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KENNETH
ALLSOP

INTRODUCTION

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IT WAS IN 1970 that Kenneth Allsop and his family moved into Milton Mill in the Dorset village of West Milton – the same year that I joined *The Sunday Times*. I was living in Powerstock at the time, but we did not meet until the following year. Knowing of his keen interest in birds, I phoned to tell him I had seen a hen harrier on Powerstock Common, and was immediately invited to tea at the Mill. I did not know then that he would become my mentor and my guru.

Born in Yorkshire in 1920, Kenneth Allsop was destined to become one of the most versatile journalists of his day. He started as a cub reporter on the *Slough Observer* in 1938, but his lively mind and flair for words were quick to bring recognition. Over the next three decades he was published in *Picture Post*, *The Sunday Times*, *Daily Mail*, *Evening Standard*, *Spectator* and *New Statesman* as well as the now-defunct *Nova*, *Listener* and *Punch* magazines.

But it was the face and the voice rather than the omnipresent byline that made Kenneth Allsop a household name when he joined *Tonight*, the BBC's flagship current affairs programme in 1960, and went on to become one of Britain's most widely recognised TV celebrities as a commentator, newsreader and acerbic interviewer.

Although best known through his on-screen fame he always regarded himself first and foremost as a writer firmly anchored in the print journalism of Fleet Street. He detested the term 'Television Personality' not only because it overshadowed his reputation as one of Fleet Street's finest but because it also obscured his reputation as an author and his abiding passion for the natural world.

Inspired by the work of nature writers such as Hudson, Jefferies and Henry Williamson above all others, he was awarded the 1950 John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize for his novel, *Adventure Lit Their Star*; but was sidetracked by the allure of Fleet Street and its greater financial rewards. In fact, so eager was he to succeed as a journalist that he passed up the opportunity of going to university.

He deeply regretted missing university in later life but his disappointment was alleviated when he won a Research Fellowship to Oxford in 1968, and lifted even more so when he became Rector of Edinburgh University the following year.

Arriving at the Mill to meet the great man on that day back in 1971 was like breaking a dream. I realised straight away that I had been there before, having been invited to an all-night party back in the 1960s. Friends had driven me there from Bridport and then, having spent the night at this idyllic Georgian mill house, I left next morning none the wiser as to its location deep in the holloways of west Dorset, until that first meeting.

I found him to be the best of company, exuding an aura of warmth that was part of his extraordinary charisma. ‘Like standing in front of an open fire’ is how *The Sunday Times* columnist Alan Brien once described it. ‘A feeling that spread through the room the moment he came in.’

Although I was somewhat in awe of this legendary figure we struck up an immediate friendship based on our shared interests in journalism, natural history and the burgeoning environmental movement that was just beginning to flex its muscles, and the following year to my great delight we also became colleagues when he joined me at *The Sunday Times* under the editorship of the inspirational Harold Evans.

Meanwhile, with Betty, his wife, and their three children – Tristan, Fabian and Amanda – he continued to carve out his rural dream among the green hills of Wessex, surrounded by dogs, white doves, peacocks, a donkey and a leat full of trout. There were times when he referred to his beloved Dorset hideaway as The Old Millstone, The Old Treadmill and even The Dark Satanic Mill. But whenever I met him there to talk about

birds or listen to his jazz records he appeared to be utterly content.

Inevitably, whenever I called I would find him seated at his typewriter – no computers in those days – in a study lined with books from floor to ceiling. He used to say that he envied my ‘untrammelled existence’ as a fledgling travel writer. For him the pressures of work were enormous and yet he was always ready to break away to walk on Eggardon Hill or look for a sparrowhawk’s nest in the Mangerton valley.

Despite his fame as a television personality it was not widely known that he had an artificial leg – the result of a wartime accident during his time in the RAF – but despite the considerable pain it gave him it never prevented him from tramping for hours around the countryside.

At other times, dressed in a beaten-up leather flying jacket and spotted neckerchief, he loved to drive around the Dorset lanes in his flashy E-type Jaguar sports car, revealing another side to this multi-faceted man as a style-conscious dresser, in love with the buzz of the contemporary London scene and fascinated by everything about the USA – from Western movies to mafia mobsters and the hoboes he wrote about in *The Bootleggers* and *Hard Travellin’*.

No matter what his subject he showed himself to be a master of the English language. He loved its richness and vitality, the subtle flavours of its words, the rhythms and nuances so pleasing to the ear. His own distinctive style was often spiced with up-to-the-minute street talk. Even when describing some lyrical moment in the west Dorset countryside he could not resist lacing a sentence or two with slang if it captured the image he was trying to project. Thus a stoat was referred to as rippling over his shoes ‘like a yellow shammy-leather . . . an animal in crackerjack trim, like Nureyev in creamy body-stocking.’

Often he liked to write in the small hours. ‘Writing is a peculiar trade,’ he said, ‘rather melancholy and intensely solitary,’ and *In the Country* contains a passage that describes it – and Allsop himself – to perfection. ‘At one, two, three in the morning there is a great belljar of silence upon the house and the country around. The lamp’s pool of light is the circumference of your life, the theatre-in-the-round of your imagination.’

He then goes on to quote Ted Hughes' poem, *The Thought Fox*, in which the fox prowling outside in the snow becomes as one with his creative processes, treading tentatively across the white quarto.

His virtuosity as a wordsmith was always an inspiration. Critics accused him of going over the top; but I loved the freshness of his metaphors and the way his copy fizzed with adjectives. Inspirational, too, was his environmental crusading. No man fought more fiercely or spoke more eloquently for the causes he believed in so deeply. 'Money speaks, beauty is voiceless,' he wrote despairingly. His detractors accused him of being trendy; yet he was fighting to preserve the graces of Britain long before words like ecology and conservation had become common currency.

One of his last pieces for *The Sunday Times*, written shortly before his death, was an impassioned plea on behalf of the peregrine falcon, a bird he admired above all others and one whose survival was being threatened by agricultural pesticides. 'We poison them, we shoot them, we steal their eggs and young. It is so wrong. We are the predators and the killers, not those peregrines. For they and the few of their kind which survive live exalted lives, true to their nature, and we degrade and damage their world which is so beautiful and complex and balanced.'

Among the local causes he espoused was a successful battle to prevent The Forestry Commission from clear-felling Powerstock Common, which is now one of Dorset's finest nature reserves; but parochial was not a word you could use to describe Kenneth Allsop. Some viewed him as a brash outsider; and it was true that he liked loud parties, striped shirts, smart restaurants and the cut and thrust of London chatter. Yet he was hugely proud of belonging to west Dorset and it is here among the buttercup meadows and sunken lanes beneath the great limestone prow of Eggardon that he was happiest, as readers of *In the Country* will discover. First published in 1972, it began life as a weekly countryside column in the *Daily Mail* and became his most successful book.

To the very end of his life he was the consummate journalist; I remember a photograph of him, cigarette in hand, crouched over his typewriter. All it needed was the green eyeshade to summon up the ghosts of his glory

years in Fleet Street, and I suspect it revealed a fundamental truth about him, that writing was a kind of drug. It was what kept him going, and continuing to write – even as he lay in bed on a misty day in May 1973, penning a letter to Betty, his wife, having already taken the overdose that would kill him, apologising for what he had done and describing the birdsong outside his window until the pen slid off the page.

The funeral, like Allsop himself, was larger than life, and Powerstock had never seen anything like it. The church was filled to overflowing as reporters and media celebrities jostled for pews with villagers and family mourners. Julian Bream hushed the congregation with the bittersweet notes of his guitar. Henry Williamson stood in the pulpit, eyes blazing like an Old Testament prophet as he read out a valedictory poem in his frail old man's voice; and afterwards, outside in the churchyard beneath a tall weeping ash, the Bishop of Salisbury conducted the service of committal, his robes flapping wildly in the wind as friends and strangers alike stood with heads bowed in homage to the gifted, kind and tortured spirit who had burst into our lives like a comet and lit up the sky before he fell to earth.

It was good to see Henry Williamson at the funeral. The young Allsop was profoundly influenced by Williamson's nature writing – especially by *Tarka the Otter* – to the point where he had travelled down to Devon to seek him out. The friendship flourished, even though Williamson's flirtation with fascism was anathema to him; and somehow, along with the publication of *In the Country*, it seemed to place Allsop where he truly belongs: in that pantheon of writers who have strived to repair mankind's broken covenant with the natural world.

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