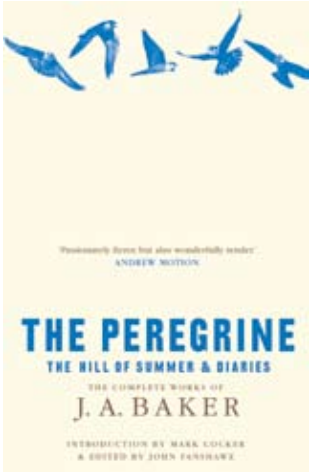
Reviews



The Peregrine, The Hill of Summer & Diaries. The Complete Works of J. A. Baker.
2010.
Introduction by Mark Cocker.
Edited by John Fanshawe.
London: Collins.
Pp. 416. Hardbound.
£20.

John Alec Baker's (1926–1987) *The Peregrine* (1967) scorched an incendiary trajectory to literary fame by winning that year's Duff Cooper Prize, awarded for, "the best in non-fiction writing,"[1] and remains the only work in the genre of 'nature writing' so honoured, since the award was instituted in 1956. Over the past four decades Baker has attained the coveted stature of being a writer's writer on a remarkably slim body of work comprising two books, the above, and *The Hill of Summer* (1969). He is considered the most influential British nature-writer of the twentieth century—joining ranks with Gilbert White, John Clare, and W. H. Hudson, all revered masters of the genre—elevated to that pedestal by admiring contemporary poets and nature-writers, awed by the adroit use of words, and consummate turns of phrase that he forged in his word-smithy.

Baker lived all his life in the small English town of Chelmsford, Essex, and for a greater part of his working life was manager, first of the local branch of the Automobile Association, and later, of a fruit juice depot. Strangely, he never learnt how to drive, preferring to ride a bicycle around the countryside while watching birds! He was a true champion of the local patch, meandering quiet country roads either after work hours, or from dawn to dusk on holidays, absorbing the wild topography of his beloved Essex, so he could, "Convey the wonder of … a land to me profuse and glorious as Africa." He preferred birdwatching by himself, occasionally hinting the presence of a companion with a privacy-guarding initial, or using the non-committal 'we,' in his diary. Towards the end of his life he suffered from, and finally succumbed to, the protracted agony of rheumatoid arthritis.

I have read *The Peregrine* four times since the 1980s, stooping into its pages between readings, and have, every time, come away gasping at the brilliance of Baker's incandescent prose—clearly my favourite for a marooned-on-an-island book. It is written in the form of a diary, purportedly covering a year, but conjecturally encapsulating the author's decade-long (mainly 1955–1966) single-minded, Ahabic[2] pursuit of this iconic predator, during a time when it was considered rare in Great Britain.

Baker's ability to imbibe landscape and atmosphere in its entirety cannot but be celebrated: to convey a sense of place and its denizens with incomparable intuition; to metamorphose into the wolf in its hackled pelt, or fleece-trapped sheep; to torpedo his reader into the visceral stoop of the savage wanderer, plunging earthward as though that circumambulating sphere were ether and the bird intent on emerging unscathed beyond; to terrorise him into the frantic flight of a doomed pintail; to make the world tilt and flash in the seething cauldron of this quicksilver moment, this temporal drama.

In an insightful passage of great import to the birdwatcher, Baker once found himself,

> … crouching over the kill, like a mantling hawk. My eyes turned quickly about, alert for the walking heads of men. Unconsciously I was imitating the movements of a hawk, as in some primitive ritual; the hunter becoming the thing he hunts. I looked into the wood. In a lair of shadow the peregrine was crouching, watching me, gripping the neck of a dead branch. We live, in these days in the open, the same ecstatic fearful life. We shun men. We hate their suddenly uplifted arms, the insanity of their flailing gestures, their erratic scissoring gait, their aimless stumbling ways, the tombstone whiteness of their faces.[3]

The hill of summer is a lyrically pastoral record of a year in the life of a hill, the changing cycle of its seasons, the covering and disrobing of its vegetative mantle, the peregrinations of its denizens. It is profoundly enjoyable if you let the author's immaculate eye unravel the scenery for you. Baker's hawk-obsessed passages are fiery, fierce, and exquisitely tooled:

> The male sparrowhawk lives very close to the edge of things. He is a primitive, an aboriginal among birds, savage in killing because his power is small. His long legs look thin and fragile, like stems of amber. He snatches his prey, bears it down, grips it insanely as though he fears its life will swell up in his foot, will swell up and burst and overwhelm him … Every movement of the wood reaches out and touches him with a long finger … But unmated, or when nesting is over, he reverts to what he was: a wild-leaping gazelle of the air, whose thin yellow eyes pierce all shadow, whom all steps tread upon, whom all sounds deafen, whom all sights dazzle; the flying nerve of the wood.[4]

1. Source: http://www.duffcooperprize.org [Accessed on 25 March 2011].

2. The striking parallel of Baker's obsession to the immortal grandeur of Captain Ahab's mania for the white whale was taken from 'LRB Blog' [http://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2010/08/03/gillian-darley/who-was-j-a-baker/]. [Accessed on 25 March 2011.]
3. ***The Peregrine***, chapter entitled 'November.'
4. 'May downland' (p. 194).

And yet, despite his raptor fixation, he is euphonic when describing other facets of the countryside,

> The wood lark's song is less abandoned and more melancholy-sounding than the skylark's. Each new cadence is elaborated from the one that went before. The bird seems to ponder each phrase before shaping it into song. He sings it, lets it fall, recovers it, lets it fall, then lets it lie where it fell … It was a wonder to me that so small a fragment of life could fly in complete darkness, and in heavy rain, breathing so carefully, skilfully, out into nothing, for nothing, to nothing, but to be itself.[5]

While the two books are distillations of his diaries, a third of which are published in this volume of his 'complete' works, it is these recently discovered sheaf of papers, printed now for the first time, that shine a ray of sunlight on the true spirit of the man. Through them we learn of his birding companions, of the tools of his trade that created his style of birding, of his frailties, of the incredible sensitivity, and reluctant mortality of his thoughts. The above song of the Wood Lark was taken and rearranged from a slightly differently worded, yet profoundly poignant, diary entry of 16 June 1954:

> We stood under that wonderful sound, coming down to us in the thick darkness and the pouring rain. And a feeling of great exhilaration possessed me, like a sudden lungful of purer air. The great pointlessness of it, the non-sense of nature, was beautiful, and no-one else would know it again, exactly as we knew it at that moment. Only a bird would circle high in the darkness, endlessly singing for pure, untainted, instinctive joy, and only a bird-watcher would stand and gorp up at something he could never hope to see… sharing that joy.

Baker's greatest achievement is the ability to draw the reader into the atmosphere of the peregrine's, or indeed, his own, landscape on any page that falls open, despite the author's perceptive confession, "The hardest thing of all to see is what is really there."

No birdwatcher's library is complete without *The Peregrine* perched on the shelf, nor his eye honed to that skill, if it were not well thumbed.

— Aasheesh Pittie

Post card from the Pacific Ocean: a boat trip to see seabirds off the California coast

Ragupathy Kannan

Kannan, R., 2011. Post card from the Pacific Ocean: a boat trip to see seabirds off the California coast. *Indian BIRDS* 7 (1): 23–24.

Oceanic birding is the last frontier for birders rooted on *terra firma*. Even the most hardened and seasoned member of the tribe may be pushed to the limit in the face of chilly winds and choppy seas. Birding on wet, heaving decks can test anyone's skill and resolve. To add to the difficulties, pelagic birds invariably offer mere fleeting glimpses, and identifications are difficult even in the best of conditions.

So I forayed into this unfamiliar arena with trepidation. On a characteristically chilly and foggy California (United States) June morning I boarded *Shearwater Journeys*' pelagic birding launch with an assortment of birders. As we chugged out of Santa Cruz harbour, our leader, Debra Shearwater (yes, that *is* her name) went over all the safety instructions. 'Be sure to know where the flotation devices are; take your motion sickness pills *now* if you are prone to seasickness; always be prepared to grab something for support.' And then the more experienced sea birders shared tips for efficient sea birding. 'Use the clock face to point out a bird's general location: 12 o'clock for straight-ahead, 6 for directly behind, *etc*.; as you yell out locations, mention if bird is above or below horizon …'

Someone cut all that with a sharp, 'Loons!' Swimming gracefully to starboard was a small raft of Pacific- *Gavia pacifica*, and Red-throated- *G. stellata* Loons. Being from the far-away, land-locked state of Arkansas (where loons are a rarity) I was pleased to see these fish-eating specialists. With their dagger-straight bills, and legs set far back on their bodies, they epitomise adaptations for piscivory.

Once clear of the bay the launch surged ahead with a deafening roar. Chilly and salty spray soaked everyone and everything. We scrambled for cover and support. No wonder they insisted on raincoats under clear skies. An hour or so later, when we were out of sight of land, amidst relatively calm seas, the captain eased back the throttle and grabbed his microphone: 'Shearwaters to port!' A teeming flock of Sooty- *Puffinus griseus*, and Pink-footed- *P. creatops* Shearwaters circled above the waters in long arcing glides. As I struggled to focus on them, a strange excitement swept through me. 'Life Order', I muttered to myself, as in, 'Life Bird', celebrating the inclusion of Procellariiformes (tubenoses) to my life list of bird orders.

5. 'May downland' (p. 195).