

## CHAPTER I

# For King and Countryside

*The Natural History of the British*



‘Literally for this’

*Private Edward Thomas, Artists Rifles, on being asked why he had volunteered for service in the army. In the same moment he said these words he scooped up a handful of English earth.*

What’s in a name? If that name is Adlestrop then the answer is the quintessence of England on the very eve of the First World War.

It was on 24 June 1914 that Edward Thomas, a self-confessed hack writer (‘I hate my work’), took a train from Paddington to Gloucestershire. He was accompanied by his wife, Helen. The temperature was 80 degrees in the shade. Thomas wrote in his diary:

Then we stopped at Adlestrop, thro the willows cd be heard a chain of blackbirds’ songs at 12.45 & one thrush & no man seen, only the hiss of engine letting off steam. Stopping outside Campden by banks of long grass willow herb & meadowsweet, extraordinary

silence between two periods of travel – looking out on grey dry stones between metals & the shiny metals & over it all the elms willows & long grass one man clears his throat – and a greater rustic silence. No house in view. Stop only for a minute till signal is up.<sup>1</sup>

His famous poem ‘Adlestrop’ came two years later, with its perfect crystallised evocation of that last summer of peace; the brightness of birdsong, the tranquillity and the beauty of the Cotswold countryside with its ‘meadowsweet, and haycocks dry’.

‘Adlestrop’ would become one of the nation’s favourite poems, although Thomas himself would not live to see its success. As Lieutenant Edward Thomas, Royal Garrison Artillery, he was killed in action on the Western Front in April 1917.

Edward Thomas died at Arras for Adlestrop.

Thomas was never much of a jingo, never a Boche-hater, versing about the causes of the 1914 conflagration:

This is no case of petty right or wrong  
That politicians or philosophers  
Can judge. I hate not Germans, nor grow hot  
With love of Englishmen, to please newspapers . . .<sup>2</sup>

Thomas considered his true countrymen to be the birds. Or the trees. When someone queried the meaning of his poem ‘Aspens’, describing the whispering trees beside the crossroad in the village of Steep he replied, ‘I am the aspen’. Already thirty-six when the war broke out, Edward Thomas had no statutory obligation to fight. He volunteered to fight in the Great War less for King and Country, more for King and Countryside.

Adlestrop summated the rural England of 1914; Edward Thomas himself embodied the Englishman’s attitude to that self-same countryside.

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When Edward Thomas's train stopped at Adlestrop in June 1914, only weeks before the deluge, he and Helen were on their way to Dymock in Gloucestershire, where a sort of unofficial poets' colony had been founded. What united these poets was a pared verse style and an eye for the everyday (rather than the ornamented epic beloved of high Victorians) and an intense love of nature much in the manner of the earlier Wordsworthian Romantics. The Dymock poets were 'Georgians', writing new verse for the new age of King George V. 'The Old Vicarage, Grantchester', penned by Rupert Brooke, the shining satellite of the Dymock circle, in Berlin's Café des Westens in 1912, was the Georgian's flower-filled model eulogy to nature.<sup>3</sup>

There was a strong element of 'back to the land' among the Georgians, a throwing over of city for countryside. When Brooke visited Lascelles Abercrombie at his Dymock home, The Gallows, he rhapsodised that the cottage 'is the most beautiful you can imagine: black beamed & rose covered. And a porch where one drinks great mugs of cider, & looks at fields of poppies in the corn. A life that makes London a foolish affair.'

Thomas himself spent much of his time at Dymock walking the fields, slopes, deep lanes and woods of the Vale of Leadon, usually in the company of the American poet Robert Frost, who, like Abercrombie was a Dymock sun. (Frost was constantly amused by Thomas's hawking over direction on their 'talks-walking'; his famous 'The Road Not Taken' is as much a joke on Thomas as it is an existential statement.)

On 26 August 1914 Thomas went walking in the night with Frost; Thomas noted in his journal:

A sky of dark rough horizontal masses in N.W. with a 1/3 moon bright and almost orange low down clear of cloud and I thought of men eastward seeing it at the same moment. It seems foolish to have loved England up to now without knowing it could perhaps be ravaged and I could and perhaps would do nothing to prevent it.<sup>4</sup>

The war was on, and Thomas was calculating the value of the land beneath his feet.<sup>5</sup> But he was not yet decided. As the weeks passed Thomas's conscience pained him; on 24 February 1915 he wrote of an owl's cry 'telling me plain what I escaped/And others could not' – that is, enlistment. He was commissioned to write a book, *This England*, a sort of patriotic travelogue; part of the research was more perambulating of the Gloucestershire/Herefordshire border. It was enough:

Something, I felt, had to be done before I could look again composedly at English landscape, at the elms and poplars about the houses, at the purple-headed wood-betony with two pairs of dark leaves on a stiff stem, who stood sentinel among the grasses or bracken by hedge-side or wood's-edge.<sup>6</sup>

On 19 July 1915 Thomas reported to 17 Duke's Road, London, to be attested Private 4229 in 28/The London Regiment (Artists Rifles). When one dismayed writer friend, Eleanor Farjeon, pressed him on why he had volunteered, this was the moment when he said, 'Literally, for this'.

Edward Thomas volunteered not once but twice. Realising that map-reading in the Artists Rifles was not sufficient he applied for officer training. Again the countryside was the prompt. Thomas himself is surely the narrator in 'As the Team's Head Brass', he who goes from flippancy to comprehension that the horse ploughing scene in England, his England, requires someone to *fight* for it. The ploughman asks bystander Thomas the fundamental question 'Have you been out?' He can only answer 'No', and the negative is inadequate as he watches 'the clods crumble and topple over/ After the ploughshare and the stumbling team'.<sup>7</sup>

Thomas was commissioned a subaltern in the Royal Garrison Artillery on 23 November 1916.

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Perhaps the love of Thomas and the Georgians for the countryside is the sort of naive sentimentality one might expect from middle-class urban poets? Certainly the canard that love of nature is restricted to metropolitans – who, it is assumed, know nothing of the hardships of rural employment, or the bloody cruelties of nature – is one that flies again and again.

There was nothing unusual in Thomas's love for rural England, or indeed his desire to don khaki and fight for it. He was always exemplar, not exception. Soldiers' letters from Flanders, France and Gallipoli are full of longings for strolls in flowery meadows, for roses-round-the-door cottage homes (the abiding popular symbol of pastoral purity in contrast to the corrupt, encroaching city<sup>8</sup>), the dawn chorus under a British springtime sky.

Frederick William Harvey, known to all as Will, was a farmer's son from Minsterworth, who enlisted as a private in 1/5th Battalion of the Gloucestershire Regiment at the outbreak of war. At the front Harvey co-founded one of the first trench journals, the *5th Gloucester Gazette*, in which he tried out poetry for himself. Or, more accurately, he used poetry to exorcise his heartache for his own countryside:

I hear the heart within me cry:  
'I'm homesick for my hills again –  
My hills again!  
Cotswold or Malvern, sun or rain!  
My hills again!<sup>9</sup>

Will Harvey was a farm boy who turned to poetry, not a poet who turned to farming. As Lieutenant F.W. Harvey DCM he was captured during a solo reconnaissance of the German front lines on 17 August 1916 and spent the rest of the war in various prisoner of war camps. Imprisonment, at least, gave Harvey time to indulge his new passion for writing verse, in which one theme would recur over and over again: the Gloucestershire countryside. The titles of Harvey's

wartime poetry collections say it all: *A Gloucestershire Lad at Home and Abroad*, and *Gloucestershire Friends, Poems from a German Prison Camp*.

If anything Will Harvey's childhood friend, Ivor Gurney, suffered a more profound identification with landscape. Gurney, the son of a literal tailor of Gloucester, spent so much time at Redlands, the Harvey farm, he was virtually family. Gurney joined the county regiment in 1915 to become a soldier 'of a sort'. As 3895 Private Ivor Bertie Gurney, he believed that his military duty was predicated on his intense relationship with the hills around the Severn; 'hills, not only hills, but friends of mine and kindly'.<sup>10</sup> He asked the Severn meadows to 'not forget me quite'.<sup>11</sup> Gurney's love for the countryside was almost physical.

For Harvey, as for Gurney, as for other countrymen, war service was exile from a landscape that was part of their being, from which they were *uprooted* by service.

Whether from countryside or city, love of nature was the British condition, which manifested itself in everything from the national hobby of gardening to the folk-influenced music of classical composers such as George Butterworth and Ralph Vaughan Williams. (What did Vaughan Williams write in the first week of war? 'The Lark Ascending', the very musical embodiment of pastoralism and patriotism, the same pastoralism and patriotism that would inspire Vaughan Williams, despite being at forty-two over age, to volunteer to serve.) The British led the world in the keeping of pets, animal welfare legislation and a regard for birds so marked by 1910 that *Punch* declared their feeding to be a national pastime, with the dockers and clerks of London included.<sup>12</sup>

Something of British nature-love is explained by the nation's torn-from-the-rural-womb early industrialisation, which left a psychic wound in the mind of the new town-dwellers. (The injury was so abysmal that urban Britons recreated the countryside in their back gardens; the lawn is nothing but the country meadow brought, as salve, into *urbia*. With the pot-plant, notably the aspidistra, Victorian

Britons eventually brought the countryside *into* the home; the more industry, with its satanic mills and smoking chimneys, despoiled the countryside, the more the British valued nature.) Yet, the nature-love was antique, as well as acute and trans-class. British nature-love preceded the Industrial Revolution, as the most cursory reading of Geoffrey Chaucer's fourteenth century poem 'The Parlement of Fowles' confirms.<sup>13</sup>

The people of Britain in 1914 were connected to nature wherever they dwelt. Nature was not 'other', separate, a thing apart. Transport, in the shape of the railways, bicycles and (for the rich) the car enabled Edwardian–Georgian city dwellers to explore the countryside. And what they found was a place of bottomless peace and bountiful nature.

An odd celebrity proof of the wonder of the countryside in the first decades of the twentieth century occurred on 9 June 1910 in the little village of Itchen Abbas in Hampshire, when the British Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, and former US President Theodore Roosevelt went for a 'bird walk'.

Sir Edward Grey is known to everyone because of a single, immortal quotation. Looking out of his office window at dusk on 3 August 1914 and towards St James's Park, he remarked to his friend J.A. Spender: 'The lamps are going out all over Europe. We shall not see them lit again in our lifetime.'

Grey was always looking out of the window. He was a devout ornithologist, hence his invitation to Roosevelt to accompany him on a twelve mile walk in the New Forest. Grey recalled that they were 'lost to the world' for hours. They saw forty separate species of bird, heard the song of twenty. Grey later wrote *The Charm of Birds*, first published in 1927, the core message of which was that watching and listening to birds could bring solace and regeneration to the world-weary.

The charm of the Edwardian–Georgian countryside is that it was full of birdsong. It was countryside worth fighting for. On the embarkation train to Southampton, before crossing the Rubicon channel to

the Western Front, Second Lieutenant Ford Madox Hueffer, 9/Welsh Regiment, watched the countryside roll by:

And I thought:  
'In two days' time we enter the Unknown,  
But this is what we die for . . . As we ought . . .'  
For it is for the sake of the wolds and the wealds  
That we die,  
And for the sake of the quiet fields . . .

For 'beautiful and green and comely' England, Hueffer was perfectly prepared to endure 'the swift, sharp torture of dying'.<sup>14</sup>

Lance Corporal Francis Ledwidge was a working-class, die-hard Irish nationalist in the King's service with the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers. And yet in 1915:

Coming from Southampton in the train, looking on England's beautiful valleys all white with spring, I thought indeed its freedom was worth all the blood I have seen flow. No wonder England has so many ardent patriots. I would be one myself did I not presume to be an Irish patriot.<sup>15</sup>

Ledwidge was killed in action in Flanders in July 1917. He had taken up arms 'for the fields along the Boyne and the birds and the blue sky over them'.<sup>16</sup>

But it was not just the Edwardian New Forest or the countryside that musicked with bird song. So did the cities, which were less kept, less kempt, less concreted, smaller than now. Thus, the countryside was in closer reach. When young Edward Thomas went exploring on Wandsworth Common in London it was a wilderness. The spillage of grain from horses' nosebags and its survival in their dung on every street of every conurbation was food for flocks of sparrows and finches. So abundant was the house sparrow in London's East End that it became the district's unofficial emblem. (Today, the sparrows



have all but gone from London having declined by the order of 99 per cent.)

An Edwardian childhood was conducted outdoors as much as it was within the confines of the house. This was the era when every doctor and moral reformer prescribed lashings of fresh air. Cecil Bullivant's ubiquitous vade mecum for boyhood, *Every Boy's Book of Hobbies*, suggested among its pastimes 'Birds' Egg Collecting', 'The Collecting of Butterflies and Moths', 'The Making of a Botanical Collection', 'Out and About with a Geological Hammer', 'How to Make an Aviary', 'Bee-Keeping', 'Pigeons'. Edward Thomas's boyhood hobbies included keeping pigeons, and at school he wrote in his algebra book, 'I love birds more than books'. The boy next to him laughed, but only at his execrable Latin.<sup>17</sup>

In the cities of Britain in 1914 animals were everywhere. There were pigs in backyards, linnets in cages, and despite the rise of the internal combustion engine horses were the main mode of transport. There were 25 million horses in the UK, 300,000 horses in London. Families from Birmingham and London went on hop-picking holidays in Herefordshire and Kent.

Whether visiting or inhabiting, people commonly referred to the British countryside as 'God's Own Country'. This passing compliment to the beauty of the Weald of Kent, the South Downs, the Lakes, the rolling red plough-land of Herefordshire, hid a rarely reflected truth; the British love of nature contained a distinct religiosity. Lacking both full doctrine and ritual, Anglicanism was born with a vacuum in its centre; and religion abhors a vacuum. Partly the vacuum was filled with ethical humanism, partly with nature-love. Within two centuries of Henry VIII pulling England out of the Church of Rome, God and nature had become so conflated in the British mind that they were one and the same. In *Centuries of Meditations* by the theologian Thomas Traherne (c. 1636–74) the countryside he adores is not the handiwork of God, it *is* God, His flesh: 'How do we know, but the world is that body; which the Deity has assumed to Manifest His Beauty.'<sup>18</sup> Victorian England sponsored 'Earth Lore for Children'

primers for Anglican/nature faith, while adults had John Keble's *The Christian Year*, a combination of pastoral poem and Anglican breviary.

Inside Anglicanism, the majority faith of Britain, there was a type of pantheism.

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When the British viewed the countryside around them they saw nature, they saw God. They also beheld the labour of their forefathers.

At the front in France, Lieutenant Christian Carver, Royal Field Artillery, wrote home:

I always feel that I am fighting for England, for English fields, lanes, trees, English atmospheres, and good days in England – and all that is synonymous for liberty.<sup>19</sup>

Some 75 per cent of Edwardian Britain was farmland, the result of agri-*culture* over centuries. The landscape was manufactured; it was man-made from nature. The countryside, to borrow the phrase of Red Cross orderly and Poet Laureate John Masefield, was the 'past speaking dear'.

For the British, their landscape was their identity, their heritage. British patriotism, unlike the patriotism of other countries, was not based on race, but shared values (Carver's 'liberty') and love of countryside. Germany, by contrast, was a country of black forests, whose people's patriotism was anchored in a belief in *Blut*.

When Carver headed his list of beloved British pastoral features with 'fields', he wrote for many who served in the Great War. Meadows with 'haycocks dry' and arable acres ploughed by 'the stumbling team' dominated in their nostalgia, rather than remote fells or estuary wastes, although these places had their admirers.<sup>20</sup>

Lieutenant Carver, like Edward Thomas and Rupert Brooke, would die for English scenes.

When the soldiers of Britain went to war they took a pre-existing and intense love and knowledge of nature with them. Of course,

whether nature-love was urban false sentiment or organic rootedness or patriotism hardly mattered. The love existed, that is what mattered.

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OED *Nostalgia*: *G. nostos* return home + *algos* pain

The nostalgia for the countryside of 'England', as Britain was universally known in those far off days, began as soon as men entered service, which was the first step away to war. Thomas himself wrote 'Adlestrop' in 1916. The difference between the diary entry and the poem is telling; the distance of time, of two years of war, has made the scene at the Cotswold halt more luminous, more precious. In the poem Thomas himself acknowledges he cannot return to Adlestrop; it has disappeared into the haze of the past, just as birdsong dwindles away in summer heat:

And for that minute a blackbird sang  
Close by, and round him, mistier . . .

For Lieutenant Edward Thomas, 'all roads now lead to France', as they did for four million British soldiers, among them Lieutenant Robert Nichols, Royal Artillery. Nichols was barely off the boat in France before he was struck by chronic homesickness. He took to poetry, which would become the soldier's medium, to explain his longing:

NOW that I am ta'en away  
And may not see another day  
What is it to my eye appears?  
What sound rings in my stricken ears?  
Not even the voice of any friend  
Or eyes beloved-world-without-end,  
But scenes and sounds of the country-side

In far England across the tide:  
 An upland field when spring's begun,  
 Mellow beneath the evening sun . . .  
 A circle of loose and lichen'd wall  
 Over which seven red pines fall . . .  
 An orchard of wizen blossoming trees  
 Wherein the nesting chaffinches  
 Begin again the self-same song  
 All the late April day-time long . . .  
 Paths that lead a shelving course  
 Between the chalk scarp and the gorse  
 By English downs; and oh! too well  
 I hear the hidden, clanking bell  
 Of wandering sheep . . . I see the brown  
 Twilight of the huge, empty down  
 Soon blotted out! for now a lane  
 Glitters with warmth of May-time rain.  
 And on a shooting briar I see  
 A yellow bird who sings to me.

O yellow-hammer, once I heard  
 Thy yaffle when no other bird  
 Could to my sunk heart comfort bring;  
 But now I could not have thee sing  
 So sharp thy note is with the pain  
 Of England I may not see again!<sup>21</sup>

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'Certainly I have never lived so close to nature before or since.'

*Corporal Fred Hodges, Lancashire Regiment, 1918*

Few Edwardians travelled abroad. For the majority of soldiers of the Great War, military service gave them their first taste of foreign parts.

Even France was exotic, with its *estaminets* and its poplar-lined roads.

Of course, the one truly novel place to be posted was the underground world; *Subterranea*. During the Great War the front line soldier lived inside the earth, in trenches or chambers excavated in their side ('dugouts' or 'funk holes'), for days, even weeks, at a time. Charles Douie, a young subaltern with the Dorsets at Usna Redoubt, near La Boisselle, noted the soldiers there inhabited 'noisome holes burrowed out of the earth, as primitive man had lived in forgotten ages'.<sup>22</sup> It is small wonder that when one wartime officer, Lieutenant J.R.R. Tolkien, later turned to writing epic medieval fiction he had his 'Hobbits' living in earthen dwellings, replicas of the dugouts in the trenches he had once slept and sheltered in.<sup>23</sup>

With telling frequency soldiers in the trenches likened themselves to rabbits, with all the hypogean strangeness and all the vulnerability that species suggests. Captain Ivar Campbell, Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, wrote home from his Flanders trench:

You perceive . . . men infinitely small, running, affrightened rabbits, from the upheaval of the shells, nerve-wracked, deafened; clinging to earth, hiding eyes, whispering 'O God, O God!'<sup>24</sup>

In the Great War men lived closer to nature than they had done for centuries, millennia even. The defences of civilisation were gone. 'Trench life,' wrote Lieutenant Siegfried Sassoon of the Royal Welch Fusiliers, 'was an existence saturated by the external senses; and although our actions were domineered by military discipline, our animal instincts were always uppermost.'<sup>25</sup> When he looked at his diary, he realised that it contained 'lists of birds and flowers, snatches of emotion and experience' but people were 'scarcely mentioned'.

As is the way with nature, living in her bosom was Heaven and Hell. Nature is always contradictory, always blackberry and barb.

Men got uplift from the sights and sounds of some birds, animals and wild flowers. As the battle of the Somme deliquesced into

November mud Captain Sidney Rogerson, on encountering a mole, thought it 'one of Nature's miracles that this blind, slow creature could have survived in ground so pounded and upturned', and took heart from the tiny mammal's survival.<sup>26</sup> Other manifestations caused discomfort, depression, disease, even death. Just one trench disease, nephritis, accounted for 5 per cent of all medical admissions on the Western Front.

When the boys came home, they brought their diseases with them. Spanish flu (caused by the H1N1 virus), originated in China, spread to western Europe with American troops, and for the British probably had its epicentre in the training and distribution bases in the Pas-de-Calais, especially Étaples.<sup>27</sup> The triumphant Tommies on returning to Britain in 1918 took the virus with them. The kiss they gave their wives, mothers, children was the kiss of death.

In the trenches, one way or another, nature mattered.

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Those who live, as perforce we were compelled to live, exposed to sun, rain, and wind, surrounded by natural forces, in the constant presence of death, are conscious of a mystery in the heart of things, some identity of man with that which gave him birth, nourishes him, and in due time receives him again.

*Lieutenant Charles Douie, Dorsetshire Regiment, The Weary Road.*

In this last ancient war, the soldier's calendar was still dictated by nature; the Somme battle started in the traditional campaigning season, summer, and petered out in winter snow; Passchendaele, the 'Big Push' of 1917 sunk in autumn mud. There was no escaping nature.

Stationed on the Somme, Charles Douie saw a link between time of day and death; the evening of the day was the evening of life:

Evening came and the broad fields of Picardy, now almost ripe for harvest were emblazoned by the setting sun with an unforgettable

splendour. The evening was in harmony with the thought of many of us, for whom this could not but be the last 'March'.<sup>28</sup>

The harvest on the Somme in 1916 would be of men, cut down like greening wheat, their blood to grow another crop, that of white crosses. Douie believed that the men of his regiment were the 'flower of the shire' of Dorset.

In the trenches, in spring and summer, soldiers were literally 'up with the lark'. The migration of birds and the blooming of flowers, the spring greening of trees and the frosts of winter were the natural markers of time passing. One reason for First World War soldiers' liking of Laurence Binyon's poem 'For the Fallen' was that it echoed the natural rhythm of the trench-day; 'At the going down of the sun and in the morning/ We will remember them'. Many soldiers too would have recognised the truth of Sir Edward Grey's observation:

In those dark days I found some support in the steady progress unchanged of the beauty of the seasons. Every year, as spring came back unfailing and unfaltering, the leaves came out with the same tender green, the birds sang, the flowers came up and opened, and I felt that a great power of Nature for beauty was not affected by the war. It was like a great sanctuary into which we could go and find refuge.<sup>29</sup>

Private Norman Ellison at Wailly, where the spring 'burst upon us with amazing suddenness' with the arrival of swallows, warblers and nightingales, wrote:

I cannot recollect any spring that thrilled me more. One felt that man might destroy himself and his civilisation through the incredible stupidity of war, but the annual re-birth of nature would continue. Here was something assured and permanent: an established truth in a world of constantly alternating values.<sup>30</sup>

For the soldier in the trenches, the turn of the seasons was about more than the passing of time; it was about the immutability of nature. A soldier's life, more even than a Foreign Secretary's life, is one of uncertainty. Win or lose? Live or die? Here or there? In nature soldiers looked for, and found, the eternalities and the verities. Recently married, and anxious both about the war and separation from his wife, Second Lieutenant Max Plowman gained solace from the stars:

What joy it is to know that you [his wife] in England and I out here at least can look upon the same beauty in the sky. We've the stars to share.<sup>31</sup>

Douie, for one, averred that trench life, with its exposure to the elements and the imminence of death, returned man to his essential natural state, whereas:

In the life of cities man is protected from the play of natural forces; and death, when it comes, has a suggestion of the unnatural by virtue of its unfamiliarity. But those whose daily lot is to witness the processes of Nature, the awakening and renewing of life in the miracle of dawn, the coming of rest and sleep in the glory of the setting sun, have a greater opportunity of seeing life and death in their true perspective, a fuller appreciation of the place of man in Nature.<sup>32</sup>

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It could be a lovely war.

Second Lieutenant Alexander Douglas Gillespie, known to all as Douglas, was vaguely ashamed to inform his parents in a letter written in May 1915 from a Flanders trench:

There is no use pretending that I am soldiering at the minute, and I don't deserve anybody's sympathy . . . The weather is still perfect;



our trenches and breastworks are brown and bare and dusty, and the sand-bags are getting bleached with sun, but everything else is green. The meadow behind is yellow with buttercups and dandelions; there's a large patch of yellow mustard out between the lines, and a forest of leeks and cabbages.<sup>33</sup>

He had just had 'as good a lunch as I ever want to get' (curried beef, boiled rice, rhubarb, plum cake, washed down with red wine and soda) and they hadn't had a man hit since entering the line.

On the Western Front there were sections of the British front which would stretch from the Channel to the Somme river, where local truces or victories obtained and the main stress was the noise of the frogs at night. Corporal A.H. Roberts, Gloucestershire Regiment, confided to his diary on 7 May 1918 that he was 'fed up' with being at Rumingham: 'Thousands of frogs round here and the croaking noise they make all night is just awful.'

Captain Francis Hitchcock, Leinster Regiment, led a work party out on the night of 6 June 1915:

Every now and then shrapnel would burst over us to break the stillness of the night. Otherwise the only sounds were in the sighing of the poplars and the everlasting croaking of the frogs . . .<sup>34</sup>

Soldiers could get lost in nature on the Western Front. On a day off in July 1916 twenty-two-year-old Captain Arthur Adams, Cambridgeshire Regiment, intentionally took a walk away from the battle zone 'without any object save to see as much as possible of the beauty of God's world'. He went to nature for respite, for tonic.

Born in Edinburgh, son of an editor of *Country Life*, Stephen Graham had been the Russian correspondent for *The Times* before enlistment. His war memoir, *A Private in the Guards*, raised a great commotion for its account of the conditions at the army's Little Sparta training camp, Caterham. Of his service in France in 1917 with the Scots Guards, Private Graham recalled:

I had been sent to a neighbouring headquarters with a message, and at noon I sat for a while beside a high hawthorn on a daisy-covered bank. The war ceased to exist; only beauty was infinitely high and broad above and infinitely deep within. Birds again sang in the heavens and in the heart after a long sad silence, as it seemed.<sup>35</sup>

There was always relief in unwrecked land: billeted in a Flanders village somehow by-passed by the war, Second Lieutenant George Atkinson and his men went solemnly to look 'at a large green field without a single shell-hole in it'; the meadow seemed an enchanting 'fairylane'. Private W.H.A. Groom found few pleasures in army life and wrote a memoir, *Poor Bloody Infantry*, detailed with his dislikes. Nonetheless, when out of the front line, 'amongst the trees, grass and wild life of the countryside there was an affinity with nature'.<sup>36</sup> For a city boy such as Hull's Private J.W. Graystone, full exposure to nature could be intoxicating and life-changing.

How free Nature is and what a call it makes to us in the Army! It makes us feel more and more how much we shall appreciate life when the war is over. No more being cooped up in smoky towns, spending our time in frivolous pleasures. Out into the country for us, but no army.<sup>37</sup>

Although before the war he 'didn't know much about birds' he soon learned to pick out the song of thrushes, larks and robins and the plaintive call of the cuckoo. 'Nature is wonderful.' Private Graystone had volunteered in August 1914 and, while proud of 10/East Yorkshire Regiment's growing military prowess, chafed at the petty restrictions of army life. The freedom seemingly offered by nature versus the 'enslavement' of the army was always pointed.

The relationship with nature was reciprocal. In the trenches, men gave back to nature, often to their own inconvenience, sometimes to the detriment of their own safety. At Gallipoli Sergeant Bernard

W. Gill, Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC), witnessed a skylark suffer a shrapnel wound; some men nearby took it in and fed it 'heartily on biscuit crumbs made moist with water'. In a few days the wing was healed, and the bird released.<sup>38</sup> Captain J.C. Dunn, RAMC, in spring 1916 'avoided treading on little frogs in Cambrin trenches' despite the busy burden of being the medical officer for 2/Royal Welch Fusiliers.

The destruction of nature on the Western Front, its reduction to timberless mudland with shell holes full of gas and rain, evoked pity and pain. Over and over, the soldier poets recollected the British landscape ('home') as antidote and counterpoint to the horror of war. In entering the ravaged town of Laventie, with its churned mud and 'stricken' houses, Lieutenant The Hon. Edward Tennant, Grenadier Guards, noticed a miraculously intact garden. The mere sight of it transported him back to English 'meadows with their glittering streams, and silver scurrying dace/ Home what a perfect place!'<sup>39</sup>

Many saw the destruction of the France–Flanders countryside as the wicked, guilty hand of man; equally, many saw in nature's regeneration of the self-same countryside the work of God or some universal 'Spirit', no matter how imprecisely conceived or described. Nature inspired because it was elemental, eternal, unvanquished. Even when war descended in all its artillery fury, nature was quick to reclaim and re-beautify, as Second Lieutenant Stephen Hewett, Royal Warwickshire Regiment, explained to his parents:

The trenches which in February were grim and featureless tunnels of gloom, without colour or form, are already over-arched and embowered with green. You may walk from the ruins of a cottage, half hidden in springing green, and up to the Front line trenches through a labyrinth of Devonshire lanes.<sup>40</sup>

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The Somme. Today the name tolls like a funeral bell, but in July 1915 when the British took over the front line from Arras to the

Somme river they thought they had taken possession of Arcadia.

Flanders in northern Belgium never truly appealed to the British, except maybe the men of Kent who felt affinity with the hop yards. Flanders was always cramped by the multiplicity of its peasant homesteads, their monotonous single-storey redbrick houses, the midden in the yard. Looking out of the train window en route to the Ypres sector all Douglas Gillespie could see was 'the usual landscape of Northern France – farm buildings and long rows of lanky poplars with magpies' nests in them'.<sup>41</sup>

No one is more interested in reading landscape than a soldier because his life may depend on it. Landscape needs to be safety in defence, opportunity in attack.

Flanders was flat, and flattened the mood of the soldiery. The hills were so few that everyone knew their names, and if a soldier stood on the top of Kemmel Hill, a mere 500 feet above sea level, he could see the Flanders Plain stretching around him for miles. Hill 60 was only by a stretch of linguistics any sort of tump, since it consisted of spoil from the adjacent railway cutting. (Spectral traces of the mutilations of fighting make Hill 60 a moving place to visit on a Western Front pilgrimage to this day.) In Flanders, a molehill gave vantage and advantage, and was the objective of grand military plans.

And the relentlessly flat, low-lying Flanders was wet. Flanders was riven with dank and with dykes, and the Belgian king's decision to open the sea-locks at Nieupoort on the Channel in 1914, in a forlorn attempt to stall the German advance, had created a vast salt marsh on the uppermost portion of the battlefield. Never one to lament or find a glass half-empty, Lieutenant Charles Douie was forced to concede that a Flanders' twilight was 'unmitigated gloom':

The appearance of the countryside suggested that it has been raining since the beginning of time.<sup>42</sup>

Into the German line in Flanders bulged the British 'Salient' around Ypres, where the army's resolve to hold its ground was tested to

destruction. By the time Second Lieutenant George Atkinson reached Flanders in 1918, the Salient had taken on the aspect of Armageddon:

Away on the left we could distinguish the ruins of Ypres shining faintly in the evening sun, and smoking under a desultory bombardment. Closer to us was the brick pile and swamp once known as Dickebusch, and in front, a few hundred yards away, the bulk of Kemmel Hill towered above us. Two months ago I saw it covered with beautiful woods and peaceful rest camps; now it is a bare, brown pile of earth, and only a few shattered tree-stumps in the shell-holes remain to mock the memory of its verdant beauty. The whole of Kemmel Hill and the valley and the ravines in front are one solid mass of shell-holes. The earth has been turned and turned again by shell-fire, and the holes lie so close together that they are not distinguishable as such. The ground in many places is paved with shrapnel balls and jagged lumps of steel – in ten square yards you could pick up several hundredweight.<sup>43</sup>

Men called it Hell. Even the earth seemed dead. Modern war's weaponry, the shells and the chemical gases, did its damndest in the Salient.

The Somme was different, and not just because when the British entered the zone in 1915 it was untouched by war's devastations, or that it offered fresh hope after the stalemate of battle in the Ypres area.

The countryside of the Somme, with its rolling chalk downland, its open fields with their knuckles of white flint, its big sky, its speckling of copses which floated on the horizon, was intrinsically beautiful. A 'modern Garden of Gethsemane', no less, was Lieutenant Geoffrey Dearmer's opinion of the parish of Gommecourt in the Somme *département*.

The clear flowing river which gave its name to the region had its own magic. Soldiers loved to swim and bathe in the Somme in spring

and summer, to swim and wash away the dirt and the cares. Lieutenant Richard Talbot Kelly recalled:

The joy of endless water, clean, clear, fresh water in which we could lie and bathe and at the same time enjoy quietness and peace, was a miraculous thing.<sup>44</sup>

Private E.W. Parker, a London builder's son who joined Kitchener's army at seventeen, and started his army life as a Hussar before transferring to the Durham Light Infantry, entered the Somme plain in 1916:

In these idyllic surroundings we were happy. Golden fields rippling in the wind healed the sight of our eyes, and the green depths of the woodland shadows, like soft music, quietened the tortured nerves of our bodies. We awoke in our barns at sunrise to hear, not the angry crashes of the morning strafe, but the forgotten songs of birds.<sup>45</sup>

Parker and his mates sunbathed by a stream, and went swimming in its waters so pure that the boys could see 'the sharp flints soon to leave long scratches on our knees'.

Men were struck too by the Somme's similarity with the last piece of England most of them had seen, the South Downs and the New Forest, as their embarkation train had pounded to the port of Southampton. Private David Jones, 1/Royal Welch Fusiliers, reached for poetry to explain the resemblance:

The gentle slopes are green to remind you  
Of South English places, only far wider and flatter spread and  
Grooved and harrowed criss-cross whitely . . .<sup>46</sup>

In his letters to his mother, Lieutenant Harold Rayner, 9/Devonshire Regiment, always referred to the Somme as 'the Downs'. The 'Downs'

of Picardy moved Rayner into an ecstasy – there is no other word for it – about nature, about England, as he explained to his mother on 1 May 1916:

It was as I breasted a rise of ground that I suddenly met god Pan by a cluster of dandelions, and then the scales fell from my eyes, and I saw the ‘Numina coci’ – the nymphs and fauns were in possession and the Downs were full of enchantment, and May magic lurked in the banks and the trees hanging on them, and in the hill-shapes and the springing crops whose vivid green was tinged with yellow, which made them singularly rich in tone, and contrasted with the almost mauve fallow land. Uncultivated stretches of turf were starred with dandelions so thick as almost to merit the name of ‘Fields of cloth of gold’, while in one place there were patches of daisies so white that they looked like sheets laid on the ground to dry. The leaves on most of the trees were out, the tender new green of early summer, so full of charm and suggestive of graceful presences. There swept over me the keen, almost wild quasi-pagan worship of Nature . . .

Rayner added that the sensations evoked by nature on the Somme had hitherto given him ‘a consuming desire to be at home’, but ‘for the first time French scenes satisfied me’.<sup>47</sup> The Somme produced the same intensity of nature-worship as England did; the Somme was not merely an aid to nostalgia. In the Somme, the British found a second home. One reason the Somme would come to haunt the collective memory of the British soldiery is that its despoliation seemed like original and native sin.

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*Et in Arcadia ego.* By war’s strange cruelty, the very Somme landscape the British loved killed them, because its chalk and flint geology enabled the Germans to dig trenches and bunkers virtually impervious to British artillery shells – even 1,627,824 of them during that meteorologically marvellous summer of 1916. Some German dugouts on

the Somme were sixty feet deep. Inside them the Germans were stone cold safe.

The deciduous copses and woods of the Somme, in which British soldiers took shade from the Picardian sun, were simultaneously the earth and timber protectors of German soldiers. Woods were nature's fortresses.<sup>48</sup>

The British 1916 Ordnance Survey maps suggest a count of 44 woods and 15 copses on the Somme battlefield, with Mametz Wood, extending to 186 acres of lime, oak, hornbeam, hazel and beech, the largest. High Wood was known for the sweet chestnuts used to make pitchforks; after September 1916 it became renowned as a graveyard. It is estimated that 10,000 British and German soldiers still lie unrecovered within the bounds of High Wood. Some of the Somme's sylvan extents had open grassy 'rides' – broad pathways for horse riding and for game shooting, especially of woodcock; the same rides also gave excellent lines of fire for the grey-clad German defenders.

And so the khaki casualties piled up at Mametz Wood and High Wood, names which to this day resound with the tragedy of it all. Those injured at Mametz Wood, amid the 'straggle tangled oak and flayed sheeny beech-bole, and fragile/Birch', included Private David Jones, wounded in the leg and cut in the mind. His immense prose-poem 'In Parenthesis' is at once personal catharsis, memorial for the Welsh nation, whose volunteer soldiers were blooded there, and sane warning to historians. For the men of 1914–18 the war was a great thing in their lives, but not the only thing in their lives. The war was bounded by brackets. It was an experience in parenthesis.

In the death zone of the Somme, which at its widest was ten to twenty kilometres across, a fat brown gash in the landscape, devastation could be apocalyptic; on the road between Albert and the Somme four villages essentially disappeared. Writing from the Somme in March 1917, Lieutenant Christian Carver told his brother:

We live in that desolate belt, extending from the Ancre to the Somme, some five miles in depth, where no trees remain to make



a show of green in the coming spring, and the chateaux and churches are pounded to mounds of red and white dust . . . By way of relieving the monotony we have just chivvied a wild boar. God knows where he came from or why. Perhaps to visit the home of his childhood – in which case he will be disappointed.<sup>49</sup>

Christian Carver died of wounds on 23 July 1917, aged twenty.

The murderous activities of men never quite managed to vanquish the Edenic splendour and wildlife of the Somme. Lieutenant Stormont Gibbs, whose battalion of the Suffolks was at the absolute end of the British line, the banks of the Somme itself, in winter 1916 wrote:

There was a full moon and a clean starry sky. As wars have a job to spoil rivers it seemed an exceedingly beautiful place. I spent much of the first night outside soaking in the glory of the moonlight on the water. It was very peaceful, with an occasional distant explosion just to heighten the romance by recalling that in contrast to the beauty of nature there were two lines of men stretching hundreds of miles in each direction waiting to be told to kill each other. And here flowed the Somme sublimely indifferent to it all.<sup>50</sup>

The war artist William Orpen visited the Somme six months after 415,000 men had been killed there:

I had left it mud, nothing but water, shell-holes and mud – the most gloomy abomination of desolation the mind could imagine; and now, in the summer of 1917, no words could express the beauty of it. The dreary, dismal mud was baked white and pure – dazzling white. Red poppies, and a blue flower, great masses of them, stretched for miles and miles. The sky was dark blue, and the whole air up to a height of 40 feet, thick with white butterflies.<sup>51</sup>

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When Edward Thomas transferred to the Western Front in early 1917, there were one and a half million other Britons there in soldier's khaki and nurse's white. In contemplating the Western Front, the mind fixes on the 450-mile snake-line of the trenches from the Channel to Switzerland, but the British occupied a Pale of temporary settlement which stretched back from no man's land to Le Havre. Effectively, this tranche of France was a Colony of Britain.

In the Colony, the man who once declared that birds were 'more important to me than books' birdwatched to the end. Almost the last entry in Thomas's diary, a small 3in x 5¾in Walker's pocketbook (cost: 2s), was made at Arras on 7 April 1917, two days before his death:

Up at 6 to O.P. [Observation Post] A cold bright day of continuous shelling N. Vitasse and Telegraph Hill. Infantry all over the place in open preparing Prussian way with boards for wounded. Hardly any shells into Beaurains. Larks, partridges, hedge-sparrows, magpies by O.P. A great burst in red brick building in N. Vitasse stood up like a birch tree or a fountain, Back at 7.30 in peace. Then at 8.30 a continuous roar of artillery.<sup>52</sup>

There were a few scribbled laconic notes, among them the prophetic: 'And no more singing for the bird . . .'

Thomas was killed by a whimsical shell blast as he stepped outside his observation post to light his pipe.

Lieutenant Edward Thomas thought the greatest gift he could leave his children Bronwyn, Merfyn and Myfanwy was the British countryside. It was a gift to us all.