



## Back to the Land

### Second Nature

Richard Mabey (ed.) Jonathan Cape £12.50

Second Nature is a verbal and visual exploration by some 42 writers and artists, of the idea that our relationship with the land and the natural world is a vital part of our imaginative, cultural and social life. This attractive and challenging book breaks new ground, not only in its format but in the way it highlights the link between human politics and natural processes. As well as much delightful writing, painting, drawing, sculpture and photography - all fresh from the impact of personal and local experience - there is a richness of ideas and critical analyses that gives a rare quality to this collection.

Part of the editorial aim is to restore the links between the conservation movement and the arts, in order to redress the present bias towards the scientific and impersonal. This is seen as urgently necessary by editor Richard Mabey who feels that 'the fate of the natural world, which is also of course our fate, has been declared the province of specialists', where passion must be replaced by compromise and consensus. Somewhere along the line he believes that many deep and widely shared human feelings have become devalued currency. This is the territory that is explored in the book.

The contributors are all working writers and artists for whom a relationship with nature and the land is a matter of personal concern and a subject of their work. They are 'from backgrounds in teaching and the arts that are usually regarded as marginal to rural or ecological affairs. None of us ... is either a scientist or a thoroughbred country person'. But the time has come when we need less about science and the preservation of rare species and special protected places, and more about the preservation of all that familiar complex of everyday plants and animals and local places which make up our common heritage. Hence the call for the arts with all their emotional force and power of persuasion to help justify and strengthen the

## REVIEWS:

May 1985 Marxism Today 45

resolve of people to speak out for what they find of value in the world around them.

Visual works alternate with essays and poems, not as illustrations but as individual statements in another language. Some celebrate the constantly changing aspects of the land through time sequence. Others evoke the physical experience of being in the country and the closeness of the elements. Many of the drawn and painted images reveal the careful and lovingly detailed scrutiny of one place in order to capture its essence.

The essays and poetry start from the personal and the particular, and from there make illuminating connections that help to demolish some of the false alternatives with which we are presented in this dangerously polarised world. Edward Blishen traces how children meet one of their first false alternatives in the sharp divisions between town and country as pictured in childrens' books. No such division existed for poet Norman Nicholas who has lived his 70 years in the same house in one small community among the iron ore mines of Cumbria. Here field and salt marsh drive like a wedge into the back streets of the small town and the industrial revolution is engraved on the landscape. Nevertheless, he believes that civilisation, based on the city, has made even those of us who live in the country, self conscious about nature, observers rather than participants. Kim Taplin sees the huge tracts of land controlled by the Ministry of Defence as the new enclosures that once more will 'swallow up men'. In her poems, the landscape that speaks to us through history in defence of the earth is the landscape of Greenham Common, Lakenheath, High Wycombe, and Faslane, ancient homes of people, we are reminded.

John Barrell takes up the theme of rural poverty in his fascinating account of how the 17th century myth of a pastoral golden age of leisure was replaced by the myth of a golden age of labour, when the economic expansion of a newly Great Britain needed to stress both the importance of work, and the idea of a class in the course of nature born to labour. Rural poverty was idealised as a natural ingredient of the dignity of labour - an association of ideas that he believes still blunts out concern for low wages in the countryside. He sees this image of the golden age of labour as part of the inspiration for the modern back to the land movement, with its emphasis on self sufficiency, organic and unmechanised farming, nostalgic interest in old crafts,

together with a tendency to undervalue the skills of modern agricultural workers. He agrees that there is virtue in a nostalgia that looks back to the past as a basis for building a golden future; but he points to the danger of the notion of a golden age of the rural past in the way it manifests itself in the writings of some self-sufficients and conservationists. The golden age is seen as belonging *ipso facto* to a natural order before politics, and is thus often accompanied by a distaste for any political action that might make its realisation possible.

Raymond Williams looks at developments since his book *The Country and the City* in which he showed that, with the crisis in the cities and the growth of agribusiness, country and city are increasingly indissolubly linked within a general and crisis ridden development of a capitalist economy. He highlights some interesting and complex changes in general attitudes, with a continuing growth of country settlement and occupations of new and hopeful kinds. This is significant because, though food production was always central to rural life, all previous viable rural societies have included a wide development of crafts and trades. In the periods of centralisation of state power, the concentration of the money market and large scale factory production drained the countryside of much of its work and relative autonomy. Now things are moving the other way, with a powerful demand for decentralisation of state power. There is a trend towards smaller and specialised workplaces which, with the advantages of new energy and communication techniques, can be more diversely sited, including in country areas. In sheep rearing areas in particular, he sees a real movement towards a more diverse and more balanced society with a new sort of people moving in with their trades and crafts, seeking a livelihood of a kind that goes with the grain of village life.

Raymond Williams deplores the drive to get rid of small inefficient producers. (The number of farms has halved since 1914.) We need a quite different assessment of efficiency whose criterion should be the production of a stable economy, an equitable society and a fertile world. To achieve that we need a new kind of political ecology that can reasonably propose alternative kinds of social and economic organisation; he sees the now emergent 'green socialism' as the most hopeful political movement of our time.

Lee Chadwick