



My life is here, where soon the larks
will sing again, and there is a hawk above.

J. A. BAKER, *The Hill of Summer*



J. A. Baker photographed by Doreen Coe in the 1950s.

Robert Macfarlane

FOREWORD

I looked into the wood', wrote J. A. Baker in a journal entry. 'In a lair of shadow the peregrine was crouching, watching me.' For decades, Baker occupied his own 'lair of shadow': a private man who lived a largely unreported life. That shadow was cast in part by his disinterest in celebrity as conventionally understood, even after the success of *The Peregrine*. It was cast also by the fierce light of his style, which possesses – as one of Baker's earliest and best reviewers, Kenneth Allsop, put it – a 'magnesium-flare' intensity. When I first read *The Peregrine* as a teenager it did not occur to me to wish to know anything of its author, for the prose itself was so forceful that it fully exhausted my attention.

But as Baker's work has lived on – it is fifty years this year since *The Peregrine's* publication – so an interest has built among its hundreds of thousands of readers as to the life of its maker. Like many of those readers I cannot imagine being innocent of *The Peregrine*. It has shaped my writing, walking, teaching and dreaming for twenty years now. Baker's prose reaches into the body as well as the mind. I hear *The Peregrine* as crack of ice and Geiger clicks, billhook blade-thuds, signal and chatter, the mew of raptor. I see it as blast-walls, silver

light on metal casings, landscape X-ray, mudflat and a swarm of golden beetles. I feel it as a cold east wind brittling my bones, a mask of green ice pressed hard to the face. And I wonder: who was the man who could write a work of such visionary power and such suppressed violence? What does it cost a person to compress a book of this condensed energy?

My House of Sky is Baker's first book-length biography, and it will be his last. There is no need for another. Hetty Saunders has written a superb, subtle account of his life and work. This is a book distinguished not only by the calm clarity of its prose and the quiet cleverness with which it tells its story, but also by its tact. As a biographer, Hetty has practised a kind of careful tracing, a building-up of a picture of Baker's behaviour from the marks he has left behind. In this respect, of course, Hetty's method echoes Baker's own pursuit of the peregrines. Confronted with the mystery of their wildness, Baker learned to deduce aspects of their existence from displaced signs of their presence: bloodied corpses found in wood and saltmarsh, or the way a falcon sets prey-species moving long before it comes into human sight. Confronted with the mystery of Baker's life, Hetty learned to deduce aspects of his existence from displaced signs of his presence: letters in the archive, jottings in the margins of books, torn-out journal pages, scribbled codes on maps.

The frontispiece of *My House of Sky* is a startling image by the artist Jo Sweeting. As with Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit, so with Jo's falcon-man. The image flickers unstably between its poles – collapses the space that divides them. Baker and peregrine inhabit one another, blown through by the same wind that bends the trees. It is clear here, as throughout, that this is a special book, beautifully published: committed to honouring the strangeness of Baker's vision and the force of his achievement. It carries an important afterword by John Fanshawe, who has done so much work over the years gathering and making available the documents that comprise the archive.

My House of Sky

That archive itself is also present in photographs of Baker's maps, optics, proofs and manuscripts, taken by Christopher Matthews. And at the book's heart is Hetty's biography: a brilliant work of tracking and of seeing. Hetty has 'looked into the wood' of Baker's world, and lit up his 'lair of shadow' to just the extent that it needs illuminating.

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ROBERT MACFARLANE is the author of a number of award-winning and bestselling books about landscape and nature, including *The Wild Places*, *The Old Ways* and *Landmarks*. His work has been widely adapted for film and television, and translated into many languages. He is a Fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge.