TO EVERYTHING A SEASON

The View from the Fen

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‘We do not see nature with our eyes, but with our understanding and our hearts.’ Hazlitt

For my son, who taught me to look more carefully

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MERLIN UNWIN BOOKS

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Prologue

I started to write this book before I had any idea, or intention, that it might be a book. In fact, it remains simply what it originally was: a sort of diary cum commonplace book. It is a collection of jottings, impressions, delights, some made decades ago, some just yesterday. So its structure is a sort of kaleidoscope of moments: like the weather, you have to put up with what comes.

All of these jottings reflect my growing and deepening love affair with the countryside of England and its lore, its yearly, seasonal, daily changes, its infinite variety seen even in the dull little spot of earth to which coincidence brought Jenny, my late wife, and me in our morning all those years ago, and where I have stayed till the nights draw in. (It turned out not to be that dull after all.) For as Thomas Gray says in one of his wonderful letters, in March, 1738, 'I don't know how it is, I have a sort of reluctance to leave this place, unamiable as it may seem… [It] is very dirty, & very dull; but I'm like a Cabbage, where I'm stuck, I love to grow…'

But as the notes and jottings accumulated, and poems found by chance were added to the mix, as they turned over in my memory as the unseen ministry of worms turns over the soil, as one file bumped up against another almost forgotten one, they began to take a shape almost on their own, rather like little knobs of butter in milk gradually coalescing as you continue to turn the churn. They came to echo the endless cycle of the seasons, the grave procession of the infinitude of stars across the

night sky, the cycle of seedtime and harvest, the languor of summer and the harshness of winter. They came to notate that growing conviction that we human animals cannot thrive mentally or physically when we separate ourselves, by design or chance, from the living, pulsing, infinitely complex interdependent network of what we call, so misleadingly, ‘Nature’ – as if it were something ‘out there.’ These jottings came also to be waymarks on that slow, hardly perceived, journey of my own spring into this autumn blessed in so very many ways. *Deo gratias.*

Blessed, not least, in my autumn love, Rosanna Petra.

Autumn

Years ago, I took on a very large allotment on the edge of the village to help make ends meet, for my job (then in publishing) paid little. It was on a bit of good land, where the high land, as we flatteringly call it, slopes down into the levelness of the Fen. It was separated from the Fen by a droveway and a stream – actually, a catchwater drain, dug in the 1600s to stop the little brooks of the spring line going into the fen. For men of substance, the Adventurers, with profit in mind, were trying to drain it.

We grew, my son and I, a small cash crop – wheat, or beet, or barley – and all our own vegetables. Sometimes too many: half a furlong of onions takes some hoeing and there were lots to give away instead of flowers or wine to people who invited us to dinner. (One year the swedes were the embarrassment.) At this time of year, September, there would still be golden days of sun warm enough for me to work there with my shirt off, lifting the maincrop spuds, letting the bits of soil clinging to them dry off while I

carried on lifting, and then bagging them for taking home. The onions – and I was always able to grow very good onions, for that land suited them – had been pulled some time back and had been drying off until their stalks were dry, but still flexible. Their shiny gold globes were warm with the sun, and their rustling outer skins, India paper thin, would come off and blow about in any breeze as I plaited the dry stems into long strings. I used to hang them on nails under the eaves of the woodshed where they would catch the sun and air. Soon enough, the drones would be kicked out of my beehives by the busy little ladies getting ready for winter, and their deep-pitched hum would surround the hanging onions where many of them, for some unaccountable reason, always wanted to try to hibernate. Which they cannot do: this is the end of the road, chum: summer's lease does have an end. Coming back along the drove, I used to notice that the trees looked tired, the leaves dull and somewhat ragged after months of weather and photosynthesising. The evenings draw in, and even after a day when I had given my land its first rough digging in the sweat of my brow, I needed to put on a shirt, a sweater, as I walked home. Days grow short and the wind gets a chill when you reach September.

It was – is – easy to see the year as coming to an end, the cycle once more complete, and to indulge in a sort of gentle melancholy. Yet autumn is really a beginning. It is much more than the elegiac fall of the leaf that has reminded so many poets of our own mortality. For in actual fact the year starts here, with getting ready: there is no spring without the dying of the old year into the beginning of new life. As it happens I am in my own autumn, and that is as good a time as any to begin something new: like writing a new book. It has been nudging, pushing, at my mind like the green seedling trying to uncurl itself into leaves, freeing itself from the mould of years past that nourished it. The pressure is at its annoying worst when I am away from my desk – in the middle of the night, say, or out walking in this

familiar but ever different countryside where the years have snowed white hairs on me.

The last gale – we have had two corkers recently – has drifted a dark wet wave of dead leaves at the foot of the blackthorns that line the drove. I poke my stick into them – why do I do that? – and stir them, and the layered lower ones are already black with wet and decay. Shining against that dark background is a bright gold acorn. Given a few months, next year's seedlings, the future's trees indeed, will be thrusting greenly through this drift of decay to the strengthening light as the year warms.

Older ages may have marked the turning of the year at the solstice when the sunset begins its northward journey, but you planned the work for your year, bound by the rhythms of field and wood and seedtime and harvest, from the time the swallows left – somewhere between the nights when the Perseid and then the Leonid meteor showers streak the night sky. And when great Orion begins to hunt the Hare across the early night sky you knew that it was high time to kill off and cure your pigs, fat with gorging on the beechmast and acorns of the woodlands and the fallen apples of orchards, and cure them down for the winter. For there would not be much fodder for them after this. Archbishop Ussher of Armagh in the 1650s, following and developing (with great learning and serious calendrical maths) the Rabbinical tradition, calculated everything started in autumn: the world was created at nightfall on Sunday 22 October 4004 BC. His contemporary Dr John Lightfoot, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cambridge, suggested 9am the next morning as the exact moment. And indeed October has advantages for a beginning, for then the food supply is plentiful and the apples are ripe. (Except that the myth of the forbidden apple is due to a mistake in translation, alas.)

The three Terms – Michaelmas, Hilary (or Lent) and Easter – of the academic year which has structured my professional life begin in October. When the first

universities were young, you needed every hand available to get the harvest in before the weather turned, often about the equinox. Then you broke for the long 12 day Christmas feast, then for the spring sowing, and closed the year in time for hay harvest and barley harvest and wheat harvest. For not so very long ago the tides of the countryside lapped up against the life of the town. Michaelmas – the feast of St Michael and all Angels at the end of September – was when agricultural tenancies started, when hands were hired. It is one of the Quarter Days, days for paying rent, settling accounts, starting or finishing tenancies or employment, a day on which in another time I would have been hiring men, or, much more likely, being hired myself as a labourer. Or paying *my* rent, for owning your own house was rare even for the most of the middling sort of people before the 1950s. When we first bought the house where I write this, sixty years ago, it was two 'two up two down' labourer's cottages. In one half as tenants lived Kate and Albert, who had moved in forty years before our arrival and had planted the big double-grafted apple tree that shaded the front of the house until it blew down in a great gale thirty years ago.

Our vendor took us to meet them. 'They're nice' she said, as we slipped through the gap in the hedge that divided the two long gardens, 'and he is an interesting chap: he's been to America.' (As I write that, a sudden memory breaks surface of how big the world used to be.) They lived in the back room, round the Rayburn, tatted rag rugs on the brick floor. Modernisation ran to no more than a single cold tap, a deep pot sink, a single round-pin 15 amp socket, and a light in each room. A tarred corrugated iron privy stood outside, with a bottom-polished wooden seat over the bucket. It was lime-washed inside to keep it sweet, and smelt of Jeyes' Fluid. In the front room, a brown pelmet fringed the mantelpiece of the chocolate-painted fire surround. A line of brass tacks that had once been bright golden held it in place. There was a smell of mothballs and damp. Kate and

Albert were, we were told, soon to move to a bungalow close by, and we were offered their house for £500. We did not strictly need the room – two rooms up and two down was already a lot more than we had had before – but, without recognising what the consequences would be over the lengthening years, we agreed. And so in that one morning we had set up the train of events whereby we were soon to be not only householders but also landlords, enjoying a rent of £6.7.6 – just about half my week's income – each Michaelmas and Lady Day.

Youth takes things very lightly, and things don't always sink in. We had been there a month. Michaelmas morning came, a bright clear day with a southerly wind whose warmth was welcome after the chilly night. Kate came through the hedge with her Sunday hat on, a dark blue straw, with her basket, looking important. 'Don't you know what day it is?' she said. 'Friday?' we said, for it was. She looked as impatient as that kind soul ever could, and took from her basket one of her spectacular fruit cakes. 'For you,' she said, 'I always made one for Mrs Shaw [the previous owner] come Michaelmas and Lady Day. Albert will be coming in directly with the rent.' A strange, not altogether pleasant moment. For the Johnsons Michaelmas and Lady Day were days of ceremony, when you put your hat on if you were Kate, for these were the days they paid their rent and ensured their tenancy for another six months. Albert insisted we signed the rent book: our predecessor's signature was there every six months, going back a long way. It was an odd feeling, not easy to get used to. I did not need that legal proof that I could not evict him, for why should I want to?

The academic year begins, as I said, in October. For decades that cycle has ruled my life, and peasant though I think myself to be, the academy has claims on me I would not have missed. So just when the martins are flying south, arrivals: the first of the wintering geese from the high north, and, from all over, the hopes of the nation, whom one hopes will not be geese. It was always exciting, welcome if quite a shock to the system: first, re-asserting the old patterns and meeting once more colleagues after a long break, when much work had been done, quietly, alone, unobtrusively; and then, students. Some return, like migrants, changed in mind and body by the summer; and a third of them, of course, unknown quantities with unknown qualities and unknown expectations. But it is surprising each year how quickly you shake down into a normality. This is their beginning, this is your resuming.

I remember my own first experience of a Cambridge October – which must be so similar to that of thousands of others. I came up to the University from my Lancashire school with little idea of what to expect and nobody really to advise me. First of all, there was that tense scurry and bustle of trying to pretend you knew what you were doing and, at the same time, feverishly finding out what and who were where and what needed doing *now,* and what could be put off, and trying to get hold of the language and jargon of the place, and all those second and third years with their off-putting confidence… and then the scurry to the Societies' Fair, where various University clubs tried to persuade you to join them, and you did, and then spent the best part of a term trying to get out of all but a few of them.

For someone like me from the damper, cooler and cloudier north, who had only seen Cambridge once before, in the dead December of the previous year when I had come up for a week to take the entrance examination, the weather was – well, the golden light and the balmy temperature made it feel a bit like you imagined Heaven might be on a good day. Nor had I ever been in a place

architecturally so beautiful. As often, the first days of Term coincided with a spell of lovely weather, and the river called, and sirens in the second year beckoned you to the languor of punting. Not that I could then do it… but I soon learned, wetly. And so, in all the scurrying, there were some hours of slow progress past the Backs of the Colleges, past mellow old brick, green lawns, golden willows who trailed their soft fingers gracefully in the water, and close encounters with indignant mallard ducks. Then the Upper River called, and, more bold, after taking the College Punt up onto the higher water – the old leat for the long defunct King's Mill – by the rollers next to the sluice, you soon passed into a quieter world, where the banks opened out to green fields, and stands of osiers that once would have been cropped for withies and basket. Then came something approaching wilderness, a place of deep shade under quiet trees, and thick undergrowth, called Paradise. The future seemed such a long way off.

I remember a golden October evening of gentle punting up-river, past where Scudamore's mend their punts, under the Fen Causeway road bridge, then past the (then) mowed lawn of Hodson's Folly on one bank and the Bathing Sheds on the other. Mr Hodson, later butler of Pembroke College, had built the temple-like stone summerhouse in 1887 for his daughter to change in, and from the grass of its discreet, walled, elegant little riverside terrace, Mr Hodson could keep paternal watch on her as she swam in the river. Two matching yew trees flanked the little building. We did not try to make it to Grantchester, for the warm October light was going. We turned by those old pollard willows which Gwen Raverat's wood engravings caught so beautifully in their quietude. Bats were flitting under the lee of the trees of Paradise, taking over from the martins as the dusk deepened. We passed a moored punt, with a couple in it, oblivious to us or the bats. An occasional splash where a large fish turned and broke surface reminded of the life beneath. A bumble bee, I remember,

one of the big plump ones, hitched a ride for a hundred yards or so. I hope we were going in the right direction for her.

As I write, I look out of the study window and my gaze rests on the trees at the bottom of the garden, now beginning to lose their leaves, and I see a jay. I know they are pirates, but they are spectacularly handsome ones, and I do like them despite their guzzling of eggs and small birds when they get the chance. And we owe them a lot, too.

There is an old country saying, ‘The thorn is nurse to the oak.’ For years it never made sense to me, but by a serendipitous chain of unconnected conversations and reading, it does now. A mature oak produces many, many acorns, and not a one of them has a chance of growing beneath the deep shadow of the parent tree. In season I pick up pockets full of them from the tree I planted decades ago by the river, and I scatter them in places where they might have a chance, where agricultural machinery can’t reach and where they will be out of the range of weedkillers. With one exception, that is the last I see of them, but I keep trying. However, the glamorous jay who visits my garden on his raids – actually there may be more than one, but I can’t recognise individuals – is the real hero of this story. For the jay in autumn will pick up to nine acorns in its beak or in its gullet and fly off to a bramble thicket or a hedge bottom, often enough hawthorn or blackthorn, where it buries them one by one. In early spring the acorn sprouts, and puts down a strong taproot, while at the same time opening two fleshy leaves full of protein to photosynthesise. Now our clever Jay – I am inclined to give him/her a capital – remembers where he put the acorns a few months back, and does the rounds,

and finds succulent protein-rich leaves pushing up to the sun through the leaf litter below the thorns. Just what a hungry bird needs at this thin time of year, and the infant oak with its long taproot can do without the leaves, for there are more where they came from. And so began many of the oaks that once clothed the wildwood country when men were few, and later made our houses, and were shaped into our ships, and so journeyed to the uttermost parts of the earth.

In these parts, come late September/early October, you often get a spell of warm, settled, quiet weather when you could believe that ripe, golden days will never cease: but the dews – some folk still used the old word 'dag' when we first came here – are heavy each morning, and the droplets on the grass blades refract the light of the low sun into spectra to dazzle eyes. It's hard not to have Keats' *Ode to Autumn*, which we 'did' at school without really seeing what it was getting at, constantly coming into your head: lines like

…And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease,

Which makes me think of when I had my own bees, or the light and the sounds of this season:

While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,
And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
Among the river sallows, borne aloft
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft

The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

He did it better than I ever could: all those sounds I know so well are here in the last verse: first, near, by the river at the bottom of the garden, then, far, from the little rise we call a hill, Will's growing lambs; then the near robin who will follow me round the garden as I do the winter digging, and then the distant swallows making ready to take the summer south with them.

They used to call it St Luke's summer, for his feast falls on the 18th. My bees are working from dawn to dusk gathering the strong-smelling nectar from the ivy tods that overhang their patch of the garden. Their clammy cells will be full of the stuff: pretty well uneatable, in my opinion, but they seem to like it. The swallows are about to go, twittering excitedly, and making momentary crotchets on the telephone and electricity wires. (They space themselves exactly at multiples of their wingspan: so, in simultaneous take-off, no bird will obstruct its neighbour.) A few martins are still about, and the flocking goldfinches are making pigs of themselves on the soft grey fleece of the thistle heads. The low sun is setting noticeably further to the south each day now, and the light is mellow, low across the stubbles where the partridges sit outward-facing in their round coveys. We have no hills here, but I remember Milton's lovely lines – actually, he is remembering his beloved Virgil – about a sunlit evening:

And now the sun had stretched out all the hills,
And now was dropped into the western bay;

Here it is trees that in the golden light reach out across the flat fields to the ditches on the further side. At dusk you can hear the cock pheasants' 'Kek *kek*' as they claim a roost for the night, and let everyone know about it.

Soon, in a month or so, the fieldfares will arrive. The starlings are already performing their evening murmuration. Muntjac deer – little pests – bark their monotonous bark all night: there were none here when we came to this part of England. Hector the Labrador pricks up his ears at the sounds of autumn, and he looks expectant if I go to the gun cabinet. Not yet, chum: let's get a bit of hard weather first. Besides, I have too much to do on the garden getting ready for the next year.

St Luke's Summer, (if we have one), does often end in a gale or two. Thomas Tusser's *Five Hundred Good Points of Husbandry* (1580), reminds us

> *October good blast,*
> *To blowe the hog mast.*

Those October gales bring down the acorn and the beech nuts, the mast on which, until the industrial farming of the last century, pigs from time immemorial were fattened before slaughter – a very good way of harvesting protein from land you could not put under the plough. The pork so fed is delicious. I last ate some in Portugal, where the old ways have not quite given over to industrialised production of meat so bland it could have come off a loom. And now we just waste Nature's bounty.

Poor Tom Tusser, first, miserably, of King's College, Cambridge, then, so happily, of Trinity Hall just along the river. He so desperately wanted to be a farmer, and gave up a well-rewarded, well-patronised career in music – when a treble he was a chorister at St Paul's – to take on a series of tenancies in East Anglia. He was not successful. As Thomas Fuller says in *The Worthies of England* (1662), '[He] spread his bread with all sorts of butter, yet none would stick

thereon.' But he left us his book on farming, a sort of Georgic, a mine of useful advice and information about country life in verse that, while it occasionally shows the impress of having read the Greek and Latin poets while at Eton under the formidable Nicholas Udall, can sometimes rise to doggerel. Some people liked it, though: his book went through seven editions, each expanded from the previous, in his last seven years of life. He too begins his book in October, at the beginning of Michaelmas Term, as all agricultural tenancies did: 'a new farmer comes in'.

Jenny, my dear, dead first wife, and I grew up in a part of England where farming even now still means sheep and cows, and only occasionally is a field ploughed for swedes or potatoes. We had never been in a countryside where the soil was black peat instead of stiff clay, where the summer turned most of the land to gold, where combine harvesters crawled across the level fields grazing the corn to stubble. When we came here first, we had never seen before the towers of angry smoke rising into the hot sky from the lines of straw which the machines excreted. For there was no use for the straw, least of all after it was chewed up by the combine, and now the wheat most plant has been bred to have short straw. (Yet up to about 1920, so A. G. Street says in one of his books, a farmer could grow wheat and make his money by selling the long, straight straw for thatching: anything he got for the grain was a bonus.) At night, the long lines of burning straw across the fields lit up the dark, and every so often the bigger heaps where the combines turned sent flames shooting higher into the sky. Beyond question it was beautiful – and enjoyable, both to watch and to light. (I was once in the nick of time to stop my son and an importunate friend setting light to the stubble of our

allotment, just combined: there was standing corn for miles, and a merry wind. That sort of memory still makes me curl my toes.) I think we are all closet pyromaniacs, and at harvest time those fires perhaps spoke, like Guy Fawkes' Night, to the sleeping primitive in all of us, who would light his Samhain fires to honour the dead; or just for fun.

You can see it as the ritual threshold of winter, the cleansing; or the stripping for action for the new race to be run. 'Yew gits rid of a terrible lot of weeds that way,' said my friend old Seth as we lit the three rows of straw the combine had left on his little patch of land, and, indeed, you do: Virgil says so as well. Having the land clean of weeds before the next cycle starts is indeed a best foot forward. But Seth was really, I am sure, making an excuse for enjoying it. Once, my parents were making their first visit to us from Lancashire, just after harvest. We had finished the meal, and the gathered dusk invited a quiet smoke outside. The northern horizon was ringed with stubble fires. And my mother suddenly shudders: 'It's just like the Blitz' – for to her this brought back with unexpected intensity the year I was born, the nights of bombing and terror and dogged determination in Manchester. And my father reminds her of her aged mother, born when Victoria had only just lost her Albert, standing in the garden in Fallowfield refusing to enter the Anderson shelter –'not just yet' – looking north at Manchester burning, and saying to him, 'O Tom, isn't it beautiful!' Sometimes the old see things differently.

Sometimes, though, in a dry year, the fires took hold on the peat itself, and might even find a piece of oak lurking beneath the surface, dry enough to take fire and smoulder. If it was a really big trunk, the fire could eat its way in for yards under the soil, almost unseen: no flame, no smoke, only a pervading bitter-sweetness that could be smelt on the wind two fields away – and steam when the rains of October started. Once 'pitted in', a big fen fire would burn for weeks, months even, and some would not die until they

had burned themselves right out, or a big snowfall came to smother them. To try to put them out, to dig them out, might only make things worse by increasing the supply of air to the fire. And so the fire down below burned, and those who knew trod warily round it. For not seldom, the surface of the land would look as if nothing was amiss, yet it was a thin crust over the furnace. Men, and animals, had been known to fall in: then the sudden rush of air lets the pent-up gas explode with a blue flash and a ‘whoosh’: and a scream.

It does not happen now: or not much. Stubble burning was stopped two decades ago. The last fen fire I saw was caused by a group of youths, joyriding in a stolen car, and then abandoning and firing it. As luck would have it, under the ground where they left the car there was a buried bog oak. It burned for weeks.

In those years when people did not plough the land immediately after harvest, as most do now, the stubbles had another benefit particularly appreciated by connoisseurs. Grain dropped by the combine – they are not all that efficient – sprouted, and brought the wild creatures – the wintering duck, and pheasants, and partridges – to feed on it, and dinners to a man with a gun. But, also, field mushrooms, and puffballs, and inky caps, grew in profusion then. If the lines of straw were burned, so much the better, for then the pale mushrooms could easily be seen, no longer covered by straw. Thus was an autumn pleasure made much easier. You could in half an hour gather a couple of two gallon buckets, full; the pleasure in simple gathering way beyond need or even use is I suppose a very atavistic pleasure. We ate them; we preserved them; we gave them away to other people who probably had gathered