

'He has what people call charm': Gavin Maxwell's otters

REY CONQUER

"Your book," wrote Veza Canetti to Gavin Maxwell on the publication of *Ring of Bright Water*, "is the love story of the century!!" Maxwell's account of his life in a remote West Highland cottage, first in the company of his dog, and later, most famously, a number of otters, was a bestseller; it outsold even the unexpurgated *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. The object of this love story is, primarily, the otter Mijbil, procured in the marshes of Iraq and brought back to live first in Chelsea and then at Sandaig, the 'lonely cottage on the north west coast of Scotland'. In *Ring of Bright Water* and its two sequels, *The Rocks Remain* and *Raven Seek Thy Brother*, the cottage is called 'Camusfeàrna' ('The bay of the alders'); not in an attempt to 'create mystery'—although readers treated the pseudonym as a puzzle to solve, arriving at the cottage and expecting to be congratulated for their ingenuity—but as a gesture of loyalty and of trust. Camusfeàrna is another object of love, and it's this love which is at stake when Maxwell is choosing the name by which it will be known, and when he chooses to continue using this name at a point when every reader knew it to be Sandaig. Over the course of the three books, the cottage becomes increasingly connected to the rest of the world: first a telephone line is installed, then electricity, then a sort of road is bulldozed in; yet remoteness is what Camusfeàrna is 'about', at least for Maxwell, and to use its public name would be to betray its very essence.

The year after Maxwell left Stowe School, sixteen and dangerously ill with internal bleeding (he later thought this to be psychosomatic, the only possible expression of mental anguish for a child of his class, time, and upbringing), T. H. White arrived as a master. White has recently been the subject—sort of—of our own 'nature writing' bestseller, Helen Macdonald's *H is for Hawk*. Of his time in Buckinghamshire, White wrote, 'Falling in love is a desolating experience, but not when it is with a countryside.' For Macdonald, this is one the saddest sentences she has ever read; but sadder still, perhaps, is the desolation experienced when one falls in love with a countryside, only to see it change, irrevocably, around you; saddest, then, of all, when you are the one, as was the case with Maxwell, to bring about that change, whether by means of the various human intrusions that fame brought him, or the increasingly fussy and extravagant extensions, outhouses and runs and pools he built to accommodate the various otters that he became 'foster-parent' to, making of Camusfeàrna an ugly, chaotic burden.

Maxwell was offered Camusfeàrna by a landowning friend from Oxford when he was broke, drifting, his shark-fishing business abandoned. It is,

at the start of *Ring of Bright Water*, beautiful, and Maxwell's descriptions are beautiful, too, and, as reviewers have pointed out, in the first third of a book famously about otters we find no otters, instead a rich and detailed picture of Camusfearna itself. It's not so much the landscape, however, as the animals, wild and tame, which fascinate Maxwell. The sublime is not a high mountain, but the two-year journey, from the Caribbean to a tiny burn in the Highlands, of millions and millions of elvers which he finds one day leaping blindly and unsuccessfully up the waterfall. The sheer scale of this instinctual action leads to an uncanny merging of animal and environment: in one extraordinary passage he describes a vast shoal of herring fry, known as 'soil', which had been driven into the bay, where his neighbour's twin sons 'were shouting and laughing and dancing and scooping up the water with their hands, and all the time as they moved there shot up from the surface where they broke it a glittering spray of small gold and silver fish, so dense and brilliant as to blur the outline of the childish figures.'

In Iraq, too, where he joins Wilfred Thesiger as a 'passenger', Maxwell is more interested in otters and birds than the landscape (traversable only by boat, which curtailed his independence) or the people (the Ma'dan, or Marsh Arabs, whom he finds frustrating and, unforgivably, cruel in their treatment of animals). Where Thesiger was a serious and competent traveller, Maxwell was petulant and clumsy. He feels uncomfortable and misunderstood, a waste of space, the feeling only somewhat alleviated when he is almost killed by a boar. Thesiger organises the purchase of an otter; with experience in neither the fishing practices of the Ma'dan (drugging with digitalis) nor otters, Maxwell accidentally poisons her, and is heartbroken. The otter that he eventually brings home is of a sub-species previously 'unknown to science'; it is now *Lutrogale perspicillata maxwelli*, and the only race of creature likely (as Maxwell notes) to bear his name.

It's the fact of the name, and also that Mijbil is the first, and that Maxwell brought him, himself, back from Iraq, in several difficult if at times comic stages, that makes him the favourite, the true love. Mijbil's story forms a perfect narrative swoop: his symbolic death at the hands of an unthinking roadmender far more emotionally satisfying than the repeated illnesses and escapes of the subsequent otters, their violent, manic, outbursts, enclosure, the months of indecision as to where and whether to hand them on. And the death was the fault of Kathleen Raine, although we don't know this from *Ring of Bright Water* (it's in the third volume of her autobiography, *The Lion's Mouth*), which means Maxwell is saved the shame and self-reproach, and can grieve wholeheartedly. But although Maxwell became 'fonder of [Mij] than of almost any human being' he also loves otters as a kind, because with otters one has to 'coexist' – they are not owned, as dogs, or kept, as cats; they are, at least in Maxwell's set-up, as demanding as toddlers and with the same propensity to find the least appropriate toys, but can also be full of parental concern, nudging and bullying him out of bed. The anthropomorphising troubled William Golding, who wrote – a brilliant line in a churlish review –

that ‘a man’s bed seems a preposterous place for an otter.’ Maxwell is aware of the sentimentality lying at hand, how easily the otters could be made to seem merely cute. The current trend of sharing videos of sea otters makes clear how eager we are to overlook their viciousness; as a counter-trend an article is circulating about the lengths to which sea otters go to keep sole guard of a dead or dying seal cub for the purposes of what would, in human terms, be rape.

The archetypal ‘cute’ experience comes earlier, when Maxwell picks up and cuddles a seal cub. Not only does it show no fear, it waddles and then swims after him, its blob-like, round-eyed enthusiasm demonstrating exactly the mixture of helplessness and aggression seized on by Sianne Ngai (and others) as constituting this particular aesthetic category—a category that the otters, however endearing, manage to avoid. Otters, it seems, aren’t looking for mothers but for playmates, intellectual sparring partners and providers of puzzles and challenges. ‘An otter’, Maxwell discovers, ‘must find out everything and have a hand in everything’; they possess ‘an uncanny mechanical sense of how to get things open’. In any competition of ingenuity Maxwell is usually outwitted, from the first attempts to otter-proof his Chelsea flat (Mijbil runs along a balustrade gnawing at the strings from which precious travel souvenirs are hanging; he watches each fall to the floor with satisfaction before moving on to the next) to the enclosure he builds for two Scottish otters he briefly has in his care, Monday and her doltish mate Mossy: ‘Every night she came brazenly into the trap, insolently confident of her ability to overcome or undermine any obstacle that I might set in the way of her escape before morning. Every day my preparations became more elaborate, and every day she mocked me.’ Treating it more as a game than an act of aggression, they continue to live at Camusfeàrna even after the humans give up fencing them in. (Maxwell upgrades their chosen holt, under the cottage, while they are out, cutting a hole in the floor and sinking a ‘well-bedded kennel’ into it. The otters, after some rearranging, are content.)

Otters, other animals, and children all run the risk, to Maxwell, of possessing nothing but ‘charm’. He quotes *Brideshead Revisited*: “I was right years ago,” said Anthony Blanche, [...] “when I *warned* you. I took you out to dinner to warn you of charm.” The wild animal who has nothing but charm is doomed, Maxwell thinks, to an analogous end to that of Sebastian Flyte, and the process by which this happens is one of denying the animal its instinctive needs, in the same way that the Catholic Church denies Sebastian his. What Maxwell wants, for the animals, and certainly for himself, is that one is taken on one’s own terms, and not shoehorned into a pre-made picture or ‘understanding’. ‘Solomon asked for powers in a particular sequence,’ he wrote to a female friend whose claims to ‘intuitive understanding’ he—somewhat patronizingly—refutes, ‘(1) Knowledge; (2); Wisdom; (3) Understanding—knowing that the last two are not attainable without the first.’ He does not need to explain this to the otters, for whom ‘love’ and ‘finding out what things are like’ are one. When Edal, the ‘jealous’

and ‘hysterical’ bitch otter—and I’m not, I hope, being unfair in underlining this characterisation—is let out to walk free around the cottage and beach after years of enclosure, she must touch everything with her flexible fingers, ‘bent on factual knowledge’: examine mechanisms, prod at the underside of a broken-down jeep, check the axles of a trailer. The characteristic otter gesture of affection is to put the fingers in all available facial orifices and feel around. In return Maxwell tickles, plays; learns the variety of noises common to otters and particular to each of his foster-otters and what they might mean. And above all, he watches: he goes to absurd lengths to observe the otters in their element; not trotting about on dry land, that is, but swimming in deep water. He first hires a tank at the Aquarium, and later sets one up at the flat. Mij is ‘boneless, mercurial, sinuous, wonderful’. In doing this he sets out the sort of behaviour he expects, but doesn’t always encounter, in other humans, including his readers.

In a documentary on Gavin Maxwell, a one-time fan and later friend of his, Sir John Lister-Kaye, describes how later in life, once Sandaig had burnt down and he was living on one of the islands he bought when flush from the sales of *Ring of Bright Water*, Maxwell would watch his visitors arrive on the mainland through a powerful telescope, and give them, when they telephoned to be picked up, a running commentary on all the things he could see them doing. How does one escape a certain one-sidedness? How do you take someone on their own terms without letting those terms subsume yours? Near the end of *Raven Seek thy Brother*, just before its epilogue (in which the devastating fire is carefully, briefly described) his reunion with Edal is something like a model of just this: after years of letting her very occasional rages dictate the set-up of Camusfeàrna, they attend, as much as an otter and a human can, to one another, ‘on terms of mutual esteem’, each doing what they can to let the other know that they are loved, accepted.

The balancing act of dependence, of being open to the needs, and the particularities, of the other (or, indeed, the otter) is everywhere in the Camusfeàrna books. At one point, Maxwell and a friend rescue two sea-birds; if a human handles a sea-bird the plumage loses its waterproofing, thus, the act of rescuing rendered the birds dependent on human care, at least until the coating returned. During the War Maxwell worked as a firearms trainer with the Special Operations Executive; at one point he protests the redeployment of one of his subordinates, saying that he is indispensable, and his Commanding Officer replies that that is all the more reason he should go. In 1966, Jimmy Watt, taken on by Maxwell as a teenager and by now his legal heir, and who often looked after the house single-handedly when Maxwell was in North Africa, or Greece, or Sicily, handed in his notice. Maxwell realised that he had made the same mistake: Jimmy had become irreplaceable, and without him it seemed Camusfeàrna would necessarily collapse. (Maxwell’s friend and business associate Richard Frere, in his account of Maxwell’s last years, makes explicit the betrayal Maxwell felt at Jimmy’s defection: he threatened, for instance, to disown him.) And his friendship with Kathleen Raine,

which forms the bulk of her *The Lion's Mouth* and to which Maxwell refers with what he at another point describes as the 'reservations and reticences that are only decent to the human species'—that is, in this case, barely at all—seems to have consisted of years of incommensurable needs and desires wilfully ignored by both parties. Raine, for instance, found his homosexuality distasteful, and saw women who she knew to be more open to queerness as an intolerable threat to her relationship with him. Quite how incompatible this relationship was—for him friendship, for her what she called 'Platonic, or spiritual' (but also erotic) love—Maxwell only found out when she showed him the manuscript of what became *The Lion's Mouth*. To be written of not only as the object of this love but also as a participant in it seemed a form of violation—although, as Raine points out, it could well be the mere fact of being written of at all that he couldn't bear; to be, as it were, on the other end of the telescope.

It's by now a commonplace to note that Maxwell sought with animals the relationships he was unable to have with humans, whether because he was gay, bipolar, or damaged by the strictures of an aristocratic upbringing, with boarding school on the one hand and suffocating maternal care on the other, where desires and fears and insecurities were all utterly unspeakable. By his own account (in *The House of Elrig* (1965)) he was deaf to all sexual innuendo as a young teenager, and for this reason an inveterate, if inadvertent, cocktease. The coyness with which sex figured in his upbringing—he spends a page or so quoting, with mocking commentary, a book called *What a Young Boy Ought to Know*—is the very opposite of the firm, forgiving way that an animal, an otter, say, or a dog, will set out its desires and the limits of its tolerance, and calibrate its own behaviour to what it knows of humans (with the exception, in the case of Mij, of curbing a desire to pierce human earlobes with his needle-like teeth).

Ring of Bright Water is often mentioned alongside White's *The Goshawk* (1951) and J A Baker's *The Peregrine* (1967); and there are face-value similarities (that the animals are all powerful predators, and the narrators are in thrall to them, but also the attention to style, and above all the fact that in these books of seeming natural history the human looms fairly large). But where in White, say, this all lies, thrillingly, on the surface, Maxwell, out of something between discretion and gentility, lets it go unsaid. At times White sounds like Maxwell's *id*: 'Alcohol now seemed the only way of continuing to live,' or, 'To divest oneself of unnecessary possessions, and mainly of other people: that was the business of life.' (Maxwell was accident- and disaster-prone enough not to need to divest himself of possessions, but he was quite able to tell a person when he had had enough of them, and break off all contact if necessary; he did not, however, mention this in his writing.) Perhaps for this willingness to hide his feelings, to leave much as an exercise in tactful inference, his reception within the 'new' nature writing has been less enthusiastic. At its most fey, Maxwell's writing offers a lot of charm with perhaps no substance, but that is, if we take the analogy of Sebastian Flyte,

the fault of the conditions in which it was written, and the moral restrictions we place on ourselves as readers and thereafter on the text, behaving in this like the sort of overanxious pet-owner Maxwell describes with scorn who inculcates insecurity as a kind of insurance policy on affection (Maxwell may have kept animals in a way which now seems suspect, but he was clear about the ways one could do wrong by a pet, and abhorred them).

Not to cultivate a need, but to recognise it: that is, he makes clear, the proper way to treat that which finds itself in your care, whatever it might be. Mij's best qualities bring about his death: he is too tame, too trusting towards humans, too open to their needs and unable to defend his own. He is otherwise, however, remarkably perceptive. Kathleen Raine was, she writes, far more present in Maxwell's and Mijbil's lives than she seems to be. Maxwell admits in the final volume to 'a certain amount of dissimulation' in the previous two; '[i]t is easier, for many reasons,' he says, 'to write more truthfully about animals than about human beings (and not only because animals can't retort that they are misrepresented).' Writing honestly about animals might incur the accusation of 'sentimentality and slushiness' but without this honesty '[the writer's] words are useless'. It's perhaps harder to do justice to humans, to capture exactly what they are, and want, although Mijbil seems better at this than any person: 'To only two other people did he extend the tempestuous affection that he accorded to me, to Morag [a St Francis-like neighbour] and to Kathleen Raine; but though the degree of demonstrative love to each of us did not greatly differ it was quite unlike in kind—with each, that is to say, he formed an entirely different relationship. With Kathleen, whose mere proximity would send him into ecstasies, he was rough and rumbustious, fiercely possessive, and he took advantage of her whenever and however he could; she in turn found some strange community with him, and was prepared to put up uncomplainingly with his most exuberant horse play.' How, in turn, to do justice to the otter?