

The Romance of Re-wilding

Isabella Tree is to be congratulated for her recent book “Wilding: the return of nature to a British farm”. (Picador, London, 2018, ISBN 978-1-5098-0510-5). It is a thrilling evocation of what I am calling ‘the romance of re-wilding’. Her book is well written, well illustrated and well researched. We learn, as we read, a load of botany, zoology, and soil chemistry expounded with clarity and confidence. We meet amazing, charismatic and admirable people. We accept their values, share their excitement and recognise their triumphs.

Of course we are delighted at the return of turtle doves to the Burrells’ farm; who would not be? And their stunning success with the purple emperor butterfly. Part of the thrill of seeing a kingfisher has, in my lifetime, been its rarity, but only part for most of the thrill is in the startling brilliancy of its plumage, and the darting swiftness of its flight; kingfishers would thrill anyone, even if they were seen every day, just as hummingbirds never fail to astonish.

The magic of re-wilding seems to lie partly in its spontaneity. We stand back and watch a natural process; almost as though there were a single conscious purpose at work on a preordained plan; we seem to witness ‘Mother Nature’. The willows come back to exploit the soggy soil, the butterflies to exploit the willows. No doubt the swallows and flycatchers will enjoy the insects, and the peregrines will enjoy the swallows. It all fits. It feels right.

I am tempted to muse on in the same *quasi*-religious vein. Just as ‘Gross Domestic Product’ is a summation of all the incomes of all the people in a polity, so it seems there should be a quantity we could call ‘Satisfaction’, that is the sum of all individual satisfactions in a polity. It is not immediately obvious, but my hunch is that ‘Gross Domestic Satisfaction’ is maximised when there are least constraints, when each player moves from a position of less satisfaction to one of greater. Be that as it may, there seems a bonus when watching nature take its course, in feeling that every player is doing what it wants, be it a fungus, or a roe deer.

It is common, and understandable, to bemoan declining numbers of curlews, song thrushes, and cuckoos in the British countryside, because they make such thrilling sounds; they speak ‘springtime’, ‘sun’, ‘sex’, and ‘summer’. We naturally feel that we are being deprived (by someone) of our rightful inheritance when we find them gradually vanishing from our lives. Furthermore, it is easy to feel the same indignation about the threatened extinction of crested newts, crested cow-wheat, and lady’s slipper orchids; even when we have never seen them and never looked.

To experience, and may I even say *to indulge*, these emotions is what I am calling the *romance* of re-wilding. The word ‘romance’ justifiably indicates the high emotional content, the free play of imagination, nostalgia, and hope. There is a swelling of the heart at the very thought of Nature returning.

We know, of course, why our ancestors dredged and drained, uprooted hedges, enlarged fields, mechanised, sprayed, and specialised. It was to raise agricultural output. It seems that the population of Britain never much exceeded 6 million between the Roman period and 1700. There were peaks in 300 A.D., 1300, and 1650, but troughs between, with the ‘dark ages’, the ‘black death’, and the ‘mini-ice-age’. The limit seems to have been set very largely by food production. After 1750 the UK population rose

from 7.8 million, to 10.8 in 1800, to 27.1 in 1851, to 38.2 in 1901, 50.4 in 1950 and to 67.7 million today (i.e. in 2020). As food production rose, so did population. From 1850 food imports became important. Currently we import some 40% of our food.

Of course, there is a lot of land in Britain that is not dedicated to food production; we could re-wild that. Waste land, old railway sidings, drove road verges; that would be wonderful. One of my enthusiasms is 'wild-life corridors' linking city parks and town moors with the surrounding countryside. One or two farms could re-wild if they were better able to produce butterflies than profits. But it does not seem realistic deliberately to lower food production without a concerted programme to lower the human population in parallel.

Our emotions are hard to reconcile with good sense. I do love an expanse of fresh, young, heather, but I know that it takes a lot of husbandry to keep it like that, grazing and burning. I once saw the dramatic effect of a deer-fence in an area near Torrington that was once part of the 'Caledonian Forest'. The shallow slopes were soggy, hag-ridden, peat topped by leggy heather, sundew, and sphagnum. A small area, between the size of a tennis court and a foot-ball pitch had been fenced round with a high fence. Spontaneously the pines had appeared and were now anything from 1 to 10 metres high. Deer or pine; each has its emotional appeal; but without wolves we cannot have both.

Re-wilding our country is a wonderful thing to look forward to, and we can hope for more and more of it as we work our human population down towards the 6.5 million we had in 1700 when wolves vanished from our island.