



## INTRODUCTION

Sir John Lister-Kaye OBE

*‘I wonder what you are doing now? I ask this not purely conventionally, but because I have future plans for this island that might be of interest to you. It is a little early to be definite yet, but I am keen to keep in touch, as we might possibly cooperate on a small project.’*

Gavin Maxwell scribbled these lines on a postcard to me in June 1968. I was twenty-two. He was fifty-three, a bestselling author and a household name; I was a trainee unhappily locked into heavy industry in South Wales, longing to escape, yearning for green spaces, desperate to find a way to work in natural history, the all-consuming passion that we both shared. I have often wondered whether Gavin fully understood the tsunami effect of those few lines – I wonder, too, whether he ever recognised himself as the very famous writer he had become after the publication of his poignant autobiographical memoir *Ring of Bright Water*.

It is often said that great creative art is the out-pouring of a troubled soul. Gavin Maxwell was the perfect exemplar of that old aphorism so studded with famous names. He exuded imagination and creativity from every pore and in common with many artistic temperaments his life was a self-perpetuating chaos. He was a published poet, a skilled draughtsman in pen and ink, a landscape and still-life artist and portrait painter, an award winning photographer and, of course, a great writer. It seemed that whatever art form he turned his hand to delivered up an inspired excellence. Many of his other ten books are gripping reading, some, such as *A Reed Shaken by the Wind*, his lyrical expedition narrative of the Marsh Arabs of the Tigris Basin with Wilfred Thesiger, and the

brilliantly crafted *Lords of the Atlas*, his work on the Berber warlords of Morocco, both received literary awards. But it is '*The Ring*', as he and his friends always referred to it, the book that was to sell well over two million copies and that would be translated into nineteen languages, for which he will always be best remembered.

Yet to depict Gavin as a troubled artist is to deny the essence of the man. In his thorough and deeply perceptive biography, *Gavin Maxwell – A life*, Gavin's friend of twelve years, Douglas Botting correctly assesses the juxtaposition of the artist and the inner man: 'He had a wonderful gift for descriptive writing. But this was secondary to his real gift – his gift of actually living his imaginative life in action. Yes, he was literate, he could write very well, but I would never rate Gavin primarily as a writer but as primarily the man who did these things, a man of action.' To Gavin life was for living, now not later. His advice to one of his young close associates was 'If you really want a vintage Bentley, get one now. If you put it off you'll never do it.' He was, in the words of *The Times*, 'a man of action who writes like a poet.'

It is important to see the whole Maxwell, the bigger view of his often quixotic personality and unharnessed life, much of the later half of which was inevitably influenced and shaped by *The Ring*, penned in longhand when Gavin was forty-four. Its immediate popularity took him by surprise. Its unquestioned literary and commercial success was a paradox that both defied and defined the man and the imbroglio he perpetually wove around himself, a success that failed to change the man and only served to make the life even more chaotic.

By the time *The Ring* was published Gavin's complex personality was well established. Distilled from his esoteric background and fatherless upbringing he had become a latter-day eccentric genius in the grand manner. The publisher's blurb to Botting's biography lists the many-coursed menu of that eccentricity: 'Aristocrat, social renegade, wartime secret agent, shark-hunter, adventurer, racing driver, traveller, naturalist, poet and painter...and one of the most popular authors of wildlife books in the twentieth century.'

Against this multi-coloured backdrop the years at Camusfeàrna, his

remote West Highland home, the years during which he was living the idyll of *The Ring* and leading up to its publication and the self-destructive whirlwind of success that was suddenly to engulf him, seem to project a pool of calmness, beauty and serenity. I like to think that they were.

By 1956 his life was focused and centred upon the captivating otter, Mijbil, an animal that seemed to enable Gavin to revisit the lost world of childhood and of Elrig, his mother's remote Galloway home, where he had passed long, enraptured summers with orphaned and rescued wildlife pets of many varied species. He writes openly that after the death of his beloved springer spaniel, Camusfeàrna would not be the same without an animal companion. '... that Jonnie's death had...ended an overlong chapter of nostalgia in my life, it was, I think, autumn and winter's days....with their long hours of darkness made me crave for some animal about the house.'

It was his quest for that animal that finally led him to import Mij, the otter cub Wilfred Thesiger had found for him in the Tigris marshes of Iraq. It is doubtful whether any pet animal other than an otter could have found such Arcadian bliss at the sea-shore ring of bright water that was Gavin's Highland home. After an exquisitely lyrical description of Camusfeàrna (its real name is Sandaig), ringed in by snow-capped mountains with its chain of uninhabited islands and its lighthouse - 'The landscape and seascape that lay spread below me was of such beauty that I had no room for it all at once...' - with its little disused house that 'wore that secretive expression that is in some way akin to a young girl's face during her first pregnancy,' with its crashing waterfall and its curving beach of white shell sand, the second half of the book is devoted to a life totally immersed with otters. As the story unfolds, otter after otter, wild and tame, appear at Camusfeàrna. The last of those famous otters, Teko, the only one to survive Gavin himself, and that by just a few weeks, was to die in my care.

Although I twice stayed at Sandaig before it was razed to the ground by the catastrophic fire in January 1968 that also killed his otter Edal, I was not a player in the pre-*Ring* idyll the book so evocatively describes. By the time I first met Gavin in 1965 the bubble had burst; fame had

added nothing but worry and complication to an already turbulent life. He had inadvertently created around that remote and once romantically alluring West Highland cottage a complex of buildings, extensions, animal pens and relationships with people he had neither the skills nor the inclination to supervise. Tragic and personally devastating though the fire was, it provided an escape from Sandaig and the costly and increasingly unsustainable heartland of *The Ring's* success.

With characteristic impulsiveness Gavin moved a few miles north to an island, Eilean Ban, the white island, in the tide-scoured straits between the Isle of Skye and the little harbour town of Kyle of Lochalsh on the mainland, which was to be his final home. It was another demonstration of his wildly impractical eccentricity. Few people in good health would have chosen for their full time residence a tiny, rock-bound island with no utilities or services on it and no boat service to it. But Gavin was not in good health. His life-long addiction to cigarettes – up to eighty a day, (Sandaig and the island house were the only houses I have ever known where there was a box of cigarettes beside every lavatory) – at last caught up with him. He survived only sixteen months after the move to the island.

I was privileged to have known him as a friend and to have come so very close to working with him. His influence on my own career as a naturalist and a nature writer is incalculable, as was his infectious commitment to nature conservation. I owe entirely to him that I have spent the last forty years working with wildlife in the Highlands of Scotland. To this day, four decades after his death I am still haunted by the deeply perceptive and prescient words, a coda for nature conservation and human sanity even more relevant today than when they were written, of the foreword to *The Ring*. 'I am convinced that man has suffered in his separation from the soil and the other living creatures of the world; the evolution of his intellect has outrun his needs as an animal and as yet he must still, for security, look long at some portion of the earth as it was before he tampered with it.'

Gavin's legacy is his written word. *Ring of Bright Water* has won a permanent place in the hearts of millions of people across the world and

in the long term iconography of Scotland and of nature writing, a genre until recently much neglected in the UK. It is his ability to project himself and his reader into the wild with clean, unpretentious descriptions and his, at times almost disturbing openness about his own feelings and emotions, that lifted his readers out of the uninspired, hum-drum day-to-day life of post-war Britain and America. He took us by the hand to a world most of us had never seen, a world that sets the imagination aloft: a fresh, wild landscape and a carefree proximity to nature that awoke in us the latent nostalgia of childhood and a yearning for a simpler life.

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*House of Aigas, 2009*