

INTRODUCTION

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ALONE IN THE DARKNESS of a derelict cottage defending his bed against an army of rats was not what Walter John Campbell Murray had in mind when he moved to the country. His escape to a rural idyll led him to Copsford, a ruined house a mile from the nearest habitation, where the wind rushed up the stairs and water poured through the roof. But the year he spent in the Sussex countryside, immersed in the plants and wildlife of postwar England, was to change his life. When, many years later, he finally wrote of his experiences at Copsford, it was a story of his discovery of a spiritual connection to nature. His writing has been compared to the more widely known Richard Jefferies, but his concern for nature and the environment made him a forerunner of modern writers, such as Roger Deakin and Robert Macfarlane.

Like many in their early twenties, Murray was eager for adventure and wider horizons. He needed to find what life had to offer beyond the limits of his rural family home. Born in 1900, Murray had been too young to endure much of the hardships of the First World War. He joined the Merchant Navy but quickly found he didn't like the sea, so with his feet back on dry land he joined the RAF with the hope of taking to the skies. Luckily for him, the war ended before he learnt how to fly and he returned to his home village of Horam in Sussex unscathed by war. Still

carrying the joy and hope for life that had been stripped from many of his peers, he packed his bag with a few meagre belongings and left the countryside of his youth to explore the possibilities of London and a job in journalism.

Murray had a lot to learn, but unexpectedly his discoveries were mainly about himself. Journalism proved to consist of dull, uninspiring reports, offering little of the glamour and excitement he had imagined. His accommodation was equally miserable: 'that third-floor-back with its tiny gas fire, its naked electric light and its distressing view'. Very soon he was finding no inspiration in the city, instead he longed for 'solitude among woods and hills' where he could 'live close to nature'.

Devising a plan to live cheaply in the countryside by picking herbs to sell for medicinal purposes, Murray thought he could make enough money to survive. But that wasn't the real reason for his return to the country, nor was it, as he suggests, a desire to live a 'solitary life'; he was drawn by a far stronger force. In his early days at Copsford, reflecting on his time in London, he began to know that he was 'of the country'. With that realisation came the understanding of his own powerful connection to nature and how that drove his creativity; 'I could not dip my pen in the lifeblood of the city streets. I needed the very song of the shadow-dappled brook to write, with the sound of wild wings in my ears and the scent of wildflowers in my nostrils.'

Anyone who has dreamt of spending time alone in the natural environment will connect with Murray's emotions during the first weeks after his arrival at Copsford. Much as he had craved being alone, the sense of isolation he felt when he entered the house oppressed him; 'the loneliness of the place repelled me, repelled me forcibly.' The sense of emptiness in the house that had been uninhabited for years was overwhelming. Out in nature, his solitude was all he had hoped for but within those walls, where humans should dwell, he felt his solitude most acutely, unable to sleep upstairs because he felt 'cut off from the front door'. But he wasn't alone; very quickly he found he was sharing the house with an army of rats. As he began a territorial battle with them,

the silence of the house was lost and he began to find comfort in the ramshackle shelter it represented.

With so much time to spare, Murray describes how he ‘learnt to be still’. Although his days involved the picking and drying of herbs, they also contained hours of emptiness. He writes of his ‘inborn love of the countryside’ being the reason for him being able to overcome the ‘discontent’ provoked by those empty hours. *Copsford* isn’t written with a deep exploration of emotion as seen in many modern works, but in these spaces between Walter’s busy activities we can see how he was being transformed, gaining a far deeper connection to his environment and just occasionally catching a ‘glimpse of the intricate and complex pattern of life’.

His vicarage upbringing in a small rural community before the First World War had been repressive in many ways, but time spent alone and the need to wash began to peel away that inhibition. His childhood attraction to ‘wild and unconventional water’ had been controlled by convention, but at Copsford Murray cast his clothes aside and plunged into a pool of wild water. He talks of this as being an ‘outward sign of my inward awareness of at-one-ment’. In a book that describes his many ‘wonders and delights’, this was clearly his greatest.

As the summer passed and slipped into autumn, Murray began to feel a deeper connection to nature: ‘it was closer contact than touch, it was almost union’. Discussing this connection in *The Green Man of Horam*, his biographer Tom Wareham describes Murray as a ‘nature mystic’. The story of his herbs and the land from which he gathered them went deeper than a simple portrait of his country life, as he pondered the ‘prodigality which scatters beauty with so lavish a hand everywhere around us’. In *Copsford* Murray takes a questioning approach, balancing nature observations with science, and suggesting time is the resolution to his struggle between science and religion: ‘What is time in the evolution of an idea and its expression in life?’ In *Nature’s Undiscovered Kingdom*, a collection of essays written before *Copsford*, Murray had already explored this ‘lavish hand’; ‘life, the vital element, spirit mind, God, if you

will', as if saying – there is a force, but you call it whatever you choose. Murray's dilemma as he tries to find a hand behind natural beauty led him to suggest it is 'God's idea' talking about the 'Artist' and 'Creator'. Wareham's summing up of this struggle probably best describes Murray's feelings: 'it is almost as if he is saying, "Call it God if you want to, but it is not quite what I have in mind".'

Copsford has an innocence, a freedom in thought and life that is less present in his other books. Written in the 1940s, two decades after the last bunch of herbs was sent to the market, Murray's recollections of this time are as clear as if they had been written only a year or two after. Undoubtedly his experiences alone in the Sussex countryside profoundly influenced the rest of his life; the joy, almost ecstasy, that he describes stayed with him through his career as a teacher and in his nature conservation work and writing. Yet it was written very shortly after the death of his only son, Dick, at the age of fifteen. He does not write of his personal tragedy and barely touches on his own emotions outside of his nature connections, but it is hard not to think that as Murray sat down to write about the young Walter, that Dick was ever present in his thoughts. His later work, *A Sanctuary Planted*, is regarded as part eulogy to his son and gives a more Christian resolution to his questioning. But *Copsford* captures the spirit of his youth, his nature spirit. As Murray imagined his younger self living free in a natural wonderland, perceiving 'meaning instead of things' and living as 'a part of all creation', his son must have been an influence. Yet only once does he mention death, when he remembers a tiny copper butterfly that had become extinct. In thoughts that predate the modern conservation movement, years ahead of his time, he talks about changing climate and physical conditions, and yet something of the shadow of Dick is in what he says: 'What else is there so tragic as the loss of a life form that can never, never reappear. I know it has happened hundreds, more probably thousands of times in the past; creatures have, as it were, taken the wrong turning, to find themselves in a blind alley from which there is no retreat only extinction. Changing climate and conditions have, slowly or suddenly, wiped out legions of

living creatures as completely and with the finality as I rub chalk figures from the slate that records my agrimony tally. The dust blows out of the open door.' In reimagining his own youth, possibly in some way he was giving Dick the youth he didn't have, giving him back the life that had 'blown out of the open door'.

As the rain pours through the open roof of Copsford we have to cheer for the transformed Walter Murray, as he strips off his clothes and wades across the swollen river, away from the house for the last time, running downhill to his 'music mistress' and the start of his 'magic book of life'.

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ONE IN A MILLION



MOST OF US, I suppose, sooner or later in our lives, experience the desire to live alone, to have our own cabin, cottage, castle and be far from the madding crowd. There is a fascination about the faraway island across the glittering southern seas, about the mountaintop shrouded in heavy mists, about the quiet clearing in the heart of the forest, that few can resist. For some the urge comes but once in a lifetime, for others it is insistent.

While we are children the desert island idea appeals to us most strongly. The story of Crusoe never palls, although in our imagination the word desert only means deserted, and, for us, the island must be a paradise with every useful and lovely thing growing at the very door of our hut. We want the island of the Swiss Family Robinson, but at the same time we must be monarch of all we survey. We would live in a tree or a cave.

A few years older, and we have grown so accustomed to many of the comforts of civilised life that we would not do without them. We are still seized, quite often, with the desire to live alone, but now it must be a log cabin or comfortable cottage, with main water and electric light, and with a wireless set in the chimney corner.

Later still, after experiencing the rough-and-tumble of life, after strenuous affairs in business, or heartrending affairs in love, we long to be alone, and picture solitude among woods and hills in forgotten corners of the world, where we can live close to nature, and hear the beating of her heart and feel her soft and kindly touch.