

DOUBTS AND FEARS

by "SUNDOWNER"

THE doubting Thomases of the world pay too high a price for their scepticism. I have received a most interesting letter from a Fendalton correspondent who is clearly a better bird watcher than I am; and a better bird tamer. His ear is better than mine, his memory (I suspect) longer. This, for example, is quite beyond me:

Blackbirds have a ten-note refrain—all hereabouts use the same—sometimes keeping it repeated till they launch into their full notes, which sound to me more bellicose than the mellow flute tones of English blackbirds, as I remember them.

Young blackbirds never "come confidently to my digging spade," as they do to his, and I have never succeeded in establishing such relations with a thrush as this paragraph indicates:

For two seasons I have had a thrush that comes down on the lawn, plays a short obbligato, runs a little way, sings again, and to my "Give us another, old chap!" always responds. He likes to sing full and loud on the back of the garden seat.

But my correspondent's most interesting note describes the hypnotising of a young cuckoo by a cat:

As I moved quietly to the peach tree where the call had been heard, I saw a well-fledged young bird above my head. A warbler fed him once and went into the next garden to forage. Neither seemed scared of me. The cat came along to see what I was looking at; then jumped up on the fence. The cuckoo stopped creaking and the cat began to move along the fence, making a guttural hypnotic gentle yowling noise. There was ten feet of rambler rose between the cat and the now silent cuckoo, which sat hunched with drooping wings and staring at the staring cat. . . Suddenly from over the fence a grey warbler shot and smacked the bird in the face. It woke with a start and dashed off with the warbler.

I wish I could accept that precisely as it stands. I can't doubt that it is

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scooping me before him he cruised sunnily into and around the forecourt. The echoes of his opening peals still lingered among the strip lighting. From finger-nail and electric clock the plastic ran down like wax.

"Oh, my people!" I pleaded inwardly. "Let me not believe this. Oh, pioneers! Oh, boys from 'way down under . . . oh, blokes!"

As though in answer to my plea a stocky, cropped, reddish-faced man shouldered out into the presence. I picked him at a glance: bomber boy; three-four type if ever I saw one; one who had shared his soap ration with Group Captains. He addressed the great man:

"And where did you put this brief-case?" How I loved that joker.

"AHHHRHH?" Mr. Normanby unrolled some of his surplus top structure; his head was jacked gently up towards the woeful, watching clock. His smile diminished a fraction at each corner. He inspected with mildest interest my bomber champion. "But, my dear boy!" he laughed at last, patient, explanatory, "that's exactly what I'm asking you!"

It was all over. Mr. Normanby was no mere Group Captain. He was an Umbrae of Air Marshals. He was Hastings. Agincourt, Waterloo. The cropped red head was down ferreting among the left luggage.

"N-never mind." I sobbed and ran out. I have started reading Carlyle in considerable dismay.

truthful, and the sentences I have quoted show that the writer is a patient, experienced, sympathetic, and disciplined observer. I can't reject the volume of evidence available about the hypnotic fears aroused in some wild creatures by other wild creatures—snakes in birds, cats and weasels in birds, weasels in rabbits, and so on. I once saw a half-grown rabbit sitting squealing as a weasel circled it in some tussocks. I was, in fact, able to catch the rabbit and shoot the weasel, which did not like losing its prey, and came back to look for it. The rabbit, which I had by this time released, seemed to be quite uninjured, and when I put it down raced up the hill into a burrow. That, I have always supposed since, was a clear case of hypnotism, but to be on all fours with the cat and the cuckoo, a second rabbit would have had to dash in, not to attack the weasel, but to break the spell. I can't help suspecting that the warbler broke the spell by accident—came back to feed the cuckoo, suddenly saw the cat, and in its fright collided with its paralysed fosterling.

ONE of the most depressing results when spring, summer, and autumn all lose half their rain is the loss of half the trees in newly-established plantations. It is bad when sheep spend most of their time near the water troughs, and worse when cattle can't hide their bones; but in both cases recovery is quick if rain comes and the loss temporary if it does not come.

APRIL 9 Trees live longer than we do ourselves, and when they die we can never be sure that we will see them replaced. Even the quick growers take 10 or 20 years to be trees, and that is a long time to wait at any stage in our lives, and an impossible time in the latter stages.

Fortunately, there are trees that it is difficult to kill—some of them big like the sequoias, some small like hawthorns. Jim told me yesterday that a hormone spray which had shrivelled his willows

like a fire had no effect at all on his hawthorns. It was good news to me in spite of the fact that thorn hedges harbour fireblight which may be the cause, or at least one cause, of my dead and dying chestnuts. When a tree begins to die before its time I feel as I do when I meet a man of 40 and notice that he has lost his hair and his teeth and his colour and his firmness and his zest and his elasticity and is rapidly losing his battle with the pull of gravity. One of the most distressing sights I ever saw in the bush was the destruction in a gale of a row of beech trees on the spine of a ridge, all of them 40 or 50 feet high. If they had crashed down suddenly the sight would have shocked me less than seeing them bend over, recover, bend again, and then fail to recover as their roots one by one gave way. The only noise was the howl of the wind high above me, and the cracking of twigs and small branches as the big trees settled down on their sides.

I WAS glancing through the Shorter Reviews of the New Statesman when I blundered on this notice of a new issue of the *Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*:

First, a box chequered black and white in a sort of shepherd's plaid. Next, a cellophane wrapper. Inside, a padded Royal Stewart tartan binding, in silk. Finally well printed, the poems of Burns, edited and introduced by James Barke. Mr. Barke's publishers have loyally co-operated in making this wholly uncritical edition; and by serving up a Lowland poet in all this tartan nonsense they pander to a synthetic patriotism and put the poems on a level with shortbread, Edinburgh Rock, and A Present from the Trossachs.

The half of me that is English laughed, the half that is Scots rejoiced.

But I wish the reviewer APRIL 10 had signed his name. It would give me great pleasure to let him know that his blunderbuss was heard round the world. I hope the sound will be recorded and reproduced as often as two or three Scots are met together in the Poet's name. I am too poor to make extravagant promises. But if some disc-maker will imprison those words in durable material, and make them available at a reasonable price, I will present one copy every year while I live to the Society for the Propagation of Common Sense.

(To be continued)



THE PLANTING of trees rates high among the pleasures of Richard Beauchamp, who will begin six talks on trees in the 3YA "Country Session" on Monday, May 2. Mr. Beauchamp starts off in the shade of his own trees, and ends with a talk on tree planting as public policy.

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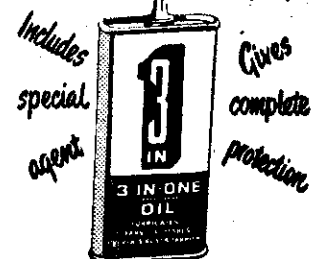
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