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Opening Extract from...

Gentle Footprints

Written by Various

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Gentle Footprints

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Foreword by Virginia McKenna OBE

As someone who, for over 45 years, has been fascinated by animals, animal issues and their relationship with humans, I have been intrigued by this diverse and yet symbiotic collection of stories.

Each writer has, of course, his or her own style, personal passions and individual focus on their chosen subject but, without exception, one is drawn into the narrative and enters, briefly, the particular world or moment being revealed.

Although, as a child, I had always shared my life with ‘pets’ (a word I am not quite comfortable with, although I recognise its intent!), it was not until 1964 – when my late husband Bill Travers and I went to Kenya to work in the film *Born Free* that I really began to try and understand animals. Their individuality, the way their minds worked. For us, at that time, the animals were lions. Not ‘pets’! But, strangely, I discovered little difference in the way one began to relate to them.

The book *Born Free* by Joy Adamson was, of course, the catalyst. The relationship between Joy and her husband George with Elsa the lioness, illuminated a hitherto unimaginable friendship between humans and a wild predator. Incredibly Elsa remained, until her early death from a tick-borne disease, loyal to her human friends. She always remembered them, returning to visit them in camp, bringing her cubs to show them and, finally, dying outside George’s tent.

George was our ‘lion man’ on the film, and through him we learned never-to-be-forgotten lessons about animals and how to ‘be’ with them.

The way we treat, manipulate and exploit other species still remains a huge and tragic issue in the 21st

Century. This is something that our charity, The Born Free Foundation, has been grappling with for over 25 years. There are many wonderful, courageous people out there trying to instil compassion towards wild animals, to educate both children and adults to understand that suffering, pleasure, fear, protectiveness, jealousy are not emotions exclusively human.

We strive to lead lives that can, in some way, fulfil us and allow us to be ourselves. Animals deserve that same opportunity. They do not deserve to be trapped, sport-hunted, killed for their ivory, held captive, trained to perform.

And that is what is special about these stories. Many are told from the animals' point of view. A point of view too rarely heard and now, at last, here for us all to read about and relate to.

The 'Spirit of Elsa' is still with us.

Virginia McKenna



Homecoming

By Abi Burns

At first I was not sure what it was. The light was fading and mist beginning to seep from the ground. Cornwall is a place of extremity and strange light effects, where land, sea and sky meet and are sometimes indistinguishable. Nowhere is this more so than West Penwith where I was born. This is a wild place, the very far tip of the country – jutting out defiantly into the Atlantic, next stop America.

I had spent the afternoon walking a favourite stretch of the coast path, somewhere I always felt close to my father. Since losing him last year I had returned home to Cornwall often and would find myself back at these cliffs. Sometimes I would bring mother and we would sit in the car looking out at the sea and talking about Dad. Now black clouds were gathering. They were edged in white-gold by the low sun and the great expanse of ocean was darkening, yet dancing with light, as if sprinkled with burning sparks of magnesium.

There it was again. Something was definitely moving in amongst the granite outcrop near the cliff edge. My eyes strained to decipher shapes in the gloom. Gradually a human figure emerged from the dark mass of rocks, facing me and, I could just make out, waving and beckoning. I looked around but there was nobody else on the path. I

hesitated – it was getting late and I was reluctant to leave the path or linger any longer on the cliffs. Like anyone from these parts, I know not to underestimate how treacherous this coast can be. The car was still a good half-an-hour walk from here. Still, I should go and find out what was going on, perhaps there had been an accident.

I began to pick my way down through the gorse and lichen-splashed boulders. You have to tread carefully here. This ground is riddled with holes, mine shafts and adits, which have caught out many an unsuspecting walker or dog. The legacy of mining is everywhere, derelict engine houses dotting the treeless moors and desolate cliffs amongst the prehistoric burial sites and stone circles. At one time the sea itself ran red with the ore disturbed by tin excavation.

As I neared the edge of the ravine where I had spotted the figure, I could see a rising wind whipping the top of the rollers into spray. I had a twinge of apprehension. Even on the calmest day, a storm can close in from nowhere. The countless wrecks littering the seabed bear testament to the savage fury the elements can display. Then I saw him. A man was crouching on a rock no more than ten feet back from where the granite stacks plunge away to the sea.

“Are you OK?” I shouted.

No response.

He was looking out over the ravine, searching for something. I could see his face in profile – he was perhaps late fifties, dark haired with a moustache.

I called again, “Hello, is something wrong?”

This time he heard and turned to look. He was Cornish, I was sure; older than my first impression with the look of someone who had seen hard times. He indicated

for me to come closer and turned back to the sea. I felt a surge of annoyance at the lack of explanation so I shouted: “What’s the matter? I don’t want to come any nearer the edge.”

He turned and studied me, then pointed somewhere down in the gully, his other hand cupped behind his ear.

When he spoke his voice was hoarse, urgent: “Hark, did ’e ’ear ’em?”

I followed his gaze and tried to hear anything over the waves crashing below. Mordros – the Cornish word for the sound of the surf – has no English equivalent. There on the edge of the cliff it seemed to envelop everything; the sea, the spray and the wind, overwhelming the senses.

But then somewhere, over the mordros, I did hear it – a haunting cry drifting above the sea and the spray and the wind.

“Kee-aw, kee-aw”.

I could scarcely believe it and, even though I had never heard it before, I knew instantly what it was and it was strangely familiar. The man was observing my face intently, waiting for a flicker of recognition. His black eyes, sharp and questioning, met mine. I smiled in astonishment and nodded. And he knew that I understood.

It is curious how some experiences are primordial, transcending any particular time. And so it was that late afternoon standing on the wind-blown cliff, listening to my first chough. That cry, a link to the past, my past, and a link to my father. To the Cornish, the chough is more than just a bird. It is a legend, the symbol of a people. It even perches on top of our coat of arms, supported by a miner and a fisherman, for nothing is more Cornish than a chough.

Since being knee-high I remember my father talking about this great icon; chows he would call them. I would

hear fantastical stories of how King Arthur's soul had passed into the body of a chough when he died, his blood staining the beak and feet that incredible crimson colour. When choughs return to Cornwall, my father would promise as he tucked me in, it will signal the rebirth of Tintagel's king. And then of course, and my favourite of all, there were the tales of the last chough.

Forty years ago my father had travelled up the coast to an isolated stretch between Watergate Bay and Mawgan Porth in a pilgrimage to see that tragic creature. The year before, one of that last pair had been found dead so, by 1969, only a single member of the race survived. For the next six years, this chough kept a lonely vigil – for choughs pair for life – before finally disappearing at an age of twenty-six or more.

As a child the image of that last chough had seemed impossibly sad. I would lie in bed and picture that solitary bird patrolling along the storm-swept cliffs and felt sure that there could not be any loneliness greater than being the last of your kind.

There it was again – “*kee-aw, kee-aw*” – and this time nearer, though from which direction I could not tell. Wind gusted up from the ravine and I crawled along the granite outcrop on my hands and knees, favouring the security of the rock over any pretence of elegance.

“Can you see him?” I shouted scanning the cliffs.

“Away jus’ beyond yon rocks. ’ll be back soon enough.” He indicated to an outcrop further along the headland. Now only a few feet away I could just make out the man's pallid complexion, mottled red and etched with scars and lines. Most likely the result of a life mining, until recently the most common form of employment round here.

“Have you seen it already?”

He nodded. "Sure 'nuff. B'aint one though. 'Tis a proper chattering – a score mebbe." I stared at the man in disbelief. Since a pair of choughs miraculously appeared back in Cornwall eight years ago, possibly straying over from France, they had delighted everyone by making their homes here and breeding. For my father the return of the chough had heralded hope for a nation and a language waiting to be re-born. There had been occasional reports of a few birds together but I had never heard of anything like twelve. That would indeed constitute a 'chattering'.

But then suddenly I saw them.

They were wheeling round the headland, like black wind-blown leaves against the dying sun. How many were there? I desperately tried to count as they appeared: four together, and then several more, followed by another group, I think, of five. They separated and regrouped as they climbed on the up-draught from the ravine. Then one by one they would turn and drop with their wings closed as if in free-fall, somersaulting and tumbling through the sky until, at the very last moment – just when it seemed they would be snatched by the surging waves – they would swoop up in an air current and begin their miraculous climb again. The whole display gave the impression of being directed by some unseen choreographer. And every now and then one would cry that unforgettable *kee-aw* which pierced even the incessant roar of the sea.

Three came directly overhead, and close enough to see the curved scarlet beaks and the broad fingered wings, as they soared on the air currents. They swept round and settled on the short grass on the other side of my outcrop, calling to the others which followed and alighted effortlessly despite the gusting wind. Now, as they hopped around the cliff edge, moving quickly as they probed and dug in the short turf, I could clearly count twelve birds.

I am not sure how long they stayed. As they investigated the ground for insects, kee-awing to each other – each cry accompanied by a flick of their tails – I was aware that the experience had an unreal feel to it, as perhaps all those of great significance do. I felt a shared moment with those who had been out on these cliffs in days gone by, watching a chatter of choughs go about their business when they were a common sight. I wondered if they too had marvelled at the aerial acrobatics, the birds' sheer joy at being – for there was no other explanation for their elaborate show – and felt a shiver on hearing that haunting cry.

Then suddenly, as if on some cue, all twelve took off, dipped down into the ravine, skimmed low over the sea and disappeared around the far headland. Just as quickly as they had come, they were gone. As if they had never been there.

“Proper ’andsome birds they be.”

I had almost forgotten about my companion and realised, as I nodded agreement, that I was holding my breath.

“’Tis ’ow they should be. Free to go as they want. We belonged ’em in cages when we was children. ’Em as survived would get tame but most never got used to bein’ caged. I use to think ’ed died of a broken heart.”

Quite possibly I thought. “What made you want to keep them in cages?”

“Weren’t too many about even back then. They’d fetch a good penny for gentlemen from up country. ’Tis partly why they disappeared. There were that many caught. A good many traps was set on these cliffs. I remember seein’ a chow caught in a gin. It were flapping about an’ its leg were broke and t’other kept swooping down to it making a terrible shrieking. I were only a boy but I couldn’t bear the noise and I stepped on th’spring

and let it go. I'd 'ave bin half killed if the'd seen us. I don't know whether it lived but it flew off with its mate. That were the last pair I ever saw."

"Well, I guess the rarer the choughs got, the more sought after their skins and eggs became. It's a vicious spiral."

"'Es. Times was hard and us could make more for one clutch of eggs than two weeks toil underground. Father'd clamber right down cliffs or into the shafts to get t'eggs. And a good few folk fell trying."

"Did you mine too?" I asked.

"Sure 'nuff, we worked just below these 'ere cliffs. I'd be a mile out 'neath the sea bed and could 'ear the sea clunkin' boulders round a few foot above us when storms came in. Then I was in the arsenic works, scraping it off the walls of the chimney."

Arsenic, that would explain the pale complexion, I thought. What a way to make a living, or try to. It was no wonder that egg collecting was tempting for men struggling to feed their families. I remembered my father talking about what caused the choughs' disappearance, about how times had been so desperate that men were prepared to scale sheer cliff faces to provide rich folks with pets for their gilded cages or eggs for their cabinet collections. Even as a child I was struck by the pointlessness of it all. And now standing there on the cliffs my eyes fixed on the headland where the choughs had vanished I wondered again what it is about human nature that makes people need to possess things at all costs.

The dark clouds were overhead now and a cold rain began to fall; large, insistent drops which stung my face.

"Well, I'd better be going. This rain looks set in." I said, then hesitated and smiled. "Thank you. For calling me over I mean. I can't believe that I have seen twelve choughs – a real chattering. I wouldn't have missed it for the world."

He nodded. “Es. I thought it’d be worth a shufty.”

“Nice to meet you. And thanks again.” As I made my way back over the rough ground to the cliff path, I noticed he was still in the same position, facing out into the wind and rain, where the choughs had gone.

The next weekend I was back at the cliffs with my mother. It was a long walk for her but I desperately wanted her to see a chough. She had been sceptical when I had told her I had seen twelve.

“Are you sure they weren’t rooks?” she had asked gently.

“No, Mum; they were choughs alright. I could see the red beaks and feet as sure as you are standing there.” She had told me that large chattering of choughs had not been seen in Cornwall since the thirties and then they were restricted to the coast much further east. “They must be doing better than anyone realised if you saw a dozen.”

We scanned the ocean hopefully. Slow, round, Atlantic rollers came in, each one catching the sun’s orange glow on its swell, before crashing into the rocks hundred of feet below. Today there were only gulls soaring over the ravine, their thin cries piercing the bluster of the wind. I found myself thinking about the man I had met.

“There was a man here, Mum. He pointed out the choughs to me. When he was a boy, they used to have choughs in cages to sell on to collectors. His dad used to climb down mine shafts to get eggs.”

My mother looked puzzled. “He couldn’t have been from Penwith then. The choughs had all gone from these parts over a hundred years since.”

“But he was from round here I’m sure. He was a miner and said he worked beneath these cliffs – a mile under the sea – and he worked in the arsenic mines too.”

“Those mines have been shut since the thirties, maybe earlier. He must have been confused, my lovely. Not sure what’s true and what’s story by the sound of it.”

I felt indignant – had the man been lying to me? He had been so believable and yet the dates just didn’t add up. Perhaps his mind was fuddled by years breathing fumes and dust but he seemed lucid enough.

My mother spoke as she looked out over the sea: “This is a thin place, you know. There’s not the usual barrier separating the past and today. Perhaps your friend slipped between the two. It’s a place of spirits, to be sure.”

I looked inland to the patchwork of fields six thousand years old and the ancient moor with its cromlechs and tarns. In Penwith the past is everywhere and somehow seems as real as the present.

Somewhere, on the edge of consciousness, I could hear that haunting cry “*kee-aw, kee-aw*”. I shut my eyes and could still picture the choughs, gliding on the updraft then rolling and tumbling down towards the green waves: those magical birds with their blood-red beaks, back again like dark ghosts in the far west sky.

Abi Burns

Abi Burns has a degree and PhD in Zoology and worked as an animal welfare scientist for a number of years. She now works as a nature writer and artist. Animals have always been her first love and she has far too many paws and claws at home. In 2009 she was named BBC Nature Writer of the Year. Her first book will be out next year.

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Dedicated to Georgie: Well done on seeing your first chough, my darling. Hopefully the first of many!



Chough Facts

Species: Chough (*Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*)

Location: Southern Europe, spreading eastwards to the Middle East and south East Asia into western China. Although their range is large, the chough is highly localised. In the UK the red-billed chough is restricted to the west coast of Wales, Scotland and the Isle of Man. The chough has only recently returned to the Cornish coast.

Habitat: Choughs forage on grassy cliff top farm grazing sites, looking for insects and small invertebrates, and preferring low-intensity farmed areas such as sheep and cattle grazing. They also feed on dung and other soil invertebrates that thrive in these areas.

Behaviour: The chough nests in recesses in cliffs or in suitable buildings. Breeding pairs remain for most of the year roosting close to the nest site. Those not yet mature form flocks and roost communally on cliffs and buildings. Nest building begins in March, and by early April there should be eggs. Five is the average size for a clutch. They are highly social birds and learn important behaviours from the other choughs at the communal roost sites.

Conservation Status: IUCN classify the red-billed chough as 'Least Concern'.

Threats: Intensive farming of grazing areas has degraded the quality of food available for the chough. They have

only returned recently after careful management of critical areas.

Action: N/A

To find out more about the choughs in Cornwall contact the **Cornwall Wildlife Trust**. The Cornwall Wildlife Trust is Cornwall's leading local charity working to protect and enhance wildlife and wild places. The Trust is passionate about all aspects of nature conservation. It is a membership organisation that depends on members' support as well as a fantastic team of volunteers.

The Cornwall Wildlife Trust, the RSPB, the National Trust and the Cornwall Bird-Watching Preservation Society work together to protect habitats suitable for the chough. Choughs returned to Cornwall in 2001 and bred successfully in 2002, the first time in 50 years. There are now around 20 choughs in Cornwall, which are regularly spotted in Penwith between Pendeen and Gwennap Head, and on The Lizard between Southerly Point and Kynance. Everyone involved in their conservation is looking forward to seeing their population grow.

To find out more visit www.cornwallwildlifetrust.org.uk.