize over nature again—write no more about "Buzz-Buzz and Old Man Barberry;" write no more about wailing winds and weeping skies; for mine is not "a poet's vision dim," but an open-eyed, scientific sight of things as they actually are. Once I have seen them, gathered them, if then they turn to poetry, let them turn. For so does the squash turn to poetry when it is brought in from the field. It turns to pie; it turns to poetry; and it still remains squash.

Good nature-literature, like all good literature, is more lived than written: Its immortal part hath elsewhere than the ink-pot for its beginning. The soul that rises with it, its life's star, first went down behind a horizon of real experience, then rose from a human heart, the source of all true feeling, of all sincere form. Good nature-writing particularly must have a pre-literary existence as lived reality; its writing must be only the necessary accident of its being lived again in thought. It will be something very human, very natural, warm, quick, irregular, imperfect, with the imperfections and irregularities of life. And the nature writer will be very human, too, and so very faulty; but he will have no lack of love for nature, and no lack of love for the truth. Whatever else he does, he will never touch the flat, disquieting note of make-believe. He will never invent, never pretend, never pose, never shy. He will be honest—which is nothing unusual for birds and rocks and stars; but for human beings, and for nature writers very particularly, it is a state less common, perhaps, than it ought to be.