NATIONAL PARKS & THE COUNTRYSIDE

IT IS ALMOST FORTY YEARS SINCE I STOOD IN this place to compete for the Winchester Reading Prize.

Those years, sometimes long and laborious, now seem to have gone with bewildering swiftness, but some of the emotions of that memorable day remain. I still recall the warm satisfaction which came from the knowledge that it was to be given me in that hour what I should say—a most admirable and humane procedure, as it seems to me now at this moment of reappearance.

And if the intervening years have given much, they have also taken much away; not the least of their takings being the unbelievably confident young man of that far-distant occasion. To-day I am as conscious of my obvious shortcomings as, according to Lord Bowen, His Majesty's Judges are conscious of each other's; and I am most deeply sensible of the great honour it is to stand where so many distinguished men have stood before me in accordance with the ancient endowment of Sir Robert Rede. And if so great a man as A. E. Housman could say of those who selected him to be the Leslie Stephen lecturer, that he condemned their judgment and deplored their choice, I, at least, standing afar off, and not daring so much as to lift my eyes, may justly and feelingly echo it.

I cannot make the claim to any special knowledge of my own that Kinglake so engagingly made in the Preface to *Eöthen*; rather do I know the painful sharpness of the truth proclaimed by Stevenson that 'neither clearness, compression, nor beauty of language come to any living creature, till after a busy and prolonged acquaintance with the subject on hand'. Yet despite all this, I count myself fortunate in being allowed to choose the subject of National Parks and the Countryside at this particular time. I do not think that choice will cause any undue perturbation to the watching shade of Sir Robert Rede.

A little tolerance is no doubt needed to bring it within the sphere of 'humanity, logic, or philosophy', and though it may lack the quality of high excitement to which the age is now accustomed, it is perhaps none the worse for that. There has been no lack of excitement in one form or another during the past six years, and when the absorbing task of beating the sword into the ploughshare, or, more properly, the tank into the tractor, is producing excitements, and more than excitements, of which the prophet Micah could have known little, it is perhaps a good thing to compose ourselves for a little time under our own vine and fig tree, and to contemplate the quiet of the countryside and the place of national parks.

After all, and with all false sentiment laid aside, we do well to remember that it was some glimpse of the countryside as an essential part of what is vaguely called 'The English Tradition' that many men held before them during six years of war, and it was with some picture of

that same countryside before them that many of them died.

'This precious stone set in the silver sea' was certainly never on their lips, nor consciously in their minds, but some familiar and well-loved spot was with them as a strength and stay in many moments of their hard experience. And whilst it is, no doubt, the highest wisdom to keep a sense of proportion in all things, and to avoid making claims of the extravagant and fantastic kind, it is simply the plainest of plain truths to say that the countryside has a supreme contribution to make to the national life at this particular moment of our history, although the nature and the quality of that contribution is yet but imperfectly apprehended:

> Beauty crieth in an attic and no man regardeth:
> O God! O Montreal!

The creation of national parks is, in some measure, bound up with the claim of the countryside to contribute to the full and harmonious national life. I say 'in some measure', for it is not suggested that the establishment of national parks will solve the problems of the countryside. Those problems are very real and complicated and highly controversial, and it is of the first importance to appreciate the limits of the claim made on behalf of national parks.

One of the most distinguished of our writers on the countryside has recently (and somewhat unkindly) said in his most attractive autobiography that 'the creation of national parks is discussed with much parade and much

ignorance'. I should count myself fortunate to be acquitted on this indictment, but if convicted, would desire to plead in mitigation the precise nature of the claims made. The creation of national parks is only a part, though a most important and valuable part, of the much greater work of preserving the whole countryside. The detachment of that part from the larger scene, and the formulation and presentation of the separate and complete proposals for national parks is a comparatively late development in the history of preservation, and has come about quite naturally as experience has shown its wisdom.

National parks are a distinguishable and determinate part of the much larger problem of controlling the use of land, and growing experience has shown it to be most desirable that they should be kept apart from the more general needs of land planning as a whole. National parks can be created now without injury to any other cause or interest; they compete with no other 'social' need of the day, but aid and supplement those needs, and are in themselves a 'social' need of the highest possible kind.

If the work of preservation on a national scale is to wait until a complete national policy is fashioned and formulated, until final decisions are made on all the highly controversial questions, it may very well be that some of the most beautiful areas in the land will pass beyond the reach of any salvation.

The great need is to make a sound national beginning, and to make it now by the creation of national parks, so that they may serve as a guide and stimulus and encourage-

ment in that work of preservation which is the professed aim of Governments and people alike. When national parks are established, some, at least, of the growing dangers to the countryside will be overcome, the fairest places still left in these islands will be secure from all assault arising either from accident or design, and a very great contribution indeed will have been made to the happiness of millions in town and country alike.

It must always be a matter for surprise that no such step has yet been taken in this country, particularly when it is remembered, as Mr Belloc has reminded us, that 'the love of England has in it the love of landscape, as has the love of no other country'. For six centuries the poets have sung the beauties of the country, and their songs, or fragments of them, have gone eternally into the common speech. For all the coloured counties, and for all the changing seasons, for the magnificent and awe-inspiring, as well as for the meanest flower that blows, there is high and satisfying expression.

The great novelists have set down the country scene upon the living page and dressed it with a kind of immortality. The social historians have recorded the events that changed the face of the countryside throughout the centuries, adding a new beauty of their own, the beauty of association. And the essayists and diarists, geologists and botanists, bird and animal lovers, fishermen and country parsons, praisers and glorifiers of every kind have made up that exceeding great army which no man can number.

The countryside is commonly spoken of as a great national heritage, and so it is; but the literature of the countryside is a most noble heritage too, and of a range and power and beauty quite without equal. All the great names are there, and some of the very greatest, it is good to think, are in a very special sense the possession of this University. Herrick is ours, no less surely than Milton or Spenser. But the very greatest, down to the most lowly, give full and dutiful expression to that love of the countryside which is a national characteristic.

And with all this, there are still no national parks! That wilderness of beauty the poets immortalized has become too often the wilderness of mean streets, the glory departed, and all the magic gone as though it had never been. In recent years, the beauty of the countryside has been destroyed on a very great scale, and that loss is now irremediable.

The work of preservation has always been hard, and at times a little thankless, but latterly it has become quite heart-breaking. To save a footpath or a lonely moor or a piece of common land from destruction, or to preserve some historic and beautiful spot, the voluntary societies, established for this purpose, have had to toil and sweat, to cajole and implore, to plead and beseech, lead deputations to Ministers, waylay Members of Parliament, write letters to *The Times* and *The Manchester Guardian*, raise Defence Funds, and, in sheer desperation, employ counsel. And for all the comfort that the 'severe and sour-complexioned' men in Government departments (as Izaak Walton would

have called them, and as they inevitably seem to be at such moments) can give, Wordsworth might never have written a line, 'Tintern Abbey' which Sir William Beach Thomas believes to contain the whole creed of the countryman, 'to be repeated aloud in places of beauty where altars are lifted to the north and south and east and west, and wherever the eyes are bent', might be quite without meaning, and that exceeding great army might never have been mobilized. Not that Government departments must be blamed too much. The burden lies heavily upon us all, and the blame must be much more widely distributed.

As things are at present, and as we have for so long allowed them to be, the harassed Minister and his advisers have a score of conflicting claims to harmonize, all put forward with zeal, and some with discretion.

The great city needs water, and water it must by all means have. The claims of the beauty lovers in the catchment areas, fearful of the impounding of lakes and tarns and rivers, with knowledge, maybe, of Thirlmere and Haweswater as they once were, no doubt seem at times to be a little remote from stern reality; and certainly, it may be conceded, the thirst of the body is more readily understandable than that divine thirst which from the soul doth rise. The country areas need electricity both for light and power, and overhead pylons seem to be a most regrettable necessity; but the indignant deputation to the Minister wrings its hands and speaks like Gordon Bottomley 'To an Ironmaster'.

On the one side are those who wish to 'develop' the land, as the official phrasing goes, those who wish to quarry and to mine with the almost unavoidable consequence of unsightly slag heaps and polluted and disfigured becks, those who wish to plaster the lovely and austere hills with ugly, monotonous conifer plantations, those who wish to drive great roads in the most unsuitable places, those who wish to take some remote and tranquil spot and use it for military purposes; and on the other side are those who wish to meet national needs in a practical way, but believe that this can be done without too much sacrifice of native beauty.

What, therefore, is the unhappy and tortured Minister to do? When the deputation, at long last, withdraws, he removes the expression of intense and sympathetic interest from his features, and turns, no doubt, to Hardy or Gilbert White for consolation, but all that he has permitted himself to say is that he is most grateful to the deputation, and the matter will have his most careful and earnest attention. Now the establishment of national parks will change all that for some at least of the most beautiful and precious parts of the land.

A discussion or exposition of what I may call the machinery of national parks would be out of place here, but it has become quite clear that an indispensable element in any scheme of national planning is the setting up of one single authority for all national park areas. A National Parks Commission must be created, specially appointed and directed by Act of Parliament, administering a special

National Parks Fund under parliamentary control, with a continuity of policy and power unaffected by the chances and changes of political life. The choice of areas for national parks, the definition of the boundaries, the nature and extent of every kind of development within the national park boundaries—all these matters would be in the hands of the Commissioners, who would be appointed by the Minister of Town and Country Planning, and the Minister would be answerable for the Commissioners in Parliament. The creation of such a Commission is regarded as quite fundamental, and it is apparent that the Government departments themselves would be very great gainers.

The establishment of national parks can only come about, of course, by the act of the Government; but the chief reason why national parks have not yet been created is the lack of the right kind of public opinion. The countryside is highly prized, but it is not thought to be in any real danger. There is still so much of it, and despite the dismal prophecies, it still survives. The larger grievous loss is not seen, and year by year the steady remorseless destruction continues. It is now nearly twenty years ago since the spokesmen of the National Trust when giving evidence before the Addison Committee said:

...in the most characteristic part of England, natural beauty is disappearing at an alarming rate. The ordinary country which has been the pride of our poets and painters, and indeed of the whole English people for

centuries is being every year more and more rapidly destroyed or disfigured beyond recognition. The nation itself, which through its chief spokesmen is always deploring these irremediable losses, is itself by its public action one of their chief causes.

National parks, in the highest sense, are a popular cause with a place in the public imagination, and supported by an instructed public opinion. But that public opinion needs to grow in volume and knowledge and power. The idea is much too common that national parks are formal and controlled and 'faddy', and the talk of natural beauty still rouses too much suspicion in the robust-minded; it is still thought that there is to be some extensive and needless prohibition, some vast and unnecessarily loud 'Stop it'.

And there are so many reforms that seem more immediately urgent, affecting this difficult business of living more closely and intimately. Some reforms, long desired and awaited, come in unexpected moments because of the inexorable pressure of great events. It was said that it needed a great European war to bring about Daylight Saving! But national parks can never hope for help of this kind; indeed, sometimes the very stars in their courses seem to fight against them.

In times of great national emergency, when all activity is concentrated on high national purposes, the claims of national parks cannot get a hearing; and when the emergency is happily past, the nation turns to other problems the emergency has left, and national parks are again forgotten.