

# I SHOULD BE DOING SOMETHING ELSE RIGHT NOW: ALAN WARBURTON

## COUNTRY DIARY

As part of *Sleep Mode*

So, in March I moved my desk from my studio to my tiny home, and after a few difficult weeks mourning the loss of my pre-Covid schedule, I decided to make a film. At first it was just to take my mind off things, but I got sucked into the production and it actually really helped me focus while the world was going crazy. The film was set in a TV studio, and I got totally immersed in making it, but after 6 or 8 weeks of modelling and lighting this virtual space, I was getting pretty itchy to escape. I wanted to get out of the computer, out of the flat and into the country. So this is why I've made *Country Diary*, a film about nature made using a computer - because it's still hard to get out of London without a car. It's also helped me crystallise some of the thoughts I've been having about virtual spaces and how we use them as escapes, especially in times like these.

So my main thought is actually how absurd it is to create replicas of natural spaces. And that's something that's popping up a lot in the art world at the moment - especially in VR - and it's often framed as being somehow about drawing attention to the politics of climate change by presenting a virtual reality version of a natural habitat. And this is an appealing artistic strategy for the times we're in, because it kills two birds with one stone - we get to talk about climate change while also feeding the appetite for content on screens and exciting new technology. But, obviously, it's not hard to see the inherent contradictions in the strategy. And the most obvious, sort of ethical problem is that computation has a carbon footprint - a huge one too. So there's a kind of hypocrisy in using tech to construct virtual worlds full of lush nature. That said, as we've seen through lockdown, the air cleared in our cities and yet a global standstill still didn't put a dent in omissions. So it's probably not the fault of a few hundred artists working with VR. The real absurdity is deeper, more structural problem endemic to most modern technology, which is sold to us in the familiar language of tech utopianism. For example, some new device or game or immersive VR experience is supposed to allow you to get closer to something, feel more of something, it's convenient, you can immerse yourself, you don't need to travel you can stay in the comfort of your own home and go anywhere. So, in enforced lockdown we should all have been jumping into VR worlds, right? But did we? What I wanted personally was the opposite, especially after making my TV studio film: I wanted to be immersed in real nature.

Like a lot of people in cities, without gardens, I had a real hunger to be out in nature. So, the thoughts I was having really made me see how weird it was to build virtual worlds at the expense of real experience. It's kind of obvious at the moment that we need to be preserving the natural habitats we have, planting new ones, not mining the environment for the minerals needed to speed up all of digital devices and flesh out our virtual worlds. So the contradictions run deep between environmentalism and virtual worldbuilding.

And that brings us back this project I've made for Somerset House's Sleep Mode exhibition. I wanted to explore and highlight the contradictions and absurdities I've just been talking about, by really exposing the mechanics of visually building this kind of virtual nature, because it's not a one-click thing, the computational effort is quite significant, especially if your computer is a few years old like mine. So, Country Diary shows the chugging pixellated realisation of this simulated world, heavy with polygons.

Getting hold of 3D models to populate a scene like this is increasingly easy. One of the most interesting trends – especially in games - has been the use of scans of real-life natural specimens, especially those provided by a company called Quixel, who now have their library of natural objects embedded in the Unreal games engine. Computers can heave this data now, it's been optimised, tricks are available to load very detailed models into a scene without crashing the computer. And because of this we get images and aesthetics that take advantage of that - there's a lot of games that are set in overgrown post-human landscapes, full of ruins and creeping vines and wildness. And even within that there's a certain taxonomy of nature that's more prevalent, so for example, it's easier to 3D scan a tree stump or a rock than to scan leaves, so the former ends up looking more real than the latter. The vegetation looks real but the water less so, and that's because you can't scan water! So I think what I'm getting at here is that form and aesthetics of virtual worlds are always led by industry, by hardware. Aesthetics becomes this second order thing.

There's another program that I've used called Substance Designer which is a program that lets users design intelligent textures that randomly generate photorealistic surfaces and I've heard anecdotally from friends who teach computer graphics and those who use it in industry that there's been this weird upsurge in students and artists paying a lot of attention to nature. They are like an army of 19th century naturalists like John Ruskin or Henry David Thoreau. They perform this close observation of nature, but the funny thing is that the value of it is not for the spirit or the soul, scientific enquiry or the public benefit of humanity in any sense... it's for entertainment. It's for games and films that can be populated

with more immersive content. It's in the service of photorealism, and of the construction of another world, a proxy world that runs parallel to our own and that's created for entertainment and bound on every side by order, optimisation, commercial hardware and software.

But maybe instead of digital naturalists they are more like the colonial collectors of the 1800s capturing and imprisoning samples forever. It's like Pokémon meets startup culture meets Victorian specimen hunters. Or maybe it's like old fashioned landscape design, maybe this new digital nature is an equivalent to someone like Capability Brown, imposing a kind of cinematic aesthetic onto nature, where every view is overwrought with design. Or maybe it's a kind of digital Darwinism where gradually through digitisation a new taxonomy of natural resources is being created, ironically burning natural resources ever more intensely the closer we get to full 360 photorealism.

Anyway. All that is why it's strange to be here, at home, at midsummer in 2020, simulating a summer's day in software that'll stream to your devices wirelessly for entertainment. This is my Country Diary.

## COUNTRY DIARY

Darling buds of February

### FEBRUARY 1920

It is many years since vegetation was so advanced at this season as it is this year. A wail comes to me from a Herefordshire garden where the flower-buds are appearing on the roses. Crocuses are fully out and the elms are reddening with myriads of flowers. I amused myself this week by making a doll's garden for a sick friend, and in the moss-filled bowl there were *Iris reticulata*, the proud purple queen over all; *Iris danfordiae*, golden and green; *Cyclamen coum*, crimson; a white crocus, violets, arabis, snowdrop, winter aconite, periwinkle, polyanthus, primrose, Siberian squill, a spray of *Lithospermum* with gentian-blue flower, and one or two tufts of sweetbriar and leaves of balm and bergamot. If larger flowers had been permissible, there would have been a fine show of hellebores.

Helena Swanwick

Clashing colours

### MAY 1921

Among the reconcilers of warring colours I find the meadow rues most satisfactory. *Thalictrum dipterocarpum*, one of the loveliest of fairies, I have found difficult, but the meadow rue with the columbine leaf (*T. aquilegifolium*) is the easiest pretty thing, and lasts a long time in beauty. Its habit is charming, and its inflorescence creamy or

pink or purple, blends well with all sorts of sharper much taller, colours and harmonises them. T. glaucum, which is very has a leaf almost as blue-green as the carnation, and when the fluff maize-coloured flowers are out it makes a good background for purple salvia or Belladonna larkspur.

Helena Swanwick

### **Unromantic harvest**

#### **SEPTEMBER 1927**

They are up in the apple trees harvesting. A man turns on the ladder, among the boughs, releasing with a magnificent gesture a torrent of greens and crimsons. Here's the tree of Cornish Gillyflowers, pale yellow, almost white. And here's a washing basket brimful of Bloody Warriors, so deeply crimson that even the inside of the bitten one is crimson-dyed. Why is it that the pears' names are mostly French and the apples' names mostly English? Doyenne du Comice, Beurre d'Amande, Marguerite Marillat, Marie Louise - I mustn't forget plain English Williams. But all England is storied in the apple names: Peasgood Nonesuch, Ribston Pippin, Quarrendon, Worcester Pearmain, even in the quite modern ones such as William Crump - good, plain English Crump.

But I wish our Northerners made more of a song about harvesting apples. Those Southerners, heaping up oranges and lemons in the groves of the Golden Horn of Palermo, or the family all turned out for the olive-gathering in Tuscany - Ettore, Dario, Marietta, all the lot of them singing; they give the miracle a more cheery welcome than the gardener and his boy can contrive with us.

### **Pass the onion**

#### **NOVEMBER 1934**

The belief that an onion can prevent the spread of infectious or contagious disease is firmly held still in rural Cheshire. An old country woman of my acquaintance, who died recently, was accustomed to peel an onion and place it on the mantel shelf whenever the epidemic of measles, scarlet fever or the like. She told me of its efficiency during a serious smallpox epidemic years ago. An onion was hung over the door of the post office in Stockton Heath, and though people were going in and out every day, nobody in the house caught the disease. After the epidemic had died out the onion was taken down, and it was all pitted with marks; as they said: "All the smallpox had flown straight into the onion."

Arnold Boyd

### **Mother's ruin**

#### **AUGUST 1944**

I went for a walk down a country lane with a small evacuee from Middlesex, who, like most children, took a great interest in wild flowers. We picked a bunch of between twenty and thirty different kinds - meadowsweet, bee-nettle, skullcap, enchanter's night shade, yellow loosestrife and purple loosestrife, and other common flowers - but she refused to pick a bit of angelica, saying that it would break her mother's heart. Her mother explained later that she herself had been taught this odd belief in her childhood. Evidently a superstition of this kind is

widely held in England, for among the country people in this part of Cheshire 'kexes' (or all the white umbelliferous flowers such as cow-parsley, chervil, hemlock, and angelica) are called 'mother-die', and some at least of the children dare not pick them for fear of killing their mothers.

Arnold Boyd

### **Botanical scratches**

#### **MARCH 1965**

An interest in wild plants and where they grow is not always a comfortable thing to have. Some of the wilder, rare plants come too early in the year, often in bitter weather, and survive in awkward places as one might expect in these days of all-invading traffic. Some even need, at times, to be cared for to one's own discomfort, as my stone-roughened hands and bramble-torn legs testify at present. These scars were the consequence of looking after two rare hellebores (relatives of the Christmas rose) which grow on opposite sides of a rocky limestone valley on the fringe of this district. One, the stinking hellebore, which I prefer to call setterwort, is a magnificent, branching, evergreen plant with fringed leaves and down-turned, pale green flowers edged with purple. It lives in an ash copse in a treacherous fall of limestone criss-crossed with militant brambles.

Early gales had battered the plants so it seemed sensible, with the flowers opening, to prop them up for the early bees to visit so that seed could be set. The other side of the valley is gentler and here the other hellebore - green hellebore called felon grass in the north - thrives in the shelter of a wall. Today, however, I found much of the wall fallen and had to remove piles of rocks before the brilliant green, almost leafless flowers could be found. This same wall which shelters the hellebore, shelters armies of snails which eat its seeds and spread them about, too, with the slime of their bodies - a comfortable and self-contained community.

Enid Wilson

### **The power of plants**

#### **APRIL 1969**

A blister has appeared in the footpath, and soon at this point a few frail spikes of an errant lily-of-the-valley will crack and lift a hand sized fragment of two-inch-thick tarmac. The greyish-green rosette of white bryony at the bottom of the hedge is just showing its first ascending shoots, and within a short time these will be progressing upwards at the rate of six inches a day. Above the bryony, a pencil thick shoot of sycamore, cut back only a few minutes ago, is already producing a steady drip of leaking sap. But, impressive as these annual releases of pent-up energy are, one can at least (however mysterious the actual mechanics involved) trace the power to its latent source - the stored-up reserves of food from last year's chemical activities; the few shoots of bryony, for example, arise from a hidden tap root as large as a flower-show parsnip. But, as a demonstrator of truly phenomenal root pressure, a weed still in the seedling stage and only so far a few inches high, far excels the established plants in comparative power. This is goosegrass (cleavers or 'sweethearts'), which, since it is an annual, can have no other food reserves than those contained in the seed. Yet if, as happened yesterday, one hoes on dry ground (particularly on pale chalky soil such as mine), the point of severance of each thread like stem of goose grass, before the day is out, becomes the centre of a dark, damp patch as large as a saucer.

### **Snakes in the grass**

## **MAY 1991**

To come across a new species of plant is always a pleasure, but to come across a meadow holding up to 300,000 of them is truly exciting, especially when it is a flower like the snake's-head fritillary. Its long, drooping, almost box-shaped bloom of light and dark purple chequering is one of the most spectacular in early spring and has attracted human attention for centuries. The range of vernacular names, such as bloody warrior, widow wail, leopard's lily, toad's head, white pheasant's lily, weeping widow, and drooping bells of Sodom, is indicative of an almost animistic response to this curious flower. Bloody warrior, for instance, derived from a belief that it grew from drops of blood spilt by invading Danes. Like almost all plant species in southern Britain, *Fritillaria meleagris* has declined substantially in the last century. The Framsdon colony, confined to a single riverside meadow of only 2.5 hectares, just east of Stowmarket, is now the largest in Suffolk. The ploughing, drainage and general 'improvement' of damp grass lands have destroyed 13 of an historical 17 fritillary sites in the county. Fortunately, three of the remaining four are now safely in the hands of the Suffolk Wildlife Trust.

### **From ooze to river**

## **JULY 1997**

From afar, the Wrekin and its surrounding wooded hills have all but vanished under a shifting, smoky cape of cloud. Inside, the woods are dank and gloriously sodden. The air is spicy with the sharp green scent of bracken, the sticky sweetness of honeysuckle drapes and biden stinkhorn. Within this humid wood-mist, the fungi are stirring early from damp loam and rotten logs. Out in the open, in the regenerating quarry valley in Maddocks Hill, is a spectacular display of common spotted orchids. An ooze from the quarry floor determines a new path, joining run-off from woods and lanes to drain into a little wet woodland. Beneath a canopy of alders these trickles merge into a narrow stream, which leads to one of those uniquely secretive places: an old yew tree twists out of the stream bed surrounded by a muddy pool with tussock sedge. From this swamp, the stream passes under the road to plunge into the narrow gorge of the Forest Glen. Water from the north end of the Wrekin flows north through the Forest Glenn, into the old reservoir, out through Cluddley and along the west side of Wellington, as the Beanhill Brook, before entering the River Tern in the Weald Moors and eventually the Severn at Atcham. Here in the woods of Hazel Hurst, at the foot of the Wrekin, the recent rains begin this journey with a strange and rare song. This is the wild, indecipherable song of nameless streams, where few paths cross but none follow. A song which bubbles and pours over stones, roots and mossy logs; deep and throaty in its narrow trough; thick and leafy under a green shade. A rare song because summer rains have in recent years been ephemeral, but this year's are persistent, strident, scouring the stream beds in a cleansing tide. This is the cold, clear life-blood the ancients may have drunk here from a skull.

Paul Evans

### **A secret sex life**

## **MARCH 1999**

The wood anemones in Hollingside Wood at Durham are poised to spread their flower petals at the first hint of warm sunlight. The bluebell leaves have speared through the decaying leaf litter and their flower buds are just visible. But for one group of plants here - the ferns the annual race to reproduce is over already. Ferns are plants with a secret sex life, accomplished without the help of flowers, that passes unnoticed unless you know where and

when to look. Late last summer tens of thousands of tiny spore cases on the underside of fern fronds burst and catapulted out dust-like spores that blew across the woodland floor. By late autumn they had germinated into a microscopic thread of green cells, broadening as the weeks passed into heart-shaped membrane – a prothallus - green, rootless and fragile, just one cell thick and not much bigger than a baby's finger nail. On the top, egg cells formed in tiny, long-necked flasks called archegonia. Underneath the male cells - antherozoids – multiplied, packed inside minute barrel-shaped containers.

On a mild, wet day in late autumn or early winter (all this can only happen in wet surroundings - even a brief drought is fatal) the containers burst, unleashing swarms of swimming male antherozoids that gyrated in the surface film of water, racing towards the egg cells along an attractive gradient of organic acids oozing from the necks of the archegonia. It all happened in the depths of winter, on a scale so small that only a powerful microscope would have made it visible, but I found the telltale evidence on the soggy, rotten trunk of a fallen elm. There were the clusters of new fern plants - fronds just a few centimetres tall - sprouting from withering prothalli where the antherozoids had made their short, frantic journey.

Phil Gates