

## W. H. Hudson, Naturalist and Author.

WILLIAM HENRY HUDSON, who was born in 1841, devoted the greater part of a long lifetime to observing nature (especially bird and human nature) and writing about it. Nearly everyone takes pleasure in the sights and sounds of nature; but most of us do so in a comparatively vague and casual way. Our observation lacks closeness and intensity. Hudson was the sensitive and skilled observer. With characteristic modesty he described his own mental attitude as that of "the naturalist, whose proper study is not mankind but animals, including man; who does not wish to worry his brains overmuch, and likes to see very many things with vision a little clearer than the ordinary, rather than to see a very few things with preternatural clearness and miss all the rest" (*Nature in Downland*, Chapter VI.). Lovers of his writings, however, would regard this as rather an understatement, for they know that with the accuracy of a scientist he combined the poet's power of seeing into the life of things and the philosopher's habit of reflecting upon their hidden significance. He had also unusual imaginative gifts and a supreme talent for describing in simple and beautiful language what he saw and heard, making the various scenes and incidents live again on his pages. No matter what he wrote about he was never fumbling or dull or ponderous. In the *Times Literary Supplement* a month or two ago a critic, reviewing a work by Thomas Wood, remarked: "His prose is without mannerisms or affectations. Keeping in mind always what it means to get said it finds the most effective way of saying it and achieves beauty without straining after it." This exactly describes Hudson's prose. It is invariably limpid, supple and expressive, achieving the effect it aims at without apparent effort, so that the reader is carried pleasurably along with a sense of quickened alertness and well-being, his whole interest engaged in that which interests Hudson. When I say that I do not know of any author (certainly of any prose-writer) who has yielded me greater delight I am probably recording the opinion of multitudes of readers besides myself.

Hudson's native country was Argentina, and there amid the far-spreading pampas of the La Plata region his boyhood was spent. He was never at school, but lived in the open air with

the birds and the beasts. Very early in his boyhood he formed the habit of going about alone to amuse himself in his own way—his favourite occupation being that of absorbedly watching the ways of some living creature, some brilliantly coloured insect or bird which had captured his attention.

The story of those early years—which moulded him for life, and to which he often looked back with a kind of nostalgia—is fascinatingly told in *Far Away and Long Ago*, an autobiographical volume published in 1918 and written during a period of convalescence in a sick-room in Cornwall, more than half-a-century after the events with which it deals. But there is autobiography in all his writings in so far as they tell of his own first-hand experiences.

Next to his delight in nature came his delight in books, particularly those books (chiefly poetry) which contained descriptions of rural sights and sounds and gave expression to “the feeling of mysterious, uplifting gladness produced in us by nature.” The couple of hundred volumes on the shelves of his early home included no poetry worth mentioning, but :—

“One day,” he tells us, “during a visit to the city of Buenos Ayres, I discovered in a mean street, in the southern part of the town, a second-hand bookshop, kept by an old snuffy spectacled German in a long shabby black coat. I remember him well because he was a very important person to me. It was the first shop of the kind I had seen—I doubt if there was another in the town; and to be allowed to rummage by the hour among this mass of old books on the dusty shelves and heaped on the brick floor was a novel and delightful experience. The books were mostly in Spanish, French and German, but there were some in English, and among them I came upon Thomson’s *Seasons*. I remember the thrill of joy I experienced when I snatched up the small thin octavo in its smooth calf binding. It was the first book in English I ever bought, and to this day, when I see a copy of the *Seasons* on a bookstall, which is often enough, I cannot keep my fingers off it and find it hard to resist a temptation to throw a couple of shillings away and take it home. If shillings had not been wanted for bread and cheese I should have a roomful of copies by now” (*Afoot in England*, Chapter XXIV.).

In his sixteenth year he had an attack of typhus, followed by acute rheumatic fever. This left in its train heart-trouble, to which he was subject, more or less, for the remainder of his days. Ultimately it proved fatal; but the fact that his death did not take place until 1922 is an illustration of the uncertainty which so often attaches to medical verdicts—for in 1857 the doctors had promised him only a few short years of life. Such a

sentence hanging over him, however, helps to account, no doubt, for the traces of deep melancholy which from time to time shadow his pages.

When he was in his thirties he came to England in the hope of making a living by his pen. Like so many other literary aspirants, he found the struggle to make good a long and weary one, and it was not until this century had begun that he gained a secure place in popular esteem. He refers in *Afoot in England* to the lean years of poverty and ill-health, when he and his wife lived in "the immense unfriendly wilderness of London" because it

"appeared to be the only place in the wide world where our poor little talents could earn us a few shillings a week to live on . . . It occasionally happened," he writes, "that an article sent to some magazine was not returned, and always after so many rejections to have one accepted and paid for with a cheque worth several pounds was a cause of astonishment, and was as truly a miracle as if the angel of the sun had compassionately thrown us down a handful of gold."

Almost his only pleasure during those years was the country rambles—mostly in East Anglia and the Southern Counties—in which he indulged at Easter and Whitsuntide and in the autumn when means would allow.

Of the three main groups into which his writings fall, viz., works of fiction, ornithological treatises and discursive essays recording the sights and sounds and everyday adventures which he met with in the course of the aforesaid rambles, my own preference (and probably that of the majority of his readers) is for the third group. The very names of some of these books fall like music on the ears of those who have learned to love them: and a like remark holds good with reference to the titles of many of his chapters, e.g., "On Going Back," "Wind, Wave and Spirit," "Shepherds and Wheatears," "Summer Heat," "In Praise of the Cow," "Following a River," "An Old Road Leading Nowhere." Anyone to whom such titles do not appeal had better leave Hudson alone; but those to whom they do appeal can read him without fear of disappointment.

Although a lover of walking—doing on occasion twelve or fourteen miles a day—he was yet no lusty hiker. "A poorer walker," he says, "it would have been hard to find." On most of his wanderings "the end of each day usually brought extreme fatigue." Sometimes he cycled; but he liked walking because of its compensations, of which

"perhaps the best of all was that this method of seeing the country made us more intimate with the people we met and stayed

with . . . I can recall," he writes, "a hundred little adventures we met with during those wanderings, when we walked day after day, without map or guide-book as our custom was, not knowing where the evening would find us, but always confident that the people to whom it would fall in the end to shelter us would prove interesting to know and would show us a kindness that money could not pay for" (*Afoot in England*, Chapter III.).

Hudson's first book was *The Purple Land that England Lost*, a graphic, eloquent and colourful romance of love and war in Uruguay. This was published in 1885 in two volumes at the price of one guinea, and it fell—as the saying is—still-born from the press. About 1904 I had the good fortune to pick up a copy of it—with the pages not cut open—for eighteen-pence in a little shop in Oxford. I kept it, on and off my shelves, for twelve years or more, and then parted with it to a London dealer for five guineas. A few months later I saw it listed in that dealer's catalogue for £38. And not long afterwards a copy (the same one?) was sold at Sotheby's for nearly double that figure. Such was its scarcity value. Meanwhile the book had been re-issued as a one-volume six-shilling novel, called *The Purple Land*, and now it is obtainable, in the "Penguin" series, for sixpence.

*The Purple Land* was followed, in 1887, by *A Crystal Age*, a kind of Arcadian Utopia, comparable in some respects to Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*. Having read both works, I know which of the two I am the more glad not to have missed.

*Argentine Ornithology* came in 1888, and in 1892 *The Naturalist in La Plata* and (under pseudonym) *Fan*. Eighteen-ninety-three saw the publication of *Birds in a Village* and *Idle Days in Patagonia*. Then followed *British Birds* (1895), *Birds in London* (1898), *Nature in Downland* (1900), *Birds and Man* (1901), *El Ombú* (1902), *Hampshire Days* (1903). Several of these works speedily reached the remainder market—to the advantage of discriminating impecunious book-buyers, although not to that of the author.

I suppose his real vogue may be said to have begun with *Green Mansions*, in 1904, a novel of haunting charm whose elusive heroine, Rima, the bird-woman, has been represented (or, as many think, grievously misrepresented) by Epstein in the stonework of the Hudson Memorial Bird Sanctuary in Hyde Park.

After *Green Mansions* came *A Little Boy Lost* (1905), *The Land's End* (1908), *Afoot in England* (1909), *A Shepherd's Life* (1910), *Adventures Among Birds* (1913), and sundry other books, concluding with *A Hind in Richmond Park*, which he was preparing in the year of his death.

In 1901, when he was sixty, he was awarded a Civil List Pension of £150, "in recognition of the originality of his writings on natural history." This he resigned in 1921 on the ground that he was no longer in need of the money. In the following year he was able to make a donation of £1,000 to the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (which he had actively supported ever since its formation thirty years before) to be used for the extension of its educational work among schoolchildren. Thus it will be seen that his feeling for birds was no mere æsthetic sentiment; it prompted him to unsparing endeavour on behalf of the creatures he loved.

His friend Edward Garnett (Hudson's letters to whom have been published) has written :

"I have known several men of genius, remarkable minds, but no man's personality has ever fascinated me like Hudson's . . . I should think that few men have aroused such warm responsiveness in their fellows as Hudson. Wherever he went . . . people succumbed quickly to the spell of his personality. His tall, dark figure, his brusque vivid talk, his magnetic eyes, his strength of manner, and the spice of mystery in his movements, captivated his hearers. People were warmed by his rich vibrating feeling, by his picturesque aloofness, by his intimacy of tone, by something strange in his attitude, by his intense zest in living fact. And by this power of vivifying his hearers and of stimulating their interests Hudson was a king in any company."

"There were," continues Garnett, "two sides to Hudson's social instinct, as there were two sides to his genius . . . On the one side his heart, the most deeply human of all men's I have known, made any little drama of life an intensely absorbing reality to him; on the other side his free, untamed spirit, the hunger of his senses and spirit for Nature and his passionate affinity with 'the earth life' bade him cast off as an incubus our crowded streets and towns and all their congested affairs. His instinct oscillated between the poles of two forces, the human and the wild."

In writing about Hudson the one thing I am tempted to do is to quote and quote and quote, so that readers may test for themselves his quality as a writer. There is a Hudson Anthology (edited by Edward Garnett), which I have not seen; and certainly his books abound in quotables. One can hardly open them anywhere without lighting upon some striking and memorable passage. The difficulty, in fact, lies in finding not what to quote, but what to omit. Here are three specimens which I should be obliged to include were I compiling a Hudson Anthology myself.

The first is from the chapter entitled "Silence and Music" in *Nature in Downland*.

"The skylark is found all over downland, and is abundant wherever there is cultivation. On the sheepwalks, where favourable breeding-places are comparatively few, he is so thinly distributed that you may sometimes ramble about for half a day and not put up more than half-a-dozen birds. And yet here, on these sheep-fed hills, out of sight of cornfields, you hear the lark all day long—not one nor half-a-dozen, nor a score or two, but many scores, and I should say hundreds of larks. Go where you like, to the summit of the highest hill, or down the longest slopes into the deepest combe or valley at its foot, everywhere you are ringed about with that perpetual unchanging stream of sound. It is not a confused, nor a diffused sound, which is everywhere, filling the whole air like a misty rain, or a perfume, or like the universal hum of teeming insect life in a wood in summer; but a sound that ever comes from a great distance, out of the sky: and you are always in the centre of it; and the effect is as of an innumerable company of invisible beings, forming an unbroken circle as wide as the horizon, chanting an everlasting melody in one shrill, unchanging tone. You may hear it continuously for hours, yet look in vain to see a bird; I have strained my sight, gazing for an hour, and have not seen one rising or coming back to earth, and have looked up and listened in vain to hear one singing overhead. And I have looked all about the sky with my strong glasses without being able to detect one small brown speck on the vast blue expanse. This was because the birds on these smooth, close-cropped hills, especially in the dry months of July and August, were really very few and far between—so far indeed that not a bird came within ken. And yet on account of the immense distance the sound travels you can hear the voices of hundreds."

My second extract, by way of contrast, deals with the ugliness of Methodist chapels in West Cornwall. It is from *The Land's End*, Chapter XIII., and may not be entirely inapplicable even to ourselves.

" . . . these square naked granite boxes set up in every hamlet and at roadsides, hideous to look at and a blot and disfigurement to the village and to God's earth, are assuredly an insult to every person endowed with a sense of beauty and fitness. You will notice that a cowhouse or a barn or any other out-building at even the most squalid-looking little farm in a Cornish hamlet strikes one as actually beautiful by contrast with the neighbouring conventicle . . .

"The interior of these chapels is on a par with their external

appearance. A square naked room, its four dusty walls discoloured a crude blue or red or yellow, with a loud-ticking wooden kitchen clock nailed high up on one of them to tell how the time goes. Of the service I can only say that after a good deal of experience of chapel services in many parts of England I have found nothing so unutterably repellent as the services here, often enough conducted by a 'local preacher,' an illiterate native who holds forth for an hour on the Lord's dealings with the Israelites in a loud metallic harsh Cornish voice.

"I observed that as a rule but few adults attended the morning services in the villages and small towns; but alas for the little ones! they were all packed off to chapel in the morning. Again and again on taking my seat in a chapel at the early service I found myself in a congregation chiefly composed of children. What can be the effect on the child mind of such an interior and of such a service—the intolerable sermon, the rude singing—the whole squalid symbolism! One can but say that if any imagination, any sense of beauty, any feeling of wonder and reverence at the mystery of life and nature had survived in their young minds it must inevitably perish in such an atmosphere."

The third passage, from Chapter V. of *Afoot in England*, describes an experience on the Norfolk coast which most of us would despair of being able to put into words; but when Hudson does it it looks easy.

"As the sun rose higher the air grew warmer until it was full summer heat . . . ; for all that day we were abroad, and as the tide ebbed a new country that was neither earth nor sea was disclosed, an infinite expanse of pale yellow sand stretching away on either side, and further and further out until it mingled and melted into the sparkling water and faintly seen line of foam on the horizon. And over all . . . there brooded a soft bluish silvery haze . . . that blotted nothing out, but blended and interfused them all until earth and air and sea and sands were scarcely distinguishable . . . Far out on the lowest furthest strip of sand, which appeared to be on a level with the sea, gulls were seen standing in twos and threes and small groups and in rows; but they did not look like gulls—familiar birds, gull-shaped with grey and white plumage. They appeared twice as big as gulls, and were of a dazzling whiteness and of no definite shape: though standing still they had motion, an effect of the quivering dancing air, the 'visible heat'; at rest, they were seen now as separate objects; then as one with the silver sparkle on the sea; and when they rose and floated away they were no longer shining and white, but like pale shadows of winged forms faintly visible in the haze.

“ They were not birds but spirits—beings that lived in or were passing through the world and now, like the heat, made visible; and I, standing far out on the sparkling sands, with the sparkling sea on one side and the line of dunes, indistinctly seen as land, on the other, was one of them; and if any person had looked at me from a distance he would have seen me as a formless shining white being standing by the sea, and then perhaps as a winged shadow floating in the haze. It was only necessary to put out one’s arms to float. That was the effect on my mind: this natural world was changed to a supernatural, and there was no more matter nor force in sea or land nor in the heavens above, but only spirit.”

Many a time I felt prompted to write to Hudson thanking him for the intense enjoyment I derived from his books. My regret at not having done so was tempered when I read that early in 1906 he informed Garnett that since coming to England he had received not less than twenty thousand letters worth keeping. Obviously it would have been rather a pity to add another letter to that vast pile. Nor would a letter really have sufficed in my case. A sonnet at least would have been needed to give anything like fitting expression to my gratitude. But amid the manifold distractions of a parson’s life it is difficult enough to concentrate on the production of sermons, let alone sonnets. So this article—such as it is—will have to serve as a small contribution towards discharging a great debt.

In conclusion let me quote the following admirable estimate of Hudson’s achievement as a writer which appeared in *Bird Notes and News* in the autumn of 1922, over the initials L.G.

“ Something his books owed no doubt to their memories of two continents. From the boundless spaces of Argentina, with its untilled pampas and half-wild gauchos, he passed to the green meadows and old-time villages of England, always able to recall not only the brilliant bird life he had first known, but the habits and language of each species; and to contrast them with the sombre-coated songsters of his new home. The English downland, the little English hamlet, the English lanes and woodlands, the English cottagers, won his heart, as summer after summer he rambled in quiet ways over many a county, becoming familiar with hundreds of small villages in a way few Englishmen can equal. The New Forest, the Sussex Downs, Wiltshire byeways and sheepfolds, Cornish rocks and Norfolk cliffs—he knew and made himself a part of all, just as whatever bird he had most newly seen and watched became, as it seemed, his favourite bird, and the most lovely. And whether it was the elusive furze-wren on a Surrey common, the jays of Savernake, the jackdaws of Pen-



zance, the wood-wrens of Wells in Somerset, or the wild geese of Wells-next-the-Sea; or a shepherd's dog, or a cow in an old lane, or a grasshopper or a dragonfly; or a ribbon of blue vernal squills, a patch of chequered fritillaries, or a yellow mimulus by the river; he could see and write of each and all with a charm that made it for the moment the one thing of interest for himself and his readers. It was all Life, the abounding life of a world made very good. But woven in with the golden threads was a web of the deepest sadness, the consciousness of Death."

E. J. ROBERTS.

*John Clifford as I Knew Him.* A Commemorative Tribute by Henry J. Cowell. (Baptist Union Publication Dept., 6d.)

The centenary of the birth of Dr. Clifford will call forth many tributes, but Mr. Cowell's is sure of a worthy place among them. Through many years he was privileged to enjoy the friendship of Dr. Clifford, and this gives to his eulogy an intimate and personal note which all the readers of this brochure will feel to be both fitting and adequate. Mr. Cowell takes us behind the pulpit and the platform into that realm of personal relationships where the Doctor moved with such grace and charm. He shows us Dr. Clifford's love for children and young people, his humility and generosity, his humour and abounding friendliness. Skillfully he paints the portrait of a fighter and leader who never lost the spirit of the child, and whose long career was dominated by his love for the Master. Dr. Clifford was, in every sense, a great Christian: and as Mr. Cowell's brochure will have a very large circulation (as it well deserves) he will have the satisfaction of knowing that he has brought back to us the memory of an outstanding apostle in the modern world, an apostle whom to know was to love.

F. T. L.