

WONALANCET OUT DOOR CLUB

Newsletter



November, 2015

NATURE WRITING by OUR READERS & A SPECIAL MEN'S FASHION ISSUE !

Random Thoughts on Nature Writing by Chris Conrod

I suppose you know how it is. The more deeply immersed we become in an esoteric topic, the more dependent we are on the dense, arcane language of the specialist. It's human nature. If a writer can properly use precise, technical jargon, the message will possess an authoritative credibility. But there is a fine line between discrimination and snobbery.

I flirted with that line when, in my mid-fifties, I decided to renew my formal education in biology and ecology. I wallowed in the peer-reviewed literature of my chosen subject and learned a whole bunch of new fifty-cent words. All worthwhile and necessary for my work, but I wasn't getting a full insight into the life history of my study species; I didn't know the entire animal. I had to turn to the "gray literature" for that.

What surprised me most was that it was the older stuff, written a century or more before the present, that was the most enlightening. Not only that, but some of these popular authors shed an anecdotal light on studies occurring while I was doing my research. Clinton Hart Merriam, in his 1884 book, *The Mammals of the Adirondack Region*, remarked on the cyclical nature of beechnut production. It just so happened that, as I was reading Merriam's observations, Timothy Fahey, of Cornell University, was "discovering" that phenomenon in his "fine litterfall" data collected a mere hundred yards from where I was doing my work. John Burroughs, possibly the most influential nature writer at the turn of the twentieth century, marveled at the efficiency and forethought that gray squirrels employed while collecting seeds and nuts. Michael Steele, of Wilkes University, has spent much of his career studying the exact same thing.

I'll give Fahey and Steele credit in that they have empirically demonstrated their findings with the latest in statistical methods. And, at least in the case of Steele, he has taken it much further than Burroughs did. But the observation and the wonder of it were there and recorded a century earlier. And, all due respect to the professional accomplishments of Dr. Steele, John Burroughs is definitely a better read.

My favorite nature writers are articulate, have a sense of humor, and are obsessed to the point of abnormality. It helps if they can recount an experience of trying to explain their behavior to an incredulous law officer. Yup, muggers, perverts and naturalists; we are all apt to be found in places and exhibiting behaviors that sane adults avoid.

Uldis Roze, who authored *The North American Porcupine*, is one of my favorites. He has had the incredulous cop experience. He also doesn't think twice about donning a

welder's glove and blindly groping into an occupied porcupine den or, for the sake of science, tracking a porcupine quill on its slow journey completely through his arm. Roze is also proof that a well respected research scientist can be capable of connecting with the lay audience. In that vein, I would be remiss in not giving kudos to Robbin Moran, curator of ferns at the New York Botanical Garden. His *Natural History of Ferns* should be on the bookshelf of anyone interested in what's going on in their own back yard.

My all-time favorite nature book (although, all my time has yet to pass) is *Eastern Chipmunks: Secrets of Their Solitary Lives*, by Lawrence Wishner. Wishner is most proud of having earned a B.S degree in dairy science "without ever (to this day) having milked a cow." He eventually ended up as a biochemist at the University of Maryland. In 1974 he decided to take up photography as a hobby and he focused on "toadstools and wildflowers" in his own neighborhood. When winter arrived and his photo subjects were gone, out of necessity he switched to chipmunks, which happened to be very abundant in his yard at the time.

Six years later (and while still working full time as a biochemist), he had amassed enough data and an understanding of the relevant scientific literature that, had he applied for a research grant, he never would have gotten enough to fund his project. A sense of humor, obsessive to the point of abnormality, and articulate, while remaining accessible by anyone. That's my kind of nature writer.

As for the dry and arcane prose of the scientific journals, I can only lament that much of it is a recent and progressive trend. As evidence, I present a ninety-year-old snippet of creative writing I found in the dusty archives of peer-reviewed literature: *It was the scene of a former small clearing made by lumbermen, now shaded by a second growth of ash, but still having a carpet of verdure underneath. It was a charming little forest nook that contained a little Robin Hood's band of wild mice, including a shy little lemming vole and its plebeian cousin the Pennsylvania vole, another interesting red-backed vole, piquant white-footed mice, and handsome woodland jumping mice.* (Green, M. M. 1925. Notes on some mammals of Montmorency County, Michigan. *Journal of Mammalogy* 6(3):173-178.)

If Green had written his notes today, they would have read more like this: *In the mid-successional study plot, primarily of a Fraxinus overstory and a residual early successional herbaceous stratum, the myomorph assemblage consisted of three microtine species, one cricetid species, and one zapodid species.*

(continued on following page)

Which reminds me of my mnemonic for remembering the family and sub-family for the jumping mice:

*Zapodid-oo da, Zapodidae,
My, oh my, It's a dipodidae!
Look at those jumpers hopping away!
Zapodid-oo da, Dipodidae.*

Now **that's** good nature writing.

I Packed my Grandmother's Trunk
by Page Coulter

They say maples are moving north
not yet ready to retire.
Otherwise they'd move south.

It's whispered they like the
robust wilderness of Canada,
they're sick of urban spread,
of drought, of other wavering climes.
They're planning, it's said, to
pack up their buckets and spouts,
to leave *en masse*.

Some folks
doubt they will. It's all just hype,
they say, ploy to get the vote.

We'll miss their fallen leaves.
It's like a loss whose gap can't be
filled by poking sticks in the ground.

Airy
by Dana Steele

Feel the sky
Draw in and draw out
A powerfully subtle breath

Check out the ravens
Soaring and gliding upon
Huge swells of pure air

Happy creatures, they
Playing in air
Happy creatures, we

Who breath deeply
And ride upon the earth's
Light mountainy crust.

Red Scissors
by Walden (Denney) Morton

Light shortens
starts later and ends sooner.
Earth grasps the last brightness and clings to it.

Forest floor becomes fountains of captured gold.
Ferns, elders, birches stand in yellow confusion
holding tight to the light of life.

Leaves redden, in fall stigmata.
A delicate bleeding sadness, end of Summer.
Black velvet trunks emerge from anonymity

Of green, outlined by shrieks in orange and pink,
which turn liver purple and crimson.
Three months of saved warmth

evaporates into chilled air.
Frosted fields release puffs of vapor, mists
blow into banks of fast moving clouds.

All is edged in gray that silvers in low sun.
The lake smokes like an inland sea.
Guardian swamp maple flares

a stoplight, the first to announce FALL
to the blackgreen pine islands, its
length reflected in the silvery water,

a red scissors that cuts Summer off.
There was warning in August;
a red flag at the end of a branch

which blurred as you sped by
in transit to another piece of Summer.
In early September your arm hairs raised

on the way to the mailbox.
The lost art of sweaters. . . every day the
lighttraps underfoot turn crispy brown.

Ferns and friends prostrate themselves
before the slow measured march into Winter.
Fear of the approaching dark . . .
and the real question, how many more?

Mountains to Rivers

by Ed Parsons

(whose email address, before it was hacked was mtsandrivers)

Living in the mountains one experiences the connection between mountains and rivers all the time. Where there are mountains, rivers flow from them. On a daily basis, this can be taken for granted in the same way we take gravity for granted. Yet the connection between mountains and rivers is also extremely poetic. On an artistic and spiritual level, my first encounter with an important artistic achievement celebrating this connection was in the “Mountains and Rivers Sutra,” written by Dogen, 13th century founder of the Soto School of Zen Buddhism. Though pleasing to read or listen to, this is a difficult text, and can’t really be “understood” in the traditional sense. It is not about mountains and rivers. Rather, the real mountains and rivers themselves are the sutra. They are the living present moment, as we are. Here are a few excerpts.

“The tips of the mountain’s feet walk across the waters, setting them dancing.”

“All the waters are appearing at the foot of the East Mountain, and therefore the mountains mount the clouds and stride through the heavens.”

“When we thoroughly study the mountains, this is the mountain training. Then these mountains and rivers themselves spontaneously become wise ones and sages.”

It’s not every day you go looking for a thread between an old Buddhist text and a piece of modern day legislation. But the Weeks Act helped heal the landscape from unlimited exploitation (though perhaps only temporarily), and honored connectivity between the landscape and humans. The impacts of the Weeks Act are living in the present moment today.

In the summer of 2011, on the Centennial of the Weeks Act, I did a hard bushwhack up the “Ramparts” in Carter Notch. I planned to write about that. After the talk, and more aware of an actual connection between mountains and rivers in the modern world of politics, economics and conservation, I decided to also do a kayak down a quiet section of the Saco River in Maine, and to then write briefly about both experiences. To honor both mountains and rivers. And to hope that in the future, more such important legislation can be passed to combat the likes of global warming, over-population and pollution.

Carter Notch, nestled between Wildcat Mountain and Carter Dome, is home to the historic AMC Carter Notch Hut, and two beautiful mountains ponds. The rugged Ramparts, a ravine on the side of Carter Dome, is unusual. It is on the west slope of the mountains, whereas, most steep ravines are on the east side, plucked out by both the primary glacier, and then valley glaciers. Second, the floor of the ravine is littered with giant boulders. According to a naturalist blog by an Old Hutman (ex-AMC employee) named Alex McPhail, these giant boulders peeled off of the upper slopes of Carter Dome 10,000 years ago or more, in a process called “mass wasting.”

Years earlier, I had climbed the Ramparts the first time. From the hut I had followed a route up the ravine used by the well known mountain writer Guy Waterman, scrambling up the center of the ravine and veering up to the right to a ridge. At that point, Guy had climbed a 20 foot vertical “stack” of granite, and stood on top of it. I did as well. This time I had agreed with my spotter that for safety, after climbing up the Wildcat River Trail to Carter Hut, I would sign in the hut logbook, and then sign in again on my return after the bushwhack.

That morning, I checked the weather. A cool front was moving in quickly. It looked good, though some dark clouds would linger over the mountains all day. Used to the balmy weather of July, I didn’t check the wind speed on top of Mount Washington. I left the hut, walked down the Wildcat River Trail a few feet, and started up the Ramparts. A dark cloud hung over Carter Dome, and a cold wind flowing through Carter Notch hit me as soon as I climbed up on the bare boulders. For the first half of the bushwhack, it was actually more dangerous to stand up on top of a boulder, where the wind could easily knock me out of balance, than it was to scratch inch by inch through the ancient Krummholz of stunted spruce, which filled the space between them. With the combination of boulders and stunted trees, often I was balanced on a scratchy branch with the yawn of a deep cave beneath me. (On my previous hike up the Ramparts, I had spied a big moose skeleton at the bottom of such a cave. Obviously the moose had climbed up to the Ramparts when there was considerable snow cover, and fallen through. I climbed down and took one of its jaw bones. That added a certain primeval quality to the rest of the hike. I left the jaw bone at Carter Hut on the way down).

I passed three separate house-sized boulders that stood as landmarks of progress on the floor of the ravine. Inching forward consisted of awkward moves through stunted trees and sharp rock. The wind died considerably when I started up to the ridge on the right side through a section of much shorter knee-high krummholz. But when I reached the vertical stack up on the ridge, it had picked up again, and I didn’t dare climb onto the flat platform on top of the stack. Soon after that, I entered the uniform forest on the upper slopes of Carter Dome and the bushwhacking became much easier. I had lunch on a tiny perch overlooking the Ramparts and Carter Notch, then continued an easy bushwhack west out to the Carter-Moriah Trail. Descending to the hut, I passed quite a few hikers and felt satisfaction that I had actually bushwhacked the Ramparts one more time. I will probably never do it again, I thought. But that was then, not now.

The next week I headed out to do a solo kayak on a quiet section of the Saco River in Maine. There were a few sections of whitewater on it. But in July they wouldn’t have big standing waves and consequently the danger of getting stuck in a “hole,” like they would in the spring.

I remember years ago when valley local, the late Earl Stetson, canoed the Saco from the source to the sea. He said that big sections in Maine were beautiful and very quiet. I assumed that the whitewater kept a lot of the recreational canoeists away. That had not changed. I saw no one from start to finish on an approximately 10 mile kayak. The whitewater was great, and well within my amateur status. The bends between long flat sections always held a bit of mystery as to what was ahead. An eagle flew up and stayed far in front of me, yet visible-- flying high and looking for fish. Families of Canadian geese waddled on the muddy bank or paddled across the river. At one point, a kingfisher--one of many-- was so upset at my presence, that it kept flying ahead from overhanging branch to branch, and never let up its metallic distress call for what felt like at least fifteen minutes. I took to paddling along the shore under the canopy to stay in the shade. A long section of striated clay on a steep bank, was a fascinating window into the past. Often I passed a concentrated array of freshwater clam shells on shore, where river otters had celebrated a feast. Rounding a shallow bend, I canoed over a big snapping turtle, located about a foot underwater. I paused to look at it. It was old, its eyes clouded with cataracts. I wondered where, in its many years of existence, it took shelter in high-water, and, in fact, where it managed to dig under the mud in the river to spend its dormant winter. At least upstream were found the lush forests of the White Mountains, which released the runoff at a manageable level, allowing such creatures of the river a safer existence.

I took out, and headed back to the mountains.

MEN'S FASHIONS: A W.O.D.C. SPECIAL from your Editor

Even those of you who know me best are probably unaware of my role as a men's fashion arbiter. Yes, despite my ability to bypass even the most basic of female fashion trends, and my personal modesty (not to say reclusiveness), I enjoy wide renown in the increasingly bizarre world of men's modes. My unique situation, with entree into both the arcane and exclusive seasonal fashion shows of NY, Paris and Milan, and the woods and trails of the White Mountains, has allowed me to realize that the styles sported by our very own mountain men --while apparently ignoring the wider world of fashion -- have been the catalysts and exemplars of those very trends that have swept urban males up in their wakes. Yes, those guys in Brooklyn and SoHo are desperately (and expensively) attempting to mimic what the fellows on our trails do effortlessly (and cheaply). Of course, due to deep neuroses and insecurity, these pathetic followers overdo it. Unlike our own guys, comfortable in their own skins and effortlessly masculine, even the experts have described the new urban male as, "less certain of his identity and much more interested in his image". Well, it's not my job to psychoanalyze them. My job is to show the pathbreaking role that WODC members have played in the world of male fashion, and what better medium in which to break this hard-hitting story than the WODC Newsletter?

For a long time, "men's fashions" was an oxymoron. Limited to changes in trivialities like lapel and tie width, or single versus double breasted suits in a narrow range of drab colors, "fashion" signified women's domain, and men were forbidden to take interest in what was happening there, under threat of being a wuss -- or worse. Even as we entered the era of the Metrosexual, when men started to treat clothes shopping as both necessity and delight, stormed cosmetics counters for moisturizers and colognes, traded their eight dollar cuts at Bud's for eighty dollar (plus tip) stylings, and crowded into gyms because their lifestyles could not provide them with the muscle definition they craved, their clothing was still pretty much the same as the clothing men had worn ever since laying down their tunics and chain mail, albeit far more costly and detailed. They might get their shirts tailored by Charvet in Paris, where you could choose from among hundreds of white fabrics, and personalize each detail down to the ability to order two styles of left cuffs -- one a bit looser to accommodate your chunky daytime watch, and another for your slim evening timepiece -- but it was still a man's white shirt. So now we come to the question of the day: What circuitous path did urban men follow to evolve from their primordial drab plumage into today's transgender anorexic youth, complete with long hair, high heels and skirts, and what role did WODC men play in this evolution? (And for those who think I'm exaggerating, please pay attention to current male style publications. Although, if you lack the stomach for that, stop whining and be grateful that I've done it for you.)

Evolution is gradual, so the first step was for the "Metrosexual" dandy (elegantly described by Mark Simpson, who originated the term, as one who "has clearly taken himself as his own love object and pleasure as his sexual preference") to be reborn as an "Urban Outdoorsman" (that name courtesy of the NY Times). One of my favorite articles of that era, lovingly preserved (by me), was entitled "For Rappelling Those Mean Canyons", showing a suitably scruffy young man rappelling down a fire escape (well . . . sort of



rappelling, his feet being planted firmly on the rungs, but the rope allows him to swing out and show his duds). Nothing that he's wearing would look too out of place on a winter hike in the Whites. Except for the price tags which add up to \$3,106 worth of stuff.

What spawned this bizarre new fashion? To answer this question, we need only turn to WODC's senior rappeller, George Hurley, who clearly (do you know any other climber who's been doing it for half a century and is referred to as "iconic" in so many rock climbing blogs?) played a major role in inspiring the concept of rock climber as fashion icon. This photo of George shows him about to climb a rock face, looking pretty spiffy. I interviewed him recently to get some prices on his latest outfit and here's what everything cost: Jacket: free, from EMS to showcase the brand, during George-led climbs. Pants: free, same source. Climbing shoes: free, from Fred Lavigne who found them abandoned on the Sandwich Notch Road and gave them to David Gianpietro who handed them on to George. (He did buy his own underwear and Petzl helmet.) In fact, George has a long history of clothing as outstanding as his ascents; the type of clothing beloved of those British aristocrats who wear the same



battered hat and ancient tweeds for decades and regard new clothing as lacking breeding. Some years back, a climbing companion noted that George sported “a one-piece, first-generation, bright purple gore-tex suit, a harness so old that a carabiner is . . . required to hold it together, and a WWII era canvas pack.” This suggests that George was one of the prime catalysts of the move by those urban outdoorsmen from brief case to backpack, named this spring’s fastest selling male accessory. (I don’t deny that other WODC mountain men played supporting roles in this movement, as well.) No surprise that the guys in the mean canyons of the big city got the product, but not the price. I’d be amazed if George paid more than five bucks for his pack -- although it’s more likely that he found it lying at the base of a pitch. Valentino offers a nylon bright red, pink, blue and yellow pattern camouflage (huh?) backpack for \$2,295; a bit cheaper than Tom Ford’s pebbled leather model for \$2,950, and a lot cheaper than Dior’s \$3,500 model. All of these make Lanvin’s satin and nylon pack look like a bargain at \$1,990.

“Urban Outdoorsman” being insufficiently catchy, it didn’t take long for “Metrosexual” to morph into “Lumbersexual”; a portmanteau word, taking advantage of the unmistakably masculine and outdoorsy image of the lumberjack. Facial hair, flannel shirts, insulated vests, and boots quickly became the accessories of the day in the trendier neighborhoods, necessary for working at the local food coop, hanging out at a bar or making the hazardous trek to the nearest retail boutique. It’s clear that this trend was jump-started by two other powerfully seductive WODC role models -- Fred Lavigne and Dave Bolles -- who show that the lumberjack identity can work for all ages. Not surprisingly, however, our guys projected a male image that urbanites desperately wanted to follow, but couldn’t quite manage. Careful study shows us why. Note the images of the real thing compared to the images of urban wannabes.

Whoa! Is that fellow on the left with the tattoos about to put on a necklace? Maybe we should dump him right away. But how about the guy below him, photoshopped to look like he’s in the woods. With an axe -- clearly purchased for the shot -- that he probably can’t even lift.

There are so many things wrong with this picture that we can only publish a very abbreviated version. First note that Fred and Dave (Dave’s on the next page) are clean shaven. If you’ve ever picked sawdust out of your beard, you’ll know why. Plus those helmets and face masks are great for keeping your eyeballs and brain intact, but they crush that carefully scruffy hairdo and make it difficult to drink that microbrew. And those ripped jeans that guy is wearing? People who cut down trees not only wear intact jeans, but add fiberglass insulated chaps -- just in case that axe or chainsaw slips*.

The fact is that the Lumbersexuals -- poor guys -- never managed to get the real woodsman look. As with all urban trends, they took off from Dave, Fred and others, but quickly turned it into a kind of 19th century costume party with costly accessories. How about a pair of fur-covered boots for \$6,470. (Seriously.) Or a plaid flannel shirt for \$1,219? Or beautifully shiny leather boots, advertised as able to “scale any mountain) for \$2,700. (They *do* seem to have vibram soles.) I must confess, however, that when *Down East* magazine, annoyed that Maine wasn’t credited for Lumbersexuality, suggested that the next trend would be the Lobstersexual, complete with orange PVC bib overalls and insulated gloves (eliminating the need for a sleeve around your takeout latte cup), I lost interest.



**I’ve been following the “distressed” blue jean fashion for years now, and I think we’ve reached its apogee. That is to say, we’ve reached a point where any more distress would cause them to fall apart. Such jeans (many orders of magnitude more costly than brand new ones) now come with a warning to wash and handle with great care, due to their fragility. Here on the trail we throw them out when we feel black flies on what used to be our private parts.*



Of course, it's difficult to lose interest in a trend faster than the trendsetters themselves. If anything is the opposite of Dave's pretty cheap outfit (being Dave, he still has the 20-year old receipts for each item) or George Hurley's ancient climbing harness, it's a metro/lumbersexual, anxiously sniffing out what the next trend will be. Still, I'm proud to say that my lengthy study of men's fashion trends enabled me to be first at the post on this one and I'm happy to share it with my faithful readership (if anyone's still reading). Consider the history. The perfect dandified Metrosexual morphed into the rough, carelessly (if expensively) scruffy Lumbersexual. Given that the Lumbersexual parodied an extreme form of

imaginary masculinity, it was predictable (to the cognoscenti) that the next trend would be a parody of an extreme form of imaginary femininity. And indeed this turned out to be the case. Lace (The NYTimes described a menswear collection with "lace shirts and clipped lace ties, lace tank tops and lace-trimmed trench coats), pastel suits (a recent *New Yorker* article described: "A baby blue suit with pants that were cropped at the mid-calf and richly sequined on the thigh"), men in heels, men with purses, men in *dresses*; men dressed completely in pink. Even those guys who've kept their beards are starting to dye them in pastel shades. Ah, you say, here's one trend that was *not* started by one of our WODC guys. Wrong. Once again a valued member of our club was the catalyst for this newest and most bizarre of masculine fads. Who is this dazzling creature that so many rushed to copy, but then, of course, carried to ridiculous extremes? None other than our faithful cartographer, who has trekked every inch of WODC's trails: Mike Bromberg. Never one to follow the herd, Mike here models one of his colorful outfits. He writes, "I buy a pair of Carhartt white painter's overalls for about \$40 and DyeHappy.com in Wilton, NH dyes them to order for \$30. I have five pairs; the others are blue/green/purple vertical, pink/orange/yellow vertical, green/white splotches, and my Uncle Sam overalls with red and white striped legs and a blue bib with white splotches that represent stars."

I rest my case.



Amazingly, all trends, clothing items and prices described in this article are real. Doubters may inspect my research documents, painstakingly clipped from years of men's style sections. The photo of George Hurley is courtesy of Anne Skidmore, whose climbing photography is spectacular and widely published. This photo and two others of George, which Anne kindly sent, can be viewed as full color enlargements on the WODC website as Supplemental Material. In fact, it's worth viewing this entire article on the website, in order to see Mike in his full rainbow glory. Thanks to Mike for supplying the photo, and to Fred, Dave and George who submitted to intrusive interviews, photo shoots and more. It's all part of being a fashion icon.

The Fall Trails Report

Our 2015 trails season is winding down. While not undertaking a major project this year, we did complete our annual maintenance and relocated a section of the Blueberry Ledge Cutoff. Once again we hired Jed Talbot's Off the Beaten Path crew to assist with annual maintenance. Jed's crew spent 250 hours clearing blowdowns, cleaning drainages, and brushing out trails. We combined that effort with contributions from adopters and 3 volunteer Trail Days. Our May Trail Day volunteers cleaned all the drainages and blowdowns on Dicey's Mill. Our June Trail Day volunteers cleaned drainages on the Cabin Trail, notorious for its number of water bars and drainages alongside the trail. September's volunteers relocated a short section of the Blueberry Ledge Cutoff to bypass a steep eroding section of trail.

The small blowout on the Bennett St Trail below Great Falls continued to deteriorate. After an inspection hike with the USFS we decided to relocate about 400 feet of trail higher up the bank. We plan to do this relocation on one of our 2016 Volunteer Trail Days. Special thanks to Steve Swift for logging over 100 hours of trail work on the Bennett St Trail this season. Bennett St has probably never been brushed out as well as what Steve has done. Overall, volunteers provided 456 hours of trailwork. When combined with the 250 hours from Off the Beaten Path we put in over 700 hours maintaining the WODC trails this season. Trailwork has always been the heart of WODC. That organizational heart is still beating strong after 123 years.

We had a hard freeze last night and a light dusting of snow. The falling leaves and snow will cover the trails and most evidence of trailwork. Next May will bring a new set of challenges and opportunities. Thanks to all who contributed either directly or indirectly this season. I look forward to working together next year to keep that heart beating strong.

Jack Waldron, Trails Chair (and, although he's too modest to say it himself, President)

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	<input type="checkbox"/> Trail Blazer	50.00	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Five Year	250.00	



Editor's Ramble: I've been reading a book called "The Shepherd's Life" by James Rebanks. It's not one of those page-turners whose ads boast that you'll stay up all night to finish it. Actually, I haven't seen a single ad for this book. I read it because of the reviews. It's the autobiography of a 41 year old shepherd in England's Lake District; the first son of the first son of a shepherding family that goes back unrecorded centuries in that place. JR was a purposely poor student in an unrewarding and brutish secondary school, who couldn't wait to quit school and farm alongside his father and grandfather. The book-loving farm girl he met and eventually married was the catalyst that got him to Oxford in his twenties, made him an advisor to UNESCO on sustainable farming, and generated this book. (His Twitter feed is @herdyshepherd1.) But he's still a farmer, and his heart is so deeply in his land and his flock that anything else (even Oxford) is literally a painful distraction. There are times, reading his descriptions of his landscape and his sheep (he knows each one), that you feel almost embarrassed at being allowed into the intimacy of such passion. Each spring his herd leaves fenced lowland pasture to walk up to the fells, where they fatten themselves without any farmed input. They are sent up unescorted by humans; led by the older ewes who know the way and are "hefted" or bonded to their piece of these commons, just as their owner is hefted to his landscape. The Lake District is the most mountainous part of England and, given leisure and railways, it was predictable that a guide to fell walking would emerge. So, between 1955 and 1966, a seven volume (there are 214 fells) Pictorial Guide appeared, written and illustrated by A. Wainwright. Peak bagging in England takes the form of "doing the Wainwrights". When JR climbs a fell with southern cousins, who've brought their Wainwright (the first time he's read one), he writes, "It struck me powerfully that there was scarcely a trace of any of the things we cared about in what Wainwright had written. . . It is a curious thing to slowly discover that your landscape is beloved of other people. There are never any tourists here when it is raining sideways or snowing in winter so it is tempting to see it as a fair weather love. Our relationship with the landscape is about being there through it all. . . Most unsettling of all to me was the discovery that people who thought about this place in this way outnumbered us by many hundreds to one." Later, he writes, "The summer after my grandfather died I climbed to the woods high above where we lived and looked down over the Eden Valley. A land where the hay was baled and stacked in countless meadows and cattle and sheep grazed in thousands of fields. I just sat silently . . . with my back to a tree. An old greyish hare hopped up the bank, stopped at my dusty boots and took a long slow look at me, then headed off on his way to wherever. Summer-wild cattle grazed past the little wood, kicking up insects in the golden haze of dusk, oblivious to my presence. As I lay against that smooth old beech tree the world rolled past me like a dream. A kestrel circled high above the woods, ignoring its ever-hungry offspring mewling from the branches of another beech tree further along from mine. And the whole land was bathed in a warm peach-red August glow." This is nature writing. And whatever deathless prose issues from the pens of those who've done the Wainwrights (or speed-bagged the 4,000 footers), it won't be nature writing. Because nature writing is always specific and always steeped in place by someone who loves it. Anything else is travel writing, and I'd be willing to bet that travel writing outnumbers nature writing by many hundreds to one. **Susan Goldhor**



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