

The Peregrine

'A land to me as profuse and glorious as Africa.'

Those of us who know Essex may make many claims for our county but none, perhaps, as confident and outrageous as this. But read the man's works, and you will believe.

JA Baker was born in Chelmsford in 1926 and lived there most of his life until his death in 1987. He left school at 16, had a succession of jobs, and gave up work before he was 40. Until crippled by arthritis, he then spent his time cycling out along the Chelmer valley, below and up the Danbury ridge, and on to Maldon and the coast. And from that came one of the great classics of nature writing in English, *The Peregrine*.

It records a winter, or more likely a portmanteau of winters, along this valley, in prose informed by great observers of the natural world such as Thomas Hardy and Gerald Manley Hopkins. If one of those was part poet, and the other entirely so, then their influence is evident from the start, October 1st:

Autumn rises into the bright sky. Corn is down. Fields shine after harvest.

Day after day, the evocations of bird life are governed by the relationship between prey and hunter. Different habitats, times of the day, weather patterns, all provoke different hunting-patterns from the peregrine, described in precise and haunting detail. Take, for example, a partridge in the moment of death, February 10th:

... the arched reredos and immense fan-vaulting of his flight, was consumed and lost in the fiery maelstrom of the sky.

Man does not often appear. An occasional tractor might pull a plough. But Baker acknowledges his own presence, and this gives another dimension to what, by itself, might be an avowedly beautiful but essentially rather limited work about bird life in the English home counties. For there are two hunters here, the man Baker, and the peregrine. As the book develops, it becomes not so much a matter of Baker seeking out the peregrine's haunts, as each mutually recognising the presence of the other, culminating in an encounter of March 15th in which the hunter is avowedly not the human:

He ... hovered twenty feet above my head, looking down ... I could not look away from the crushing light of those eyes, from the impaling horn of that curved bill.

In this book and its successor *The Hill of Summer* Baker left, in his sadly-truncated career, an inestimable gift to nature writing in English, and a reminder to of how tightly the wild remains folded into our civilisation.

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