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# The Unoffical Countryside

Written by Richard Mabey

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**6 THURSDAY** Epiphany



Colne Valley gravel pits

First day of spring. Magnificent bright, exhilirating day. Clump of bright green dittander right up to the road at Ricky. Like golden rod a little. Extraordinary contrast between pits. First entirely empty, but on Stockers Lake — Red-crested pochard (male). Goldeneye (male displaying, plus seven females of very varied head colour) 5 canada geese; teal, a pair with the eye stripe and dipped yellow tail visible far off; pochards Ricky close up in the reeds + beyond. A pair of kestrels displaying overhead. Wrens in the reeds, gulls (common, lesser black-backed herring) sporting, turning somersaults, sisken swinging like budgerigars on the alder, making a most curious dull, echoing chink. Sight of great crested grebe, just beginning their displays.

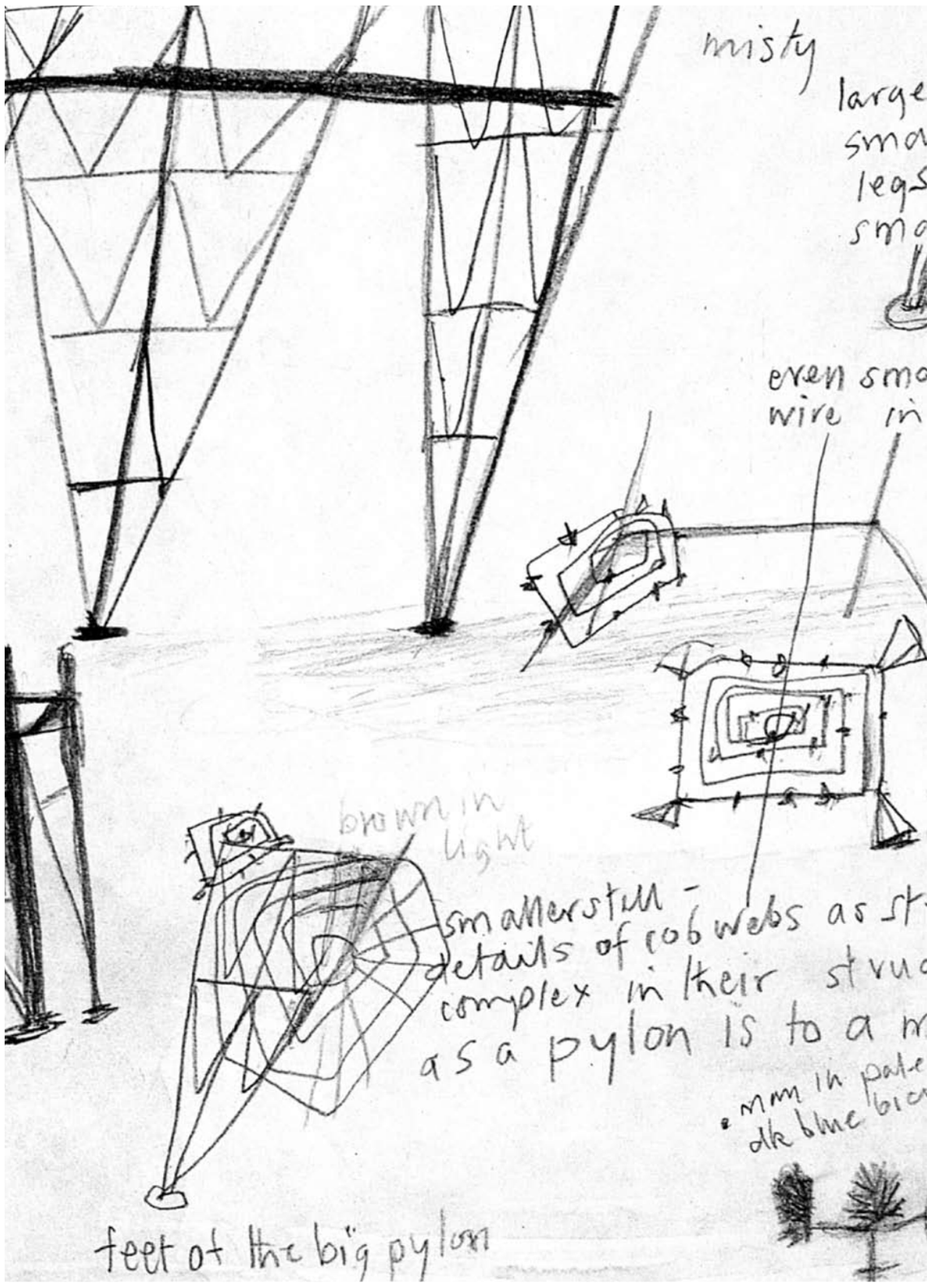
# *The Unofficial Countryside*



Richard Mabey



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# INTRODUCTION

Iain Sinclair

This is a beautiful title, *The Unofficial Countryside*. And it was timely and pertinent too, back then, in 1973. How did I miss, first time around, a book that linked, at a single stroke, burgeoning bureaucracy and the threatened pastoral of whatever lay beyond the city's horizon? Richard Mabey identified so neatly the transitional quality of unwritten places where slightly bemused survivors of the Sixties, pocketing their battered copies of *Food for Free*, found themselves labouring at the dawn of a harsher era.

Prompted by 8mm film diaries, I remember the bright moments of my rock-bottom employment, loading and unloading containers, by the railway yards in Stratford East in the early Seventies. The site is presently occupied by the emerging Westfield supermall, the only confirmed legacy of the 2012 Olympics. Leaking warehouses, which had been stacked with the cargoes of the world, in an attempt to circumvent the restrictive practices of the dying docks, the power of the dockers' unions, were known to the workforce as Chobham Farm. *Chobham Farm, Angel Lane*. When Angel Cottage, a rustic gem festooned in creepers and blooms, disappeared overnight as part of the great redevelopment package, I cried out, in my ignorance, for a small portion of the precision and lightly-worn scholarship with which *The Unofficial Countryside* had been mapped. Without a proper accounting of loss, these acts are final: not a scratch on our consciousness when the listed building is replaced by a loud nothing, protected by a corrugated fence and a battery of surveillance cameras.

No record has been left behind of our shame in failing to resist. And no memorial, in Mabey's direct and effective prose, to the processes of weather, the complex entanglements of predatory humans and indifferent nature.

When I wasn't grazing on copies of *The Sun,* junked by fellow workers, I laboured, a page or two a day, through Dante. The dark epic seemed appropriate to time and place. The other ex-hippie communalist in the gang sat on his fork-lift truck alternating Thoreau's *Walden* and Alan Watts. In the lunch break, we made expeditions into the marshes of the Lower Lea Valley, into overgrown cemeteries, through a tangled residue of wild orchards and concrete pillboxes on the banks of polluted streams. From a deep pocket in his combat jacket, my companion retrieved his treasured copy of *Food for Free,* with which he identified some of the less toxic mutants, to carry home for supper. Mabey was the surest guide to the coming cultural shift, the economic bite imposed by politicians cruising sullen landscapes in helicopters. His work was made in the spirit of poet-naturalists, but it was eminently practical. If John Clare, imprisoned in an Epping Forest asylum, had nibbled judiciously from roadside salads, on his crazed and visionary trudge up the Great North Road, he would have had something better than stringy tobacco to digest. Or so my fellow wanderer in the Lea Valley wetlands reasoned, missing that underlying melancholy, the tempered romanticism of Mabey's thesis. Those glancing details – the vortex of a snail's shell, the colour and texture of a feather – are not only true to themselves, but they become symbols of larger and more mysterious energy fields. Like calligraphic markings on a Chinese scroll. Signs that propose and predict a world of meaning.

The real Beat Generation epiphany, recalling Allen Ginsberg's 'Sunflower Sutra', arrived when we took a break from the slithery sacks of talcum powder, the oozing sheep casings, the chemical drums,



and sat against a mesh fence, in pale autumn sunlight, looking across the silvered span of the railway yards. From oily gravel and impacted dirt, sunflowers climbed. 'Corolla of bleary spikes,' Ginsberg wrote. Golden messenger spirits of the unofficial countryside. Mabey explains how 13,000 tons of canary grass seed, fodder for caged birds, comes into Britain every year. And is recycled into landfill sites, to leach into the water table, to drift down embankments and sewage-outfall tracks; bringing life and colour to the uniform greys of spurned and disregarded places.

Now, in the age of the Grand Project, Richard Mabey's excursions from thirty-five years ago, undertaken in strong heart, never succumbing to impotent rage, seem prophetic. Which is to say: true and right. Inevitable. Writing by walking, and walking again to gather up the will to write, was such an obvious tactic; a mediated response to a dim period of failing industries, social unrest, power cuts: suppression of the imagination after the unbridled utopianism of the Sixties. But nobody else, at the moment of the book's composition, took on the job in quite this way; and not, for sure, in this territory. Mabey, like a covert infiltrator, makes an engaged pass at the ugly bits, the dirty folds in the map. Convalescent canals and sluggish tributaries of the western rim of London, where dispersed Notting Hill dopers and opters-out were taking to the water in narrow boats with psychedelic decorations. With cats, tomato plants and bicycles. Would they notice Mabey, with his binoculars and his notebook, as he investigated pre-traumatic urban-edge market gardens, motorway-detached settlements waiting for longer runways and bigger air terminals?

*The Unofficial Countryside* is a proper reckoning, the Doomsday Book of a topography too fascinating to be left alone. Gravel beds, abandoned by film studios, were blissfully repossessed by passerine birds and opportunist plants. Mabey logs the tough fecundity of

the margin, where wild nature spurns the advertised reservation and obliterates the laminated notice-boards of sanctioned history. Human tragedies of our paranoid cultures, raids and terrorist outrages, as Mabey points out, are nature's opportunity. 'The first summer after the blitz there were rosebays flowering on over three-quarters of the bombed sites in London, defiant sparks of life amongst the desolation.'

Mabey is associated with a long residence in the Chilterns, with childhood memories of Berkhampstead, and the discovery, a Home Counties version of Alain-Fournier's novel, *Le Grand Meaulnes*, of a landscaped parkland over the garden fence. Intimations of wilderness within the fetch of suburbia. He absorbs and champions John Clare, not as an overreaching 'peasant' poet, but as a great and prescient natural eye. A witness to seasons and shifts, informed but unsentimental about the flora and fauna of the fenland fringe. He sees Clare's tragedy, a man at the whim of the social and economic forces of his time: enclosures, loss of common land, construction of railways. And he recognises this pathetic figure, trapped on the road between Helpston obscurity and metropolitan fame, as the solitary prophet of a new ecology. The damage in Clare's psyche, the painful divorce from the things which were closest to him, chimes with morbid shadows from our own period. The black-dog weather systems that settled on Mabey, clamping his life-force, after the groundbreaking achievement of *Flora Britannica* in 1996. He relocated to Norfolk and wrote himself back to a proper balance with the land. This trajectory, soul-sickness, walking in nature, swimming, planting, observing, was the template for a gathering school of writers, many of them associated with the East Anglian countryside: W.G. Sebald, Ronald Blythe, Roger Deakin, Robert Macfarlane. Sickness was not always the launching point, unless it was the sickness in nature, in



our broken treaty with living things.

*The Unofficial Countryside* was an exciting re-discovery for me: the unacknowledged pivot between the new nature writers and those others, of a grungier dispensation, who are randomly (and misleadingly) herded together as 'psychogeographers'. Will Self, looking to J.G. Ballard, a large presence on the western collar of London, as mentor and inspiration, has recently undertaken a series of yomps between airports and cities: the ultimate shock-corridors of deregulated urbanism. A Liverpool clergyman, John Davies, took a sabbatical to hike down the acoustic footprints of the M62, from Hull to Crosby beach. But the most submerged inheritor of the genealogy set out by Mabey in 1973 – Cobbett, Defoe, the 17th century mercenary John Taylor, John Hillaby – is the self-proclaimed 'deep-topographer', Nick Papadimitriou. A solid invisible, tramping and haunting Mabey's familiar turf, the Colne Valley: the canals, reservoirs and sewage farms of the Watford-to-Heathrow corridor. When Papadimitriou, archivist and scavenger, a person who solicits arrest and confrontation every time he sets out to visit another decommissioned settlement, tries to make a record of the Bedford Court Estate, he carries one book as his totem. The Estate is doomed, a parking lot for aircraft, but Papadimitriou, recording wild flowers, invading abandoned orchards, keeps faith with his chosen text: like a veteran of the English Civil War, bible and gunpowder, marching south to the Levellers' camp at St George's Hill, Weybridge. This is how he transcribes the episode in a contribution to the anthology *London, City of Disappearances* (2006).

'I first stumbled across the Bedford Court Estate during an attempt to visit Perry Oaks, a sludge-disposal works set up by the County Council in the 1930s . . . The sewage works featured in that record of urban wildlife, Richard Mabey's *The Unofficial Countryside* . . . Mabey drew attention to the rare waders using the works as a halt

on their migratory flights.'

In 1973, Ballard published *Crash*, his controversial novel of sex-death eroticism in a claustrophobic mindscape of concrete and tarmac: the airport slip roads, multi-storey car parks, low-level warehouses and convenience hotels that overspread Richard Mabey's liminal lands. Two writers, apparent contraries, produced defining texts at the same moment. And laid them out in the same never-quite-identified non-places. Ballard's perverse (but tender) ecology of petrol, blood, semen, crumpled metal, is the soundtrack playing at the edge of Mabey's frame as he logs willowherbs, mosses and knotgrass. Mabey's rogue plants, scuttling creatures migrating along central reservations and colonising abandoned filling stations, are the local jungle into which Ballard's architect, Robert Maitland, plunges in *Concrete Island* (1974).

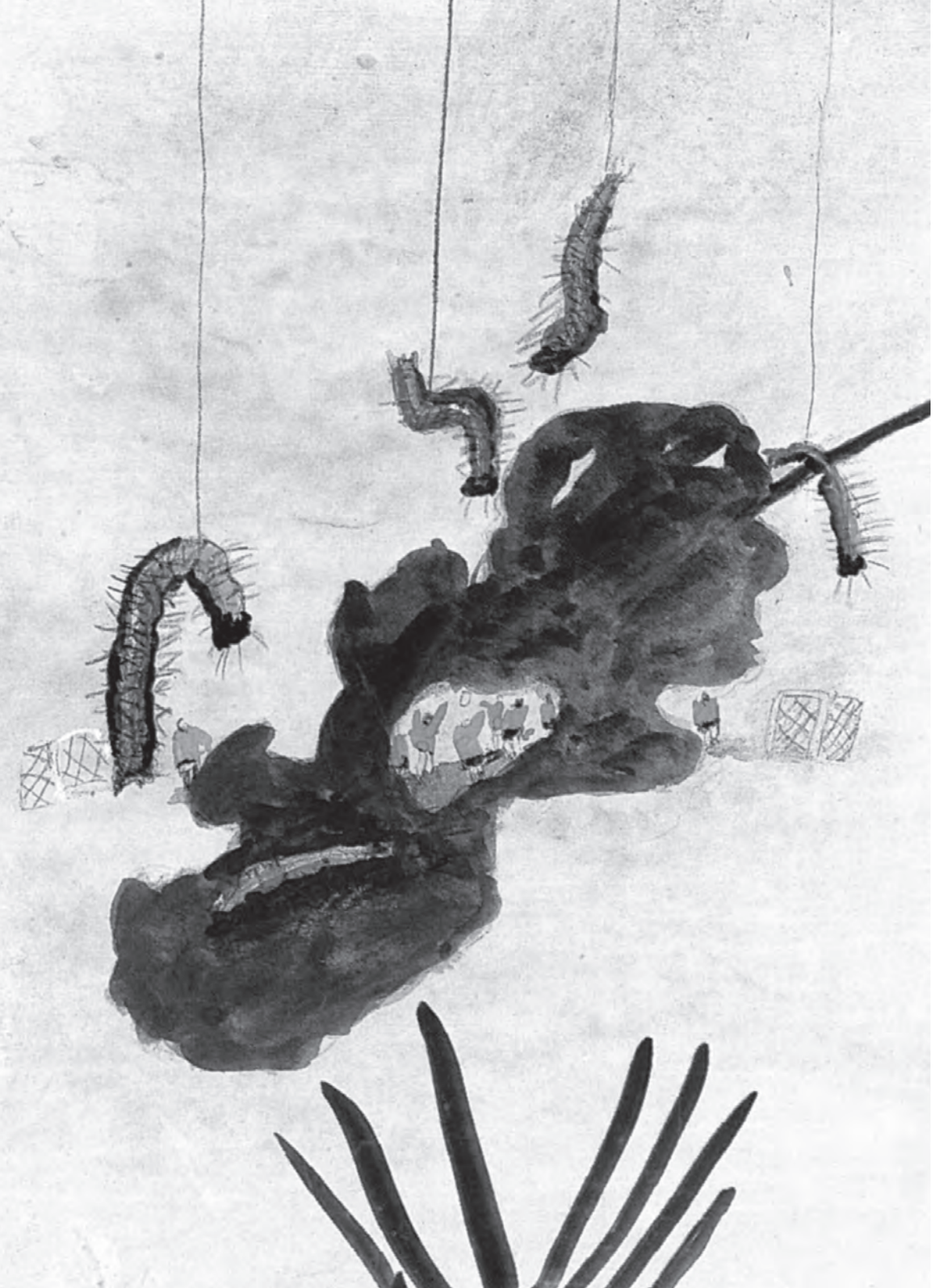
It was astonishing to find how accurately *The Unofficial Countryside* plotted my own unwritten future books. Mabey evaluated every piece of evidence I had missed on my pedestrian circuit of London's orbital motorway. He was interested in process, not place. Everything I attempted was an articulation of the specifics of named territories, the reconstruction of an authentic edgeland mythology. Mabey projected his 'journey in an erratic circle around London,' in 1973, 'tacking towards and away from the centre.' Like me, he soon learnt how 'every road and path seemed to lead straight to a "Private" sign'. Like me, but decades earlier, he understood how the rambler learns 'to look at sewage farms and airfields . . . as if they were natural land-forms, inexorably tied to local history and geology.' If I had been half-awake, I could have found the horrors of Thames Gateway, the apocalyptic mess of Grand Project short-termism, analysed by Mabey in his account of a single day botanising the smouldering landfill dumps of Rainham and Dagenham. 'Russian thistle is spreading,' he wrote, 'and maybe one dust-blown evening,



the drinkers in Dagenham saloons will look out into the main street to see the tumbleweeds rolling past their reined-up Cortinas.'

Bunkered down at the limits of London, through valid obsession and intensity of vision, the warring ecologies of J.G. Ballard and Richard Mabey are finally united. Two men of the Sixties in whom libertarianism and conservatism, rage and good-humour, combine to telling effect, have emerged as sages; the elective godfathers of a new generations of questing dissidents.

Iain Sinclair
*Hackney, 2010*



# *Prologue*

EXPERIENCES HAVE A WAY of staying naggingly out of focus until after you have been through them. So it was with this book, whose true beginning I only chanced upon, like a glimpse of the perfect setting for a dust-jacket photo, months after I had finished work on it.

It had been what they call a normal working day. Bitching at the office, brooding over lunch. No rhythm to set the day in order but a tense slouch at the desk one moment and tetchy toings and froings the next. The central heating was inexorably broiling, the windows too small – not that there was much to see through them but the damp and smoky air cowling the factory blocs. Driving home in the middle of a creeping three-lane jam was about as much relief as if the office had been towed away on wheels. I was locked-up, boxed-in, and daydreaming morbidly. It was difficult to believe that there was any other sort of world beyond all this.

On impulse, I had snatched out of the homebound crawl after a few miles and headed down a winding suburban lane. It led to a labyrinth of gravel pits, reservoirs, and watery odds and ends that I had often visited during my work on the book. It was hardly the promised landscape, and the whole area was pocked with working quarries and car dumps. But in the mood I was in, just to have seen some murky water lapped by non-air-conditioned wind would have set me right. What I did find that early autumn day was, I suppose, nothing special, but it made sudden and clear sense of my whole

year's exploration.

I had parked by the edge of a canal which curled around the western edge of this maze of water, and had stumped off, scowling, along the towpath. I think it was my black frame of mind that made the unexpected late fruitfulness of this place strike me with such intensity. I had never noticed before that the canal here was as clear as a chalk stream. Yellow water lilies drooped like balls of molten wax on the surface. Near the edge of the water drifts of newly hatched fish hung in the shallows. Anglers, fresh out of work, were setting up their tackle on the bank, and family parties chugged past in holiday cruisers from time to time. It was a bustling and human scene, but altogether different from the daily slog I had just dropped out of, and whose dog-end I could still see trailing past the hedges in the distance.

What had begun as a nervous gallop soon turned into a stroll. My eyes began to relax a little, and following the last swallows hawking for flies over the water, I caught sight of a brilliant spike of purple loosestrife in the distance. I had never before seen this plant so deep into suburbia. The towpath itself was festooned with wine-tinted hemp agrimony blooms and when a bicycling worker bucked past it seemed as natural to exchange greetings with him as if we had been in a country lane. No matter that the place he had come from was the gaunt Water Board pumping station that stretched along the bank, looking like nothing so much as an oil refinery. As dusk fell and the warning lights on its roof began to flush the bellies of the roosting gulls, I went off home like a new man.

That homely canalside stroll was as good an antidote to the workday blues as some real and solitary countryside would have been. And better in some ways, for I had beaten off the urban stresses in their own territory and on their own terms. Yet how rarely we look to this kind of landscape for some contact with natural things. Nearly forty



years before George Orwell had stood only a few miles from this spot, and been gnawed by the seemingly insoluble conflict between his twin loves: rural England and its close but dying communities, and the new industrial landscape where the mass of people were forced to live. He wrote a poem about the place called 'On a Ruined Farm near the His Master's Voice Gramophone Factory':

> There, where the tapering cranes sweep round,
> And great wheels turn, and trains roar by
> Like strong, low-headed brutes of steel –
> There is my world, my home; yet why
> So alien still? For I can neither
> Dwell in that world, not turn again
> to scythe and spade, but only loiter
> Among the trees the smoke has slain.

Written in 1934, it was an uncanny glimpse of many of our current worries. Yet Orwell was, as so often, too gloomy. If he was right that for most of us there is no return to 'scythe and spade', the choice was not as stark as he painted it. The trees can live next to the cranes. He forgot that their roots are not just the symbolic ones of our natural ancestry, but real ones of wood and fibre. At both levels they are a goodly sight hardier than the smoke-stained branches.

Our attitude towards nature is a strangely contradictory blend of romanticism and gloom. We imagine it to 'belong' in those watercolour landscapes where most of us would also like to live. If we are looking for wildlife we turn automatically towards the official countryside, towards the great set-pieces of forest and moor. If the truth is told, the needs of the natural world are more prosaic than this. A crack in the pavement is all a plant needs to put down roots. An old-fashioned lamp-standard makes as good a nesting box for a tit as any hollow oak. Provided it is not actually contaminated there is scarcely a nook or cranny anywhere which does not provide

the right living conditions for some plant or creature.

Think of the sites inside an urban area which can provide this opportunity: the water inside abandoned docks and in artificially created reservoirs; canal towpaths, and the dry banks of railway cuttings; allotments, parks, golf courses and gardens; the old trees in churchyards and the scrubby hawthorns at the back end of industrial estates; bomb-sites in old parts of the town and building sites in the new; the sludge of sewage farms and the more elegant mud of watercress beds. Every patch where the concrete has not actually sealed up the earth is potential home for some living thing. So willing are wild creatures to make-do with even the most marginally familiar habitats, that a stone curlew, a dwindling bird of open downland and dry heaths, was once found resting-up in a children's sand-pit in Kilburn.

This book is about these areas and their wild inhabitants. I have called it the unofficial countryside because none of these places is in the countryside proper, nor were they ever intended to provide bed and board for wildlife. They are all habitats which have grown out of human need. This is a scrappy definition, I know, covering everything from a planned suburban playground to the accidentally green corner of a city-centre parking lot.

Yet I think all these places do have one quality in common, and that is that, in them, the labels 'urban' and 'rural' by which we normally find our bearings in a landscape, just do not apply. It is not the parks but the railway sidings that are thick with wild flowers. Hedgy scrub springs up and spreads luxuriantly in the waste ground between factories just as surely as it is clipped down to size in suburban front gardens. And the water, an ancient and natural element if ever there was one, is mostly in decidedly unnatural holes dug out since the Industrial Revolution. Nothing seems quite complete or rounded off. Buildings and greenery alike are liable at any moment



to be levelled, trimmed, landscaped, incinerated, modernised, or just vaguely 'redeveloped' as if they were some under-used muscle.

If the ability of wildlife to survive literally on our doorsteps is remarkable, its persistence in the face of this ceaseless change is amazing. It is also, I find, amazingly cheering. For it is a bleak view to see this story as nothing more than one of survival, with Nature irrevocably opposed to Man, forever just holding on. Looked at more hopefully it is a story of co-existence, of how it is possible for the natural world to live alongside man, even amongst his grimiest eyesores.

I suppose that in the end it is an act of faith to believe that the natural world is important to us, that we need to keep in touch with life which has a pattern unshaped by human hand, with the flow of the seasons, and with things as simply brightening to a dull day as a blackbird's song and a buttercup. Yet our country cottage daydreams and passionately tended backyard pot plants suggest that it is a widely shared belief. There's a story that during the siege of Leningrad, the citizens used their furniture and even their doors for firewood rather than cut down the city's trees.

It is for this reason that I have not tried to stop this book being a very personal account. I am no biologist anyway, and it would have been pretentious of me to try and write a scientific study of biological adaptation in man-made environments. There are other things this book is not. It is neither comprehensive nor historical. The fact that polar bears once splashed about in the Thames or mammoths grazed on the site of the M1 is not very relevant to our experience of nature now. Nor have I done more than touch upon those myriads of minute creatures – microscopic insects, algae, moulds, bacteria and the like – on which the whole living superstructure depends. This natural underground will, for our lifetimes at least, be sadly beyond the ordinary view of the layman. It is the common, everyday

experience of bird and flower and tree, cohabiting with us in our urban areas, that I have tried to capture. That, if you like, is the message. The medium is an account of a year in the unofficial countryside, based chiefly around my personal observations and experiences, but organised so that some of the mechanisms of adaptation are highlighted when they seem most important.

The danger in this approach is being tempted into some biological slumming. The habitats I've described in this book are in no way a substitute for the official countryside. Nor are they something to be cherished in their own right, necessarily. The last thing I want to do is to excuse the dereliction, the shoddiness and the sheer wastefulness of much of our urban landscape.

And living with and learning to enjoy the natural world does not mean trying to copy it. The fashionable and banal practice of comparing human and animal behaviour could have some disturbing results in this context. I hope we are never forced to ape the peppered moth, which could only survive on the grime-encrusted trees of the industrial North by turning black itself. Or that like that notorious mutant carp in the polluted waters of Lake Erie, we learn to thrive on the poisons in our environment. There is now a more chilling example still. An American grasshopper living in an area heavily sprayed with weedkiller has been found to be recycling the chemical and adding it as a booster to the fluid it secretes naturally to repel its enemies. But these are all exceptional examples. In areas of gross contamination most plants and animals quite simply die. They have no choice. We do have one, which is to clear up our own filth.

It is easy to become sceptical of the ecological soothsayers when you learn, for instance, that there are twice as many birds per acre in urban areas as there are in most of the open countryside. This is not the point. Discovering that the natural world is indifferent to at least the clutter and ugliness (but not usually the poisons) of



our urban environments does not mean that we should be also. We should instead be trying to make our built-up areas more fruitful and life-giving for *all* their inhabitants.

For it is nature's fight back which is such an inspiration, her dogged and inventive survival in the face of all that we deal out. It is this survival story, and what it can mean for us, that is the subject of this book.