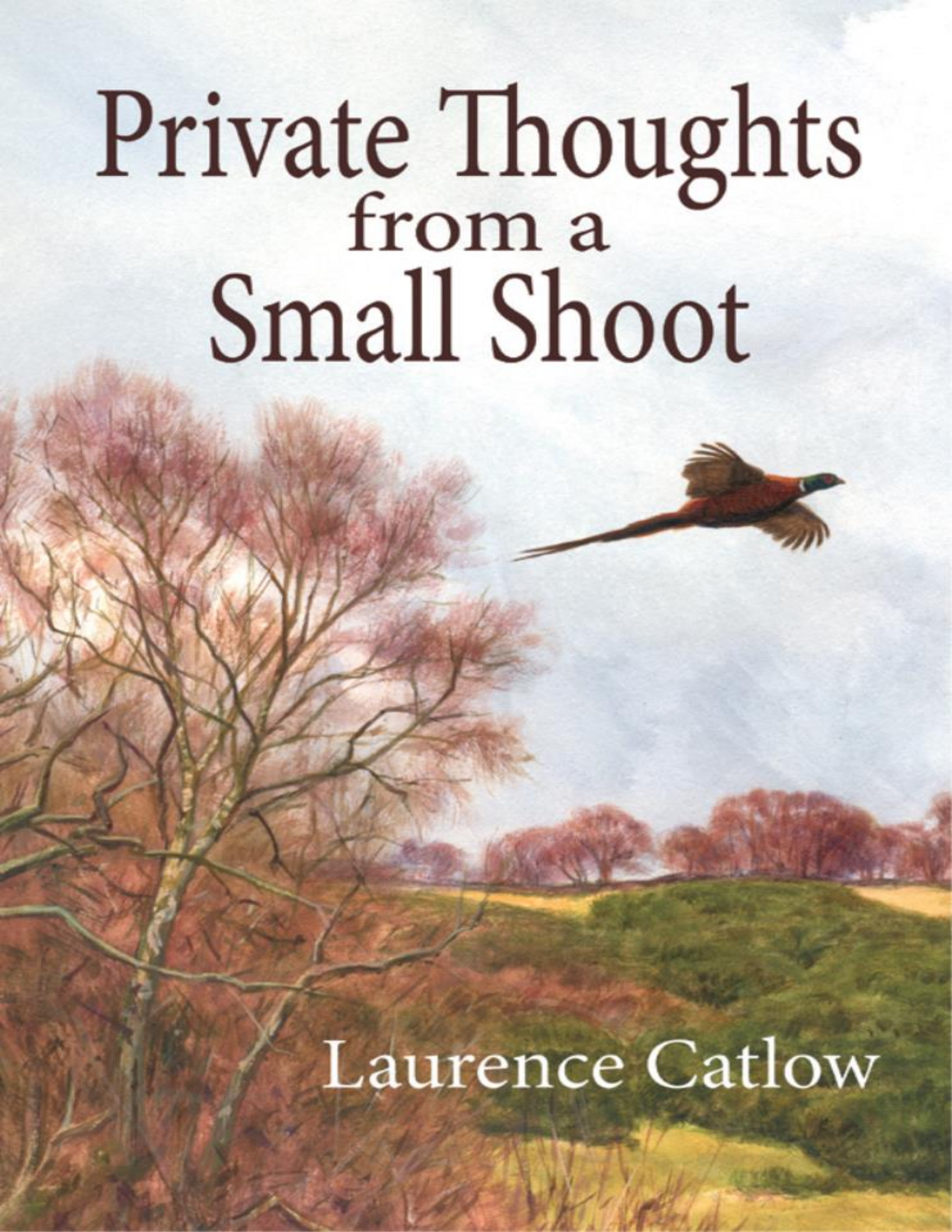
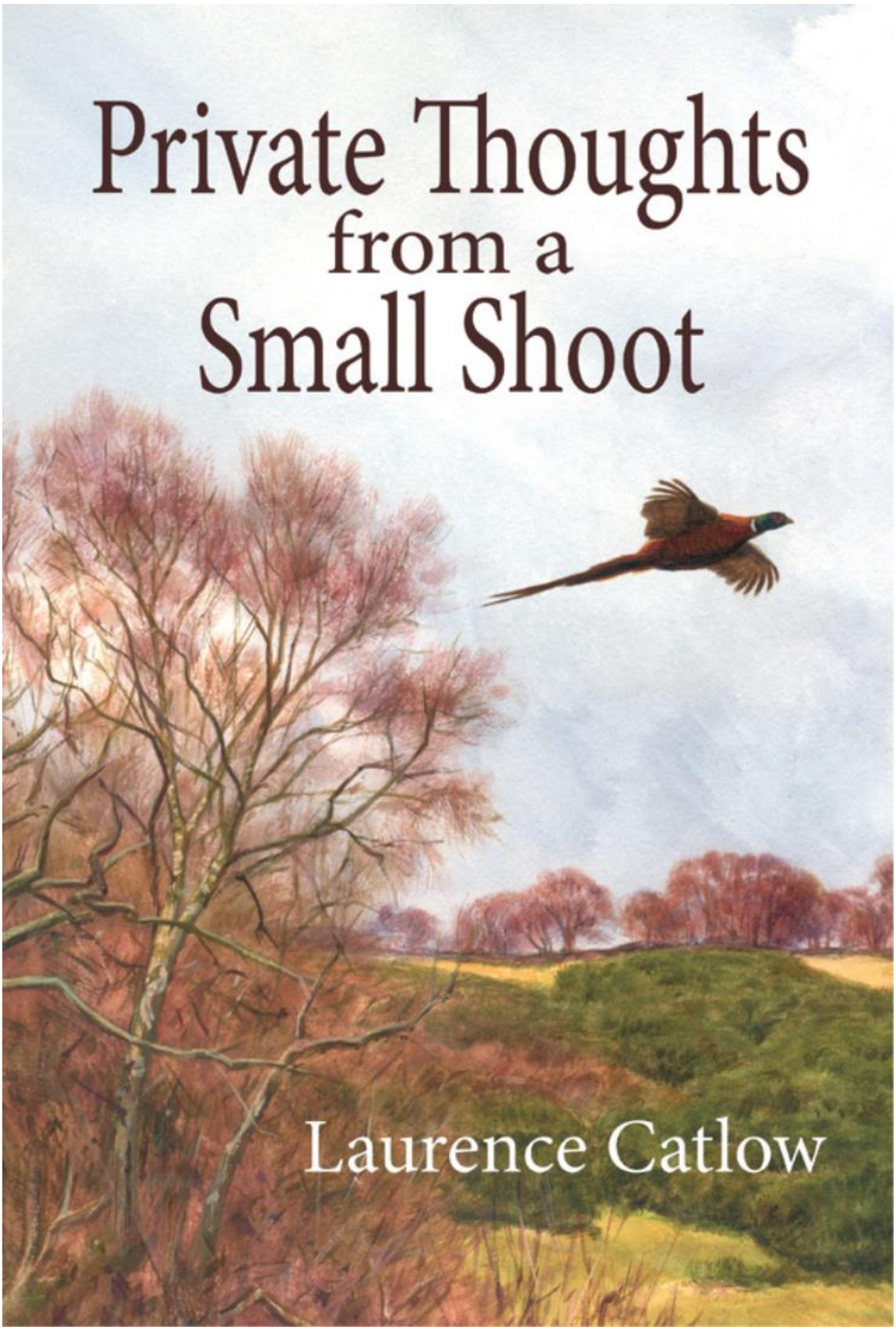
Private Thoughts from a Small Shoot



Laurence Catlow

Private Thoughts from a Small Shoot



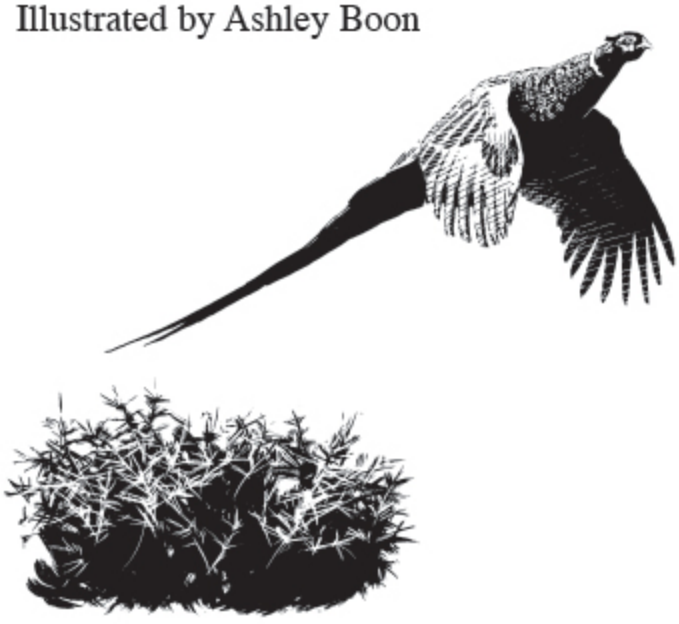
Laurence Catlow

Private Thoughts from a Small Shoot

Private Thoughts from a Small Shoot

Laurence Catlow

Illustrated by Ashley Boon



Merlin Unwin Books

CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

JULY

Right to roam; my beautiful pheasant shoot; Catlow the fisherman; shooting experience; appraising the dogs

Not long ago – it was early in June and the sun was shining – I spent the afternoon wandering round my little farm. There are just over fifty acres of it and, as far as I am concerned, it is the centre of the world, lying up there on the edge of the Pennines not far from a little village called Brough. There are just over fifty acres of it, with perhaps another thirty where I have permission to go exploring with my dogs and my gun; but it is those fifty acres that really matter to me. They are all mine, those fifty acres are; they are my kingdom, my pride and my joy; they are my pheasant shoot, and it does not bother me a fig that fifty acres are too few for anything but a very rough and ready sort of pheasant shoot. They are a place for me and for my dogs and for my friends; we are all perfectly content with a rough and ready sort of pheasant shoot; they are a private place and I rejoice that there is no right of way over a single square inch of any one of my fifty acres.

I do not want half the world tramping over my little kingdom. I want most people nowhere near it. I want to share it with just a few kindred spirits; and so when spirits not on the list suggest to me that this is an exclusive and selfish attitude, I suggest to them that they should grant me unconfined access to their gardens and their garages and their bedrooms. They always tell me that their garages

and their gardens, not to mention their bedrooms, are a different matter altogether. I cannot see how; private property, it seems to me, is private property, whether or not it is enclosed by a neatly clipped privet hedge or thickly carpeted or sheltered from the elements by four walls and a slated roof. But I let the matter drop, happy to leave other men in unchallenged possession of their little kingdoms, as long as they, however grudgingly, are willing to leave me in freedom to enjoy the seclusion of my own.

I did not start these pages with the intention of announcing to the nation that, with very few exceptions, it is unwelcome on my fifty acres. I intended to celebrate rather than to exclude: to celebrate the loveliness of my fifty acres and to revel in their beauty. The other day they looked very beautiful indeed. The meadow was full of waving grass and the grass was full of bright flowers, of orchids and yellow rattle, of buttercups and tall daisies, of clover and red sorrel and purple splashes of bistort. I was walking along the edge of the meadow and, above me on the left, all the young ashes and oaks and hazels and wild cherries that I planted three years ago were waving their leaves above the tops of their tubes; and the aspen saplings, which sprang up everywhere on the Rise as soon as it was fenced off, the aspens were all swaying and shining in the breeze and the bright light.

At the top of the Rise there is an old hedge of holly and hazel, of ash and hawthorn; there is a ditch in the shadow of this hedge, choked with rushes and with rough grass. As I walked along the edge of the meadow the other day, looking up towards the line of the hedge, briefly my mind wandered away from summer, wandering off to frosty mornings in December and to the pheasants that, come next winter, will surely spring from the ditch where they love to hide, flying high over the meadow in search of

shelter on Beck. Bank Sometimes they climb all the way and are fine birds when they cross the guns.

My beck is really called a sike. There are many sikes in this part of Cumbria and, should you be interested in such things, the dictionary tells me that the word is from the old Norse. My beck even has a name; it is called Powbrand Sike and it flows straight down the steep little valley that forms the heart of my shoot; then, when my valley begins to spread itself, the sike slants across the top of the meadow, dividing the flat land where the hay grows from the rough and rising ground on the southern side; it turns against a high bank, from the top of which an old oak leans way out over the water. Then the stream splits, forming a little island where a few straggling gorse bushes have decided to grow; then it turns again and flows over my boundary towards its junction with the Bela about a mile away.

The other day the beck was full and clear, with wild roses bending over the water and spilling their white petals into the stream. Beck Bank is densely overgrown with hawthorns and brambles and impenetrable thickets of blackthorn. On the slope there are a few ashes and a few taller oaks; up on top, just over the fence that marks the limit of my land, rise three or four noble Scots pines and a line of tall, silver-trunked beeches.

Beck Bank is a problem. There is a small stand of Douglas firs at its lower and flatter end on the edge of the water, with a planting of larches at its eastern limit above the meadow gate. My pheasants love the Douglas firs and the larches and the tangled cover all over the slope. They also love to fly the wrong way when flushed, or to run out at the top corner in order to avoid being flushed at all. I have plans for the coming season, but I shall wait to explain them until the season has moved a little nearer. The other

day there was a blackcap singing somewhere in the hawthorns on Beck Bank; there was a woodpecker drumming in the firs and a cock pheasant shouting from the edge of the larches.

I went through the meadow gate, past the hedge where we eat our sandwiches on shooting days, sitting there with perhaps a dozen pheasants and a few rabbits lying somewhere near us on the bank, with our dogs waiting to be rewarded for their work in the morning: for those four cocks that Austin's Meg put over the guns back in the wood, for the runner that my Merlin brought in at last when we had all decided that it would never be found, for pheasants and rabbits flushed from spiky jungles of gorse, from dense and tearing clumps of thorns and brambles, from rush-choked ditches and from all those matted and tangled places in which my shoot abounds.

I went through the gate and walked along the bottom of the steep bank of gorse that rises on the left. The other day the bank was still yellow with flowers. It makes two little drives on pheasant days; one is called the Whins, the other the Gutter: a long, deep ditch, thick with gorse from top to bottom, that runs down to the sike from my northern boundary. Sometimes, especially during hard weather, they are productive little drives; there are also days when they do not put a single pheasant into the sky. There was one morning last season when the Gutter was full of birds, which rose into a bullying wind that swept them high over the sike. Not many of them fell.

I did not go up through the gorse the other day. I crossed the sike just in front of the patch of flat ground that is the best place for a standing gun when the dogs are busy on Beck Bank. It is right on the edge of the water, and it is the sound of water that you hear as you stand there

waiting, until suddenly there is a pheasant above you in the sky and there is barely time for you to mount your gun. I crossed the sike, remembering the four birds I shot there on my November shoot last year; then I walked up the open ground of Pheasant Hill where, seeing a few primroses still in bloom, I forgot about last November and gave myself over to the pleasures of June. There were two buzzards soaring high above me, mewing and circling on their broad wings; they make me nervous when my pens are full of poults, but at all other times I enjoy their presence over my land. Owls often nest in the wood and sometimes a pair of sparrow hawks; owls and sparrow hawks have helped themselves to more of my poults than the buzzards have ever done.

The old pen is up the hill and just inside the trees. I went there to inspect the wire and decide how much of it needed replacing. The pen has been there for eight years now; it is on a slope, and the wire on the bottom side, as the weight of earth and stones and rotting leaves builds up behind it, is beginning to bulge and tear. Next year may be the time to rebuild it; this year I think an afternoon's work, full of sweat and midges, will be enough to make it secure again.

After deciding this I sat in the sunshine above the pen and smoked for five minutes; I watched a red squirrel bound away from me through the trees; briefly I looked forward to those August days that will be spent watering and feeding birds, hanging hoppers and filling them, setting and checking my traps, lying in ambush for the crows that will start descending from the sky in black hordes to stuff themselves on my grain. There is plenty to be done at High Park in August; but it is always good to rest for a while at the end of another afternoon's work, lying back in the sun and listening to the sound of gorse pods popping in the August heat.

I did not get round all my fifty acres the other day; I walked along my top ground above the wood, a long strip of open land between the edge of the trees and the boundary fence, rushy land with dense tangles of briars and haws and brambles. This is where my best pheasants rise. Merlin flushes them from the rushes and the brambles; some fly over the boundary fence and are crossing targets for my gun. These are just ordinary birds, but others swing to the right and fly over the steep sides of the wood, high over the sike where my friends are waiting with their boots in running water. They are fine fast birds and you must get onto them very quickly.

I wandered into the wood itself, where willow warblers and wrens and chaffinches were singing away. My wood has a name as well as my sike; it is called Brogden's Plantation, and I have no idea who Brogden was or if it was he who planted it. To my eyes it does not look like a plantation at all, but like a little remnant of the wild wood; it is mostly hazel and birch, with a few oaks and ashes and dead elms down by the water. It was coppiced once and I should like to coppice it again; but there are sheep in the wood until August and, although they avoid the steeper parts – which means most of it – and although they browse mostly on the edges, you cannot coppice a wood where sheep roam. I cannot afford to fence off the wood and so the sheep will stay until I have turned into a rich man. Given the presence of the sheep there is a surprising amount of cover in Brogden's Plantation.

As I walked through my wood the other day I saw a brood of pheasants scampering ahead of me to take shelter in the rushes. I counted seven or eight of them and wondered how many would survive into the coming winter. Reaching my eastern boundary I went down along the rickety fence, through the hazels and the birches, down to

the sike and the deep shadows at the bottom of the slope. I began to follow the stream back though the wood, squelching through the marshy land in the narrow bottom, skirting the rotting trunks of fallen elms, watching a few rabbits running ahead of me and a pigeon or two clattering from the trees.

Down in the bottom of the wood in high summer, down there by the sike, it is always damp and green and full of shadows; there are ferns on the edge of the water and there is moss on the fallen trunks and branches and on all the rotting stumps; but even in high summer I never walk there beneath the dense cover of the leaves without thinking of the same place in pheasant time, in November and, better still, in December and January, when all the trees are bare except for those clusters of shrivelled brown leaves hanging from the branches of oaks, and for those polished and pointed green leaves on the hollies, except for these and the twining masses of ivy round so many of the birches; and though it may be June with a hot sun shining above the leaves, I think of frost sharp on the winter air and deep in the cold ground, I think of pheasants crouching in piles of brash and in the dense thickets of gorse that extend along the edge of the trees on top of the valley's northern slope; my mind's eye sees dogs hunting up and down the slope, with guns waiting on the edge of the sike, until all at once the first pheasant comes gliding silently over the trees. This little drive is called North Bank and it is, I think, the most dependable drive on my little shoot.

I did not go up to the high ground of my faraway, up above the gorse to the rushes where the rabbits squat. Occasionally we find a hare there as well, but, although I love the rich flavour of their flesh, hares are now a rare presence on my ground and they are no longer shot. I left the Ten Acre unvisited and the Middle Pasture below it and

the Stackhole beyond; they are all rushy fields and they are always worth a walk on shooting days; rabbits are their usual contribution to the bag, but there is often a pheasant or two and sometimes a woodcock, with more rarely a snipe from the marshy ground in the Stackhole below the spring.

I did not even go up to the New Pen in the fenced-off strip above the Whins, although mention of it reminds me of a December pheasant that rose from the edge of the wire and kept rising until he had flown over four standing guns, too high and too fast for all four of them; and the sun was shining on him as he flew and it was very beautiful to see. Last season was the first with the New Pen; but already I have learned from experience and I shall be surprised if, during the coming season, I cannot exploit its presence more successfully. After the first shoot or two I think the strip to which it belongs will be better driven with walking guns ten yards below the fence rather than with standing guns waiting down below the gorse on the edge of the sike.

I left the New Pen unvisited and came back down to the sike through a gap in the gorse, seeing at once that the rides we cut two or three years ago now need clearing again, and that both the Whins and the Gutter would benefit from more brutal and extensive assault with loppers and strimmers and saws. They would still hold plenty of birds and, with more gaps and clearings in the gorse, I fancy our dogs would manage to put more of them onto the wing. I did not promise to get it all done this summer, though I told myself that it would be a good idea to make a start. The rides, at least, must be made easily passable again. Next Lent, I decided, would be the time for a really savage attack; for gorse, as you probably know – unless you set fire to it and burn it to the ground – gorse resists any attempt to take back even a portion of the land it has

claimed for itself; it resents all efforts at control or management; it pricks and pierces the man who would hack it down; it scratches and tears him, so that every yard, every foot of progress exacts its sharp price of suffering and pain; and it leaves its spikes in gloves and stockings and flesh, waiting there to wound the enemy when he thinks the day's struggle is at last over; there is something penitential about time spent in intimate contact with gorse; it is an ideal activity for Lent.

I sat down when I came back to the water, somewhat relieved that I had just postponed any serious gorse management for almost a year. I sat down, lit my pipe and enjoyed the feel of the summer sun and the sight of a clump of ragged robin, with pink flowers waving and straggling on their stalks above a patch of boggy ground. I rarely go to High Park without sitting for a few minutes and marvelling at the sequence of events that first brought me there and then, three or four years later, made me the owner of the place. It might so easily never have happened; I might have missed all the joy that has come to me from those fifty acres of rough ground. Sometimes I cannot believe that it was an accident; sometimes I feel sure that God always intended me to be a landowner; sometimes I fancy that, from all eternity, he has been planning High Park as the place that would some day turn into my little portion of heaven upon earth.

Sitting by the sike the other day, and marvelling all over again at the fact that the fields all round me were mine, sitting there and drifting between hope and memory and present contentment, sitting there with vague schemes of improvement, with pleasant memories of past seasons and with the immediate delight of the sights on every side of me, sitting there quietly and smoking, I felt – as I so often feel – all the power of the hold that High Park has taken on my heart in the course of the last ten years. And my inability to get you round fifty acres of land without stopping every few minutes to sit and smoke or stand and stare, without turning aside into a stream of memory and association and reflection, this incapacity of mine has helped me to realise all over again why I so love the place.

It is beyond doubt very beautiful, but there is so much more than beauty there; for I can never look at any part of it without seeing much more than my eyes are showing me;

always there is some recollection from last winter or from five seasons ago, perhaps even from last week; and I walk every inch of it with plans for the future as well as with these memories from the past. Next year there are spruces and larches to plant on either side of the new pen; there will be Scots pines too for the strip that runs along the top of Middle Pasture; and the ditch that runs down its west side must sooner or later be fenced off and planted up and turned into another little drive.

At High Park, just as on the rivers that I have fished for so many years, there is a richness of association that I find nowhere else, not even in places that I have known much longer or in places where I spend more time. High Park is very special because I own it and am thus free to shape and change and to involve myself more deeply, more powerfully in its earth and in its landscape; but it seems to me, more generally, that a sportsman's places, which seep out moods and images and memories, become in a very special way a part of himself, and continually they are enriching both themselves and the man who loves them with the growing deposit of experience. It is like the accumulation of leaf-mould beneath the trees. It is like this on the Eden and the Wharfe as well as at High Park. And in these places, in these sacred little corners of the world, we find a blend and an intensity of feelings that belongs to them alone; we find excitement and peace at the same time; often we feel a deep and thankful contentment; sometimes we are lost in praise; there are times when our pleasure in these places is exuberant; there are calmer and more thoughtful times. We share these places with our friends; we spend long hours in them by ourselves. They are the places where we go to disentangle ourselves from the clutter of our surrounding lives; we go to them to free and to find ourselves and we do this in the name of sport; but what we call sport is properly a sort of ritual of praise, a sort of reverent acknowledgment

of the sustaining beauty and all the richness of the created world.

If, by the way, these thoughts seem to you to be windy and empty or tedious thoughts, then you will loathe this book, for it will be full of thoughts along similar lines, though there will be dogs in between, dogs and pheasants and ducks and rabbits and probably a few woodcock. There will be late summer at High Park, followed by the autumn and the winter and the sport that belongs to them. I have done a very poor job of introducing you to my little kingdom; you will get to know it much better in the months ahead, and some of you may know something of it already from earlier books and from my articles in *Shooting Times*. Meanwhile I had better attempt to introduce myself, although it is again possible that you may already have met me in earlier writings either as a trout fisher or as a shooting man.

If you have met the fisher you will know that he is not of the sort who fills his bag whenever he goes to the river, the sort who casts with unerring precision and delicacy, who sees and identifies the fly on the water, selects an appropriate and beautifully tied artificial from one of his well-ordered boxes, flicks it over the nose of an unsuspecting two-pounder, promptly brings up the two-pounder and then calmly drives home the hook, playing the trout thus attached to his line with an unruffled judgment and with a perfect application of pressure, until it admits that it has met its master, turns on its side and is drawn smoothly over the net. There are days when I return from the river feeling moderately pleased with myself; there are just as many days when I creep home with an empty bag; after losing the only trout I hooked because I caught my rod in an overhanging branch; after putting down fish after fish with bungled casts or a thoughtless choice of fly; after

spending more time rescuing my flies from alders and willows than putting them onto the water; after failing to cope with a downstream wind; after falling in twice and tearing my waders on a rusty strand of barbed wire; after fishing, in short, like a man who has learned nothing since the day forty years ago when he first held a fly rod in his hand.

I am not an expert fisher and I am most certainly not an expert shot. My experience as a shooting man, moreover, is limited. Over the years I have done a bit of wildfowling, but only with small rewards and I confess that, in general, I found it cold and uncomfortable. I have never shot a goose, although I can remember the end of an inland flight when the moonlight was suddenly filled with honking; and then a skein of Canadas came low over the pond where we were crouching in the hope of a last duck or two. Geese can never have offered a shooter an easier target, but my surprise and excitement got the better of me and I went home at the end of it all with only a brace of mallard to hang in the shed where my game waits until it is time for me to get it ready for the freezer or the table.

Many of you will have killed more pigeon in a single day than I have managed in more than thirty years. My experience of partridges is small and I have no experience at all of shooting abroad. I love sitting in a grouse butt; unfortunately I do it so infrequently that, on those rare and grand occasions when I find myself peering out expectantly over the heather, I also find that I can hit very few of the birds that some instinct for self-preservation sends skimming over the heather in the direction of my gun. I am much more likely to shoot a duck as it flights into a grey pond on the edge of the darkness, but the ponds where I sit waiting for them, with old Merlin at my side, rarely bring in more than a dozen or so mallard and sometimes a few teal.

Whenever I leave one of my ponds with as many as four duck in the bag I feel very happy indeed; and, incidentally, I think that flighting duck, although I do it on a very modest scale, is perhaps my favourite form of sport with the gun.