



INTRODUCTION

Horatio Clare

I ASKED A FAMOUS AUTHOR what she desired, now that she had had a worldwide best-seller.

‘Oh, I just want to write one good book,’ she said. ‘My ambition is to be a decent English novelist.’

A couple of years later she produced *On Beauty*, and few would deny her success – Zadie Smith is a decent English novelist, by any standard. I asked another superstar, the French novelist Anna Gavalda (even more successful there, and in many other countries, than Smith is here) what she aimed for.

‘But it’s obvious,’ she said. ‘We must inform ourselves, then we try to write a masterpiece. That is the job, no?’

By either of these measures, then, Jocelyn Brooke was a success. And yet: who remembers Brooke now? Who read him then? Brooke’s springboard and central subject – his own life – does not automatically suggest an oeuvre made for immortality. He did not take to education, running away twice before he was withdrawn: ‘My public school career lasted a fortnight, which may, for all I know, constitute a record.’

After a happier stint at Bedales he went to university where he self-published *Six Poems*. ‘When I got to Oxford I was totally unable to construe a simple bit of Latin prose, and consequently distinguished myself by failing in the Law Prelim at the end of my first year.’ Brooke is sent down. He writes but publishes nothing.

The war sees him working in a venereal disease unit of the Medical Corps. Demobbed, he produces another volume of poetry and joins his father's business, which allows him to try his hand at failing as a wine merchant. Having more or less botched civilian life, he re-enlists in the army – to general mystification.

'Say, are you the bloke that signed on again?'

'Yes, that's me.'

'Cor, stone a crow. What did you do it for – was the police after you?'

'No – at least I don't think they were.'

'Come on Andy, get weaving.'

'It's half twelve,' said Andy, who had lit a fag and picked up the *Mirror*.

'So it is and all – another morning gone,' said the corporal. 'Sixty-six and a half days more before my demob – and by Christ,' he added, with a grin at me, 'they won't get me back.'

And then, in 1948, The Bodley Head publishes Brooke's little masterpiece, a queer species of autobiography called *The Military Orchid*. The critics are delighted by it; a discerning section of the public enjoy it; Brooke is able to buy himself out of the army; the BBC give him a job as a talks producer – one might think his orchid had flowered. But no: unhappy in London and the job, Brooke lasts four months, resigns and moves to Ivy Cottage, Bishopsbourne, where he lives with Ninnie, the strict Baptist nanny who raised him. From now on, he writes. Criticism, reviews, a torrent of books pour from his pen: non-fiction (botany); novels (many are variations of autobiography, with twists); autobiography (two more volumes complete *The Orchid Trilogy*: a mosaic of truth, fiction and fictionalisation); surrealist pastiche (imagine his publisher's reaction on being handed *The Crisis in Bulgaria, or, Ibsen to the Rescue!* in 1956) and at least one true novel, *The Image of a Drawn Sword*.

Anthony Powell – who reviewed the second volume of the *Orchid Trilogy* for *The Times Literary Supplement* – believed Jocelyn Brooke ‘one of the notable writers to have surfaced after the war’. *The Image of a Drawn Sword*, Powell said, ‘is not in its way, inferior to Kafka’, and he noted that despite its haunting, dystopic qualities Brooke had read no Kafka when he wrote it. John Betjeman complimented Brooke on being ‘as subtle as the devil’. Elizabeth Bowen said ‘His writing is imaginatively unique . . . a great writer’. But if Brooke dies a *succès d’estime* he also leaves the stage without due recognition, unburdened by fortune or glory. Penguin republish *The Orchid Trilogy* in 1981, copies of which survive still in the shelves of the seriously bibliophilic, but that, until now, was that.

The forgotten, the overlooked, the bypassed writer is a favourite subject with writers; theirs is a melancholy fate which haunts many of us in our darker hours and awaits pretty well all in the end. We are drawn to such figures because they are mournfully comforting reflections of the cold vagaries of fortune, the hot, short tastes of fame and the idiosyncratic favours of culture. But the nearly-man or woman of letters is a hackneyed figure, not nearly as interesting as its coefficient – the writer who never achieves the magnified life of a Gavalda or a Smith, whose works never thunder into posthumous fashion, but who, nevertheless, refuses to die. It takes something special to be numbered among these particular creatures, to smoulder on despite a fuse which never quite flared. Your work will have to speak powerfully and memorably to the few who encounter it. At least one or two of your books, which will probably be strange fish, even by the standards of books, will have to be very good indeed. Welcome, then, to the quietly dazzling talent of Jocelyn Brooke.

I was more interested, at that time, in flowers than in people. Indeed, except in particular cases, I still am. Yet the social flora of the Sandgate

Undercliff, where we lived, was perhaps worthy of study. I devoted to it approximately the same amount of attention as I did to bird life – a subject which I found less interesting than flowers or butterflies, but not without a certain attraction.

It was seldom, in the social milieu frequented by my family, that I encountered anything so exotic and orchidaceous as Miss Trumpett.

Brooke is vastly easy to like and not simply because his prose is so elegant, and every paragraph has a flower, a twist or a sweet one-liner in its tail. He has beguiling passions for Proust, wine, Italy, words, Dover, soldiers, French, music, and first equal above all, orchids and fireworks. In *A Mine of Serpents*, his second volume of autobiography, which takes its name from a firework, he meets a stranger on a train:

This shared mania, this *amour qui n'ose pas dire son nom*, was none other than a shared passion for . . . fireworks. We were, both of us, chronic pyrotechnomaniacs. We loved fireworks to the point of imbecility – fireworks of all kinds, from Brock's Benefit at the Crystal Palace to the humble half-crown's worth in the back garden. It is not a common vice among adult males; its Freudian interpretation may well be sinister . . .'

The playful innuendo is not, I think, Brooke sending lightly coded signals, so much as signalling as explicitly as he decently can, given the absurd laws and oppressions of his time: not far below the surface of the *Trilogy* is a story of Brooke's heart-life, all the more moving because it cannot be recounted aloud. His account of Miss Trumpett concludes with a delightfully subtle-unsubtle confession: 'Obscurely, perhaps, I felt that I wasn't cut out for such as Miss Trumpett; her world was too alien, too romantically remote.'

Brooke's dislikes are equally entertaining. He has such an appalled dread of bores that he becomes fascinated by one called Basil, whom Brooke adopts – meeting Basil, studying Basil, sponging off Basil and drinking a great deal with Basil in a committed attempt to

assess the limits of Basil's capacity to bore. This is a respectable sort of activity for Futilitarians: Brooke is an adamant and 'impenitent' Futilitarian. He explains that a Man of the Twenties (like T.S. Eliot's Prufrock) lived in a kind of timeless St Martin's Summer, in an epoch isolated by the First World War, the Boom and the Slump, 'in which the past was forgotten, and the future, as far as possible, ignored'. Brooke offers no definition of Futilitarianism, presumably on the grounds that explaining to any who might require explanation would be futile, but he says the Twenties failed to prepare its adherents for 'the drab and earnest salvationism' of the Thirties. The 'extraordinary decade', Brooke says, renders many of its young men incurably nostalgic and imbues them with only one ethical slogan – Intellectual Honesty. So Brooke is not being misanthropic when he says he is more interested in flowers than people; he is not even slighting people, really – it just happens that he loves, adores and worships flowers. Not all flowers, though. 'Whole tracts of the subject leave me cold: certain families or genera frankly bore me, and always will – the Chenopodiaceae, for example, or those tedious *Hieracii*, or the chickweeds.'

Apart from his impeccable rhythms, diction and timing, which would make his work a joy to read aloud, another of the qualities which make Jocelyn Brooke a superb and superbly pleasurable writer is his frank dismissal of great swathes of creation and existence, a discernment which allows him to better concentrate on the bits that do appeal.

Against the hot blue sky, the terraced knoll loomed enormous, its summit lost in a shimmering heat-haze. The grassy flanks seemed to radiate a reflected heat, enfolding us in a weighted, thyme-scented silence, enhanced rather than disturbed by the monotone of a thousand insects. On the banks at the hill's foot, the cropped turf was gemmed with the small downland flowers, many of which I had never seen

before: rockrose, milkwort, centaury. In that moment, I encountered a new Love – the chalkdown flora: a Love to which I have always remained faithful. Most botanists have their ecological preferences; and though I have had brief spells of infidelity with peat bogs, with sand dunes or even with wealden clay, the downs remain my Cynara, and I still return to them with some of the pristine delight of that first visit to The Hills.

Graham Greene may have been correct in his assertion that a writer requires a splinter of ice in his heart, but a good one also needs passionate fire, the passion of Brooke's capitalised Love.

A miniature chalkpit dazzled our eyes a little way up the hill. Running ahead, I paused near the edge of it: a plant had caught my eye, a flower with pink petals on which a bee seemed to be resting. Suddenly I realised that this was the goal of our pilgrimage; like Langhorne,

I sought the living bee to find
And found the picture of a bee.

Yes, there was no doubt of it: a single plant, standing stiff and aloof, bearing proudly aloft its extraordinary insect-flowers, like archaic jewels rifled from some tomb; I had found the bee orchid.

This is great writing and great nature writing because it flows from the thing itself – life lived; the intensity of conscious existence in the world. It is not a forced and adjectival attempt to inflate and stretch language until it obtains something of the width and colour of the world (which, forced, it never does). Rather, it is a simple product of a sensibility which is itself part linguistic, part scientific, part musical and part visual. It is this rare combination of sensitivity and facility which makes a great writer about nature, an H.E. Bates, or a BB; a Richard Jefferies, a Kathleen Jamie, Richard Mabey or Jim Perrin. Extraordinary writing about the world cannot be forced, but nor does it come hard to those who exist in the world in the way these writers do. Writing, for Brooke,

is not an alternative or an addition to life but a completion of it. Reading him, like reading any of these writers at their best, is to share the experience of a completed life – not in a linear sense but in terms of depth and breadth. Look again at his ‘weighted, thyme-scented silence’. It seems to expand from horizon to (unmentioned) horizon, filling the mind’s eye with a scene, almost an epoch, which is not so much described as transmitted. When I teach nature writing I sometimes suggest, perhaps mischievously, that writing is actually walking, after which the creation of a book or piece is just a question of typing.

A reader on the cusp of discovering *The Military Orchid*, itself such a deceptively light creation, should not be burdened with a weighty introduction. There is much more one would wish to say of Jocelyn Brooke, but one imagines him (immaculately tailored) eyeing one speculatively, thinking, *oh dear me, another bore . . .* His book will sing to any who will open it: my own first experience was one of amazed and delighted recognition. How could I have so much in common with such a singular man? I am shamefully ignorant of flowers, but this book does not seem to be about them any more or less than it is about childhood, the army, about England, about Sicily, about tramping around Italy hopefully asking ‘*Avete del vino?*’, about being not quite in and not quite out of the world, about loves which you can explain only implicitly, about the supreme comedy of other people – about nothing, in the end, but life.

Horatio Clare
Verona, 2011