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Nesting in English fields : bird narratives and the re-imagining of post-war Britain

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‘Nesting in English Fields’
Bird narratives and the re-imagining of post-war Britain

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Abstract

This thesis explores what a reading of bird narratives from the mid-twentieth century reveals about contemporary anxieties around human identity. Starting from the assumption that people often use animals to say things they cannot otherwise articulate, it investigates whether readings that foreground the representation of the more-than-human world in both familiar and unfamiliar texts can shed new light on a period of British history that was characterised by radical social change. The texts are examined using insights from historical contextualisation, ecocriticism and animal studies.

The period is known as one in which previous ideas about human identity were being destabilised by new thinking around issues such as gender, race and sexuality. However, my readings show all the texts examined to be dominated by a single, overarching question, namely whether humans are capable of creating and sustaining a world worth living in. In *The Owl Birds* by J.K. Stanford (1949) and *Adventure Lit Their Star* by Kenneth Allsop (1949) the answer is yes, but this positive response is premised on two very different constructions of national identity and of the type of country that Britain should become after the Second World War. In the 1960s texts, *The Peregrine* by J.A. Baker (1967) and *A Kestrel for a Knave* by Barry Hines (1968), the answer is an unequivocal no. My readings demonstrate a close connection between the pessimism of these books and the profound changes in agriculture that were underway during the period.

This research is important in demonstrating how readings that foreground the more-than-human world can offer new insights into both the texts under discussion and also the culture in which those texts were produced. In addition, in the current era of anthropogenic ecological crisis, they add to our understanding of what lies behind the way that humans interact with the more-than-human world. Without such an understanding, efforts to solve the crisis are unlikely to succeed.

Contents

	Page
Acknowledgements	2
Abstract	3
Introduction	5

PART ONE: *The Owl Birds and Adventure Lit Their Star*

Introduction to Part One	18
Chapter one: Avocet	25
Chapter two: Little Ringed Plover	36

PART TWO: *The Peregrine and A Kestrel for a Knave*

Introduction to Part Two	46
Chapter three: Peregrine	49
Chapter four: Kestrel	60
Conclusion	74

Introduction

This research project investigates how readings of bird narratives from the mid-twentieth century can shed light on contemporary anxieties around human identity. It takes critical frameworks from the present day and applies them retrospectively to texts that have historically been neglected or interpreted only narrowly. By combining insights from ecocriticism and animal studies with historical contextualisation of the texts, it demonstrates that readings that foreground the representation of the more-than-human world can yield new insights about both the texts themselves and the culture in which they were produced.

Beginnings

The project began with two sparrows. Towards the end of my undergraduate studies, I read *Mrs Dalloway* for the first time and was arrested by an image of the shell-shocked Septimus Smith in Regent's Park:

A sparrow perched on the railing opposite chirped Septimus, Septimus, four or five times over and went on, drawing its notes out to sing freshly and piercingly in Greek words how there is no crime and, joined by another sparrow, they sang in voices prolonged and piercing in Greek words, from trees in the meadow of life beyond a river where the dead walk, how there is no death (Woolf 2000, p21).

Later I discovered that Woolf had written in a memoir how she herself, during a period of severe mental distress, believed that the birds in the garden outside her sick room were singing in Greek choruses (Dalgarno 2001, p33). I was intrigued by the idea that a deeply traumatised subject might find meaning in birdsong, and also that the birdsong might be understood in terms of a language that is at the same time one of the shaping forces of Western culture and also a common trope for what is incomprehensible. Birds enter our lives so frequently that we often hardly notice them, but this fragment of text hinted that if we would only pay them proper attention, they might open a way to uncover a multiplicity of hidden meanings, both cultural and personal. For example, in the context of *Mrs Dalloway* as a whole, these sparrows offer a radical alternative to the culture that the novel critiques, challenging both its constructions of madness and also its refusal to confront the crisis of representation brought about by the First World War.

In the same year that I read *Mrs Dalloway*, Jonathan Cape published Helen Macdonald's phenomenally successful *H is for Hawk* (2014), in which Macdonald describes how training a

goshawk helped her come to terms with the death of her father. Here again, someone for whom the world no longer made sense was able to find meaning in birds. This struck a deep chord. My childhood and early adulthood were dominated by the death of my younger brother in a road accident when he was seven, an event that my sister and I were forbidden to talk about.

Unsurprisingly, this meant the family didn't talk about very much at all. The one time when we did become relatively communicative was when we went out birdwatching. We were members of the RSPB and had several holidays visiting reserves in pursuit of rare species: marsh harriers, red kites, avocets and Dartford warblers drew us like magnets to different parts of the country.

Reading Woolf and Macdonald, with their suggestions that birds might help humans negotiate unspeakable experiences, led to some interesting questions. Why were these holidays so successful when the rest of our lives was so miserable? What were we really looking for? I began to wonder whether there was something in the rarity of these birds, their status as almost-extinct species, hovering on the brink between life and death, that compelled us to seek them out. Did the reserves offer a safe space to confront, albeit subconsciously, fears about endings, loss and death? Did the time spent in hides, watching birds move so effortlessly and enviably between sky, land and water, give us a temporary sense of freedom from an earthbound existence that had become, at times, almost intolerable?

My suspicions that birds could be more significant than I realised were confirmed in an article by Macdonald. 'Nest of Spies' (2013) discusses a book by Maxwell Knight, an MI5 handler who was the inspiration for James Bond's controller, M. Ostensibly, *The Cuckoo in the House* (1955) is the story of how Knight raised a cuckoo chick in his own home. However, Macdonald also finds in it 'a fascinating and troubling fable about the meanings we give to animals, and a book that unwittingly revealed all sorts of strange collisions and collusions between natural history and national history in post-war Britain' (Macdonald 2013, no pagination). Cuckoos are an important English cultural marker, their arrival each year being recorded in *The Times*, and also an emblem of duplicity, due to their habit of laying their eggs in other birds' nests. 'The enemy within,' she writes. 'Knight, naturalist and counter-subversion specialist, was, of course desperate to own one' (Macdonald 2013, no pagination). She goes on to draw parallels between the cuckoo's secretive sex life and Knight's clandestine homosexuality, and uses contemporary writing on natural history to reinforce her claim that 'we can — and do — use animals as our proxies; we use them to speak for us, to say things that we cannot otherwise articulate' (Macdonald 2013, no pagination).

This analysis made me want to seek out other bird narratives to see whether they might also be saying things that were difficult to articulate, and whether the birds might be vehicles for exploring issues that for whatever reason could not be confronted directly. I discovered two of my chosen texts, Kenneth Allsop's *Adventure Lit their Star* and *The Owl Birds* by J.K. Stanford, both published in 1949, through the work of Sophia Davis (2010, 2011). Davis's readings of these texts are a fairly small part of her PhD, but her insights into the ways they shed light on the construction of British identity at a crucial point in the country's history inspired me to investigate them further. I spent some time searching for other bird narratives that might inform my research and eventually settled on J.A. Baker's celebrated 1967 narrative *The Peregrine*, and Barry Hines' 1968 novel *A Kestrel for a Knave*. These texts spanned a period that was characterised by significant social upheaval and I was interested in discovering what they might reveal about anxieties around changing ideas of human identity.

Social Identity

To be clear about what I was looking for in response to my research question, some definition of the word 'identity' is necessary. When I talk about anxieties around human identity, I mean anxieties about the answer to the question 'What does it mean to be human?'. In an acclaimed introduction to the subject, Jenkins argues that identity is something dynamic that arises both internally from the individual, and externally from others who assign an identity to that individual through a process of classification. Identity, he writes, is:

... the human capacity – rooted in language – to know 'who's who' (and hence 'what's what'). This involves knowing who we are, knowing who others are, them knowing who we are, us knowing who they think we are and so on. This is a multi-dimensional classification or mapping of the human world and our places in it, as individuals and as members of collectivities (Jenkins 2014, p6).

Jenkins prefers the term *identification* to identity, since that carries the idea of identity being a process and, as he puts it, 'not a "thing"; (identification) is not something that one can *have*, or not, it is something that one *does*' (p6, emphasis in original). As Jenkins' definition implies, an individual's identity only makes sense within relationships. It is premised on ideas of similarity and difference, which in turn have to do with a sense of belonging: identification hinges on whether an individual belongs to these groups or those ones and why. The extent to which individuals and groups agree and disagree about these belongings and connections can be a source of tension that is in turn part of the process of identification.

Jenkins' definition of identification, cited above, makes specific reference to 'the human world' and implies that the process of identification takes place purely within human relationships. In this thesis, I demonstrate that relationships with the more-than-human world also play a significant role. In *The Owl Birds* and *Adventure Lit Their Star*, the birds are shown to help the human protagonists recover a sense of self that has, in different ways, been damaged by involvement in the war. In *The Peregrine*, the narrator uses his relationships with the birds he is tracking as a way of rejecting human identity altogether. In *A Kestrel for a Knave*, Billy Casper's relationship with the kestrel is a means for him to resist identities that are being thrust upon him by the institutions of state and school, and also to overcome a sense that he has nowhere to belong.

Initially I expected my readings to reveal concerns over the way that ideas about identity issues such as gender, race and class were changing in the period covered by the texts. However, as my research and thinking progressed, I realised that all four texts were dominated by an overarching question about human identity that would demand almost all my attention. I summarise this as being: 'Are human beings capable of creating and sustaining a world fit to live in?' In the 1940s texts, this question is focused on England and is tightly bound up with ideas of national identity. Both texts appear to suggest that the answer will be 'yes', if Britain becomes the right kind of country, although they differ on what kind of country that is. However, my analysis will demonstrate that there are serious fault lines running through the apparent optimism, unspoken anxieties that come to light through the application of the critical frameworks I outline above. By contrast, the 1960s texts are concerned with issues that reach further than national identity. Not only that, but their answer to this overarching question is an almost unequivocal 'no': humans are most likely going to destroy their only home, or at least render it unfit for most people to live in.

It is particularly significant for present-day readers to discover that this anxious question about the reach of human destructiveness was being asked in the mid-twentieth century, a period that some stratigraphers have identified as the start of a new geological era, the Anthropocene. First coined by the atmospheric chemist and Nobel laureate Paul Crutzen in 2000, the term refers to 'the present time interval, in which many geologically significant conditions and processes are profoundly altered by human activities' (Working Group on the Anthropocene, no date). It coincides with the start of what is commonly referred to as the Great Acceleration, a period

since the middle of the twentieth century that has been marked by massive increases in human population, species extinctions, production and discard of plastic and metals, and carbon emissions (Macfarlane 2016, no pagination).

Methodology

My readings of these texts are shaped by three areas of critical theory. First I have sought to place them in their historical context, believing that all writing is profoundly influenced by the social and cultural conditions in which it is produced, as well as itself contributing to the ongoing creation of such conditions. I have then drawn on insights from ecocriticism and animal studies in order to produce readings that foreground the representation of the more-than-human world.

Historical contextualisation

To answer my question about what the texts reveal about contemporary anxieties around human identity, I had to try and understand what it was like to be alive during the Second World War and in the immediate post-war period. We can only know the past through its cultural representations and I have approached my four narratives in the knowledge that they are, in Widdowson's phrase, 'indelibly marked' by their historical and cultural context (2001, p210). No writer can isolate themselves from the histories and ideologies that shape their culture; thus it follows that the critic who is well informed about that culture and its shaping forces will be able to arrive at a more astute interpretation of the text under discussion.

This attention to the conditions of literary production is so common nowadays that literature students may not recognise how radical it was when it emerged in the 1980s through the overlapping approaches of new historicism and cultural materialism (Belsey 2010). Prior to this, the historical context of a work of literature was considered as background information and the literary text was privileged. New historicism rejects such privileging and insists instead on parallel readings of literary and non-literary texts of the same period: the idea is that each interrogates and informs the other (Barry 2009). In a seminal essay, Montrose defines this as a combined interest in 'the textuality of history' and 'the historicity of texts':

By *the historicity of texts*, I mean to suggest the cultural specificity, the social embedment, of all modes of writing ... By *the textuality of history*, I mean to suggest ... that we can have no access to a full and authentic past, a lived material existence, unmediated by the surviving textual traces of the society in question (1989, p20, emphasis in original).

I sought to use a range of different ‘textual traces of the society in question’ to inform my readings of my primary texts. These included non-fiction writings, such as popular contemporary guides to ornithology, Mollie Panter-Downes’ wartime columns for *The New Yorker*, and extracts from diaries that were kept as part of the Mass Observation Project (Garfield 2004). For the 1960s texts I made use of contemporary environmental writing, such as Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962). I also referred to novels and poetry of the time, as well as autobiographical writing by Barry Hines’ brother, Richard, alongside authoritative secondary sources, such as books by Hennessy (2006) and Kynaston (2008). By reading from such a wide range of sources, I developed my understanding of the likely range of allusions and attitudes to the prevailing culture in each of my primary texts, with the aim of noticing where they might be evasive or self-censoring, and additionally recognising where the text might be deviating from its background, for example by appealing to nostalgia or pleading for a radical departure from the conventions of the moment (Belsey 2010, p9).

Ecocriticism

During my undergraduate studies I became interested in ecocriticism, which offered a way of combining literary studies with a longstanding interest in environmentalism. Ecocriticism is a rapidly-developing field embracing a variety of perspectives, but as a starting point Glotfelty and Fromm’s 1996 definition is still useful:

Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies (pxviii).

In common with other politically-oriented approaches to literature, ecocriticism seeks to unmask and challenge the binary dependencies that underpin different texts. Where feminist criticism has exposed the constant privileging of male over female, and postcolonialism that of colonising power over colonised subject, ecocriticism works to unmask the tendency – in Western thought at least – to privilege human over nonhuman to the point where it is assumed that ‘it is only in relation to human beings that anything else has value’ (Clark 2011, p2). This tendency is known as anthropocentrism. Ecocriticism has one important difference from these other approaches, which is that the less privileged side of the binary, the more-than-human world, cannot speak for

itself in a way that humans can understand, and therefore its response can only ever be imagined and approximated.

Ecocritics are concerned with the way 'nature' is constructed and represented in literary texts, and with the way such constructions may relate to its degradation and exploitation outside of the text. This extends to the use of the word 'nature' itself, famously described by Raymond Williams as 'perhaps the most complex word in the language' (1983, p219). More recently, Morton (2009) has argued that it is so problematic as to be a chief obstacle in the way of developing a genuinely ecological politics. In this thesis I have avoided it as far as possible and chosen to use the term 'more-than-human world' as a way of talking about the natural environment, since the alternative 'nonhuman world' is premised on the human being the privileged signifier. In addition, 'more-than-human world' acknowledges that humans are also part of nature. However, when I have wanted to distinguish specifically between humans and other animals, I have used the term 'nonhuman animal'.

Animal studies

Closely related to ecocriticism is the rapidly-growing field of animal studies. I will spend longer on this part of my methodology, since it is the aspect of ecocriticism that has had most influence on my readings of the bird narratives.

Relationships between human and nonhuman animals are at crisis point. The rise in industrial agriculture has led to the killing of animals in almost ungraspable numbers. Genetic modification and cloning have pushed back the frontiers of what humans can do to and with animals. The number of wild animals in the world has, in the last sixty years, declined by half, with almost all that loss being due to human activity. Species extinction is also at an all-time high, with many experts believing we are entering the planet's sixth great age of extinction (Worldwide Fund for Nature 2016). Yet even as real animals are marginalised to the point where many humans have virtually no interaction with them – a situation that would have been unthinkable before the early twentieth century – so representations of animals proliferate in almost every sphere of popular culture, from documentaries to cartoons, furnishing fabrics, children's books and so on. This has led, in the twenty-first century, to what Rohman has described as 'an unprecedented amount of scholarly work on the place, meaning, and ethical status of animals in relation to our signifying practices' (2009, p1).

The question ‘what do animals signify?’ is an important one, arising out of structuralism and poststructuralism. Before examining this in more detail, it is important to trace some of the historical debates around the relationship between humans and animals and in particular the long-standing controversies about where to draw the dividing line between human and nonhuman animal - if, indeed, it is appropriate or even possible to draw one at all. For the purposes of this introduction, I shall focus on Western epistemological frameworks, since all my primary texts were produced in England and because the disruption of the assumptions contained within these frameworks is one of the key elements of my critical approach.

When Descartes, in the seventeenth century, separated reason from emotion and mind from body, he consigned animals to the realm of his ‘mechanical’ universe, claiming that since they were without souls, any distressing sounds they made that suggested they might be in pain were nothing more than a mechanical response, akin to the ringing of an alarm clock (Berger 1980; Garrard 2012). This also added weight to a particular reading of the Genesis narrative, in which humans are interpreted as unquestionably superior to animals since only they are made in God’s image. In addition, it echoed Aristotle’s stipulation that the capacity for language was the marker of moral worth that therefore excluded the animal (Rohman 2009). Not everyone agreed with Descartes. As Armstrong (2008) has pointed out, his ideas did not chime with people’s everyday experience of living and working with animals. In addition, they jarred with eighteenth-century ideas of ‘sensibility’ (Garrard 2012, p148). However, few intellectuals would have challenged the idea that humans were both separate from, and superior to, animals until the seismic ideological shifts of the nineteenth century, when Darwin’s theory of evolution dealt a catastrophic blow to the principle of human exceptionalism. In the early twentieth century, Freud additionally destabilised the idea of human separateness by claiming that animality was part of the human psyche.

The suggestion that humans might simply be highly evolved animals, rather than completely separate from them, was profoundly unsettling to Western ideas of human subjectivity. Extremely rapid developments in technology compounded this insecurity. Machines were doing more and more of the work that had traditionally been done by hand; in addition, machines were one of the main reasons why the First World War saw such an unprecedented loss of life. Rohman describes Western identity at the time as ‘pitched somewhere between “natural” bodies and “artificial” bodies, between animals and machines, naturally given ontological differences and historically contingent and exterior techné’ (2009, p21). People felt threatened and their

response, according to Rohman, was to revamp social hierarchies: the further someone seemed to be from the animal, the higher their status. 'The animal' became a term against which modernity was able to define crucial concepts such as humanity, culture and reason (Armstrong 2008). As the century progressed, such hierarchical assumptions came increasingly under attack. In 1975, Singer was one of the first to condemn the concept of an 'insuperable line' dividing beings that matter from those that do not. Singer stated that it was impossible to draw a line in such a way as to include all humans and exclude all animals. He coined the term 'speciesism' to define the anthropocentric prejudice that underpins the differential treatment that humans mete out to animals (Garrard 2012, p146).

One of the first to critique the relationship between modernity, animals and cultural representation was John Berger, whose 1980 essay 'Why Look at Animals?' is seen as groundbreaking. Berger's principal argument is that 'real animals' have been almost entirely erased by modernity. Either they have been pushed to the margins by mechanisation and relegated to the status of manufactured commodities, existing only to serve human commercial interests, or they have been co-opted into human spaces as family pets or spectacles in a zoo, and rendered dependent on humans to the extent that their true identity as animals fades away. In previous eras, animals could return the gaze of the human, confirming the distinctiveness of each. Now, the animal has become like the objectified female in art: always the observed object and never the observer:

That look between animal and man, which may have played a crucial role in the development of human society, and with which, in any case, all men had always lived until less than a century ago, has been extinguished. Looking at each animal, the unaccompanied zoo visitor is alone. As for the crowds, they belong to a species which has at last been isolated' (Berger 2007, p261).

For Berger, humans have managed to render themselves completely separate from nonhuman animals, but only at great cost to themselves, as well as to the animals.

There is a parallel between the marginalisation of 'real' animals and the repression of animal subjectivity in cultural discourse. Debates around subjectivity can be seen as locked within speciesism (Wolfe 2003), still taking it for granted that the subject is always human and situating the animal as the negative 'other', the beast or the brute against which human subjectivity is defined (Baker 1993). This is despite the fact that in recent years scientists have repeatedly

demonstrated that the characteristics traditionally used to distinguish human from animal can be found on both sides of the species barrier.

A chief critic of the self-definition of the human animal in contradistinction to the nonhuman animal is Jacques Derrida, who, in 1997, gave a ten-hour address at a conference devoted to his work and entitled '*L'animal autobiographique*'. The first part of that address was subsequently published as 'The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)' (Derrida 2002). The title in French is '*L'Animal que donc je suis (à suivre)*', which plays with the fact that the French verbs *être* (to be) and *suivre* (to follow) share the same first-person singular present form (Derrida 2002, p369n). Another translation is thus 'the animal that therefore I follow after', so that as well as being a play on Descartes' saying 'I think therefore I am', the title also has a double meaning which points to Derrida's desire to destabilise, if not upend, the entire Western premise that humans come before animals. Derrida blames the unprecedented scale of human subjection of animals in the late twentieth century on the binary opposition of human versus animal, since 'the categories of "Man" and "animal" are produced by an act that simultaneously effects the category "animal" and renounces its characteristics' (McKay 2009, p263). It is 'Man' who names animals as such and in the process separates himself from the animal, paving the way for the legitimisation of increasing levels of violence against it. In Derrida's view, only a complete deconstruction of Western philosophy will enable us to resist the abuse of animals.

One of Derrida's most important points is that human attempts to draw a single dividing line between all humans and all animals are stupid (*une bêtise*) since they take no account of the multiplicity of different types of animal. Because of the huge variety of animals, it is not enough to think of a simple repositioning or elimination of the 'insuperable line'; what we are dealing with is 'a proliferation of differences within a schema of unfixed hierarchies' (Garrard 2012, p150). Furthermore, the totalising effect of the human-animal binary also works to erase the existence of *individual* animals, yet for Derrida the experience of being watched, when naked, by his cat and of recognising the shame that arose from knowing himself to be watched by one particular animal, was an experience of 'the point of view of the absolute other'. He writes: '(N)othing will have ever done more to make me think through this absolute alterity of the neighbour than these moments when I see myself seen naked under the gaze of a cat' (2002, p380).

The same can be true of the way that animals are situated within texts. Some texts represent animals in such a way that they are merely co-opted as ciphers to express something about humans. This is what Derrida is criticising when he describes fables as ‘an anthropomorphic taming, a moralizing subjection, a domestication’. He goes on: ‘Always a discourse *of* man, on man, indeed on the animality of man, but for and as man’ (2002, p405, emphasis in original). There is a tension between the idea that animals should be portrayed ‘just as they are’, distinct from humans, and the undeniable fact that animals and animal behaviour at times provide indispensable metaphors for human activity. I have been particularly aware of the difficult balance between respecting the alterity of birds and investigating a research question that is premised on the idea that animals are ‘a malleable repository for human meanings’ (Macdonald 2006, p8). This tension is impossible to resolve, but nor is it desirable that it should be, for the question is based on a recognition that human identity is not something isolated from the rest of the biosphere but is inextricably enmeshed in relationships with other forms of life. In addition, I believe that all literary criticism that foregrounds the representation of the more-than-human world contributes to the essential work of moving environmental issues from the margins of our cultural and social discourse to the centre.

In my choice of books I was therefore looking for texts that allowed birds alterity in their own terms and did not make humans the exclusive subject. It followed that they also needed to demonstrate fidelity to ornithological knowledge. On these grounds it was easy to reject Daphne du Maurier’s famous 1952 story ‘The Birds’. Whatever its other merits, this is not an environmental text. It is a story about nuclear attack that meets Derrida’s definition of a fable: ‘a discourse *of* man, on man, indeed on the animality of man, but for and as man’ (2002, p405). The story is clear that the birds are not acting as they normally would: their strange and threatening behaviour is put down to an unprecedentedly cold east wind, which may be coming from Russia (du Maurier 2004, p8). They flock so densely above London that ‘it seemed as if the city was covered by a vast black cloud’ (p13), evoking images of a mushroom cloud. One incident that illustrates the story’s lack of interest in actual birds occurs when a gannet, a bird that is celebrated for 100 kilometre-per-hour dives far out at sea, dive bombs one of the story’s characters on dry land and splits its skull on the ground, perhaps in a reference to Japanese kamikaze pilots (du Maurier 2004, p20). In common with other fables, *The Birds* blurs and at times erases the alterity of the avian characters.

Another popular story of the times, Paul Gallico's *The Snow Goose* (1941) begins more promisingly with a detailed description of the Essex saltmarsh, such as one might find in a book of nature writing. However, the protagonist Rhayader's miraculous ability to tame wild birds, which seems worryingly tied up with the fact that he has a disability and consequently 'repelled women' (Gallico 1946, p8), betrays its anthropocentric nature. We are told that the snow goose of the title was 'born in a northern land', which is accurate since the snow goose, *Chen caerulescens*, breeds in Canada; however, the extra information that this is a land that was 'all pink' on the map (p15) is the start of the story's co-opting of the goose into a tale of patriotic sacrifice that culminates in the goose following Rhayader to Dunkirk, where she saves several officers' lives by hissing in such a way as to warn them of a German mine. There is much to trouble the twenty-first century reader in this novella, including the patronising depiction of the ordinary soldiers, the privileging of whiteness – the goose herself, along with a heroine called Fritha who is 'pure Saxon' with fair hair (Gallico 1946, p11) - and the deeply sexist and ableist representations of the two main characters. Over time, in this story, the goose becomes tame; within the text she is also tamed into a cipher that reinforces its stereotypes. By the end her identity as a goose has, to use Berger's phrase, completely faded away.

In contrast, my four primary texts allow the birds room to be birds. The avocets, the little ringed plovers (LRPs), the peregrines and the kestrel are portrayed with a high degree of biological accuracy and their alterity respected. Nevertheless, the way they are represented and the role they play in the narratives also reveal much about the texts' underlying concerns about what it means to be human in a culture undergoing profound change.

The meanings of birds

What is it about birds that makes them, to paraphrase Lévi-Strauss, so 'good to think with'? One important reason is that they are the wild animal we are most likely to encounter in our everyday lives. Birds also show some similarities to humans: almost all of them walk on two legs, many build nests for their young, and those that sing appear to have something resembling language. And yet they are rendered radically other to us through their ability to fly independently. In fact, birds embody numerous contradictions. Many species appear intensely vulnerable with their hollow bones and tiny bodies; nevertheless, they can also be immensely strong. The common swift (*Apus apus*) for example, weighs just 35 grams but is estimated to fly around 190,000 kilometres a year at speeds of up to 200 kilometres per hour (Tigges 2016). Such aerial adventures make birds obvious symbols of freedom and wildness; on the other hand, their nests

can often be so carefully crafted and cosy that they seem the epitome of domesticity. These multiple tensions – between frailty and strength, wildness and domesticity, contiguity and remoteness – coupled with the ubiquity of birds in our lives, go some way to explaining why they are so important in human culture. An additional factor is that the ease with which they inhabit the sky links them with the divine. In Western culture at least, beneficent gods have always lived above the earth and like birds, angels have feathered wings. Thus birds can appear to be conduits between earth and heaven, to exist on the edge between human and divine. This is reinforced by the way that we are often most aware of them when they appear on the borders between light and dark, such as during the dawn chorus or when they sing as they return to their roosts in the evening. Birds can thus transform the ordinary.

So far in my discussion on the meanings of birds I have been guilty of what Derrida calls an asininity (*une bêtise*) (2002, p400). Birds may be a subset of the category ‘animals’; nevertheless, to speak of them as if they were a single, homogenous group is still close to meaningless. There are vast differences between goldcrests and penguins, turkeys and merlins, house sparrows and flamingos. Not all birds fly, only about half have a song, and an ostrich weighs 97,500 times as much as a bee hummingbird. Some birds, such as nightingales and skylarks, have been represented so frequently in literature and music that it is almost impossible to experience them separately from the layers of cultural meanings that have accrued around them. Others, such as ‘greedy’ vultures and ‘proud’ peacocks, are similarly burdened with centuries of cliché and human projections. Among the birds in my four primary texts, the LRPs and avocets rarely, if ever, appear in art or literature. The falcons of *The Peregrine* and *A Kestrel for a Knave* on the other hand have captured human imagination throughout history and all over the world. In my readings, it has been important to foreground the individual characteristics of each bird species while also paying attention to their cultural meanings.

PART ONE: *Adventure Lit Their Star* and *The Owl Birds*

INTRODUCTION

Towards the end of August 1939, with civil defence planning at fever pitch, an enormous crater appeared in the elegant green spaces of Hyde Park. The hole, which was forty feet deep, exposed the concrete foundations of the original Crystal Palace. It was created by a platoon of mechanical diggers, their drivers charged with excavating as much sand as possible to help shore up homes against possible blast damage. That crater would go on to be filled with rubble from London's bombed buildings, resulting in a mound more than forty feet high. Then, that rubble would disappear, transported to East Anglia to become the foundations of the runways from which Boeing Superfortresses would take off at the start of their bombing raids on Germany (Hennessy 2006, p16).

It is tempting to read the Hyde Park crater as a metaphor for the profound shifts and disruptions that affected every area of British life during the Second World War. However, that would be to miss the significance of the way that warfare actually disrupts the landscape, literally changing its shape and thus metaphorically inscribing it with new meanings (Davis 2010). This section of my thesis examines two books, both published in 1949, which demonstrate huge concern with the changes wrought on the English landscape as a result of the Second World War. In the following two chapters, as well as examining the representation of the birds in these books, I will also compare the ways that the changing landscape is depicted and ask what new meanings are being ascribed to it, and the extent to which change is being resisted. I will then ask what these attributions and resistances reveal about contemporary attitudes not only to the more-than-human world, but also to constructions of national identity and visions of the nation's future.

The Owl Birds by J.K. Stanford and *Adventure Lit Their Star* (from now on referred to as *Adventure*) by Kenneth Allsop are both lightly fictionalised accounts of events that caused a stir in the world of British ornithology and beyond. *The Owl Birds* tells the story of the avocet's return to Britain as a nesting bird after an absence of more than 100 years, while *Adventure* charts the efforts of the LRP to establish itself as a breeding bird in Britain. The books have other similarities. In both, the human protagonist is a damaged serviceman who finds a measure of healing and redemption through his relationship with the birds, and in both cases the birds nest in edgeland habitats that have been created by human interventions in the landscape. In addition, both books feature tense standoffs with a villainous egg collector.

In terms of genre, the books defy easy categorisation. Both have a strong element of memoir. When avocets first nested in Suffolk in 1947, Stanford, who had fought in both world wars and published books about Burmese ornithology based on his experiences as a colonial administrator, was one of the volunteers who maintained a round-the-clock vigil over their nest ('M.F.M.M' 1972). Similarly, Allsop was present when the first LRP eggs were discovered in Berkshire in 1947 and he describes *Adventure* as 'a combination of personal observation, recorded data and imagination' (Allsop 1972, p8). Both books, and especially *Adventure*, show a concern for accuracy and detail in their descriptions of the birds and their habitats which justifies the label 'nature writing'. In addition, both have a strong narrative drive and are interested in the psychological recovery of their protagonists from difficult war experiences, characteristics that are associated with novels. In their hybridity, they foreshadow a current popular trend in mixed-genre, nature-focused writing exemplified by books such as *Cold Blood* (Kerridge 2014), *H is for Hawk* (Macdonald 2014) and *The Outrun* (Liptrot 2015), among others. Like *Adventure* and *The Owl Birds*, these books also deal with difficult life experiences; unlike them, the autobiographical nature of these experiences is explicit. In the 1940s it was less usual for people to talk openly about their own lives: the two world wars had fostered a culture in which people were reluctant to appear to be complaining, while the 'welfare state' mentality of the period meant the focus was on collectivity and any hint of selfishness was frowned upon.

Despite their similarities, the books can be read as examples of radically different approaches to nature and nature writing in the period around the Second World War, and, by extension, as representing two contrasting attitudes to British identity. Kerridge has coined the term 'welfare state nature writing' to describe the kind of approach demonstrated in *Adventure*, which emphasises the idea of the British countryside as 'a possession held in common by the people in a newly democratic and consumerist era of national parks and popular recreational motoring' (2015, p38). He contrasts this with 'anti-modern nature writing', which is characterised by a conservative stance, a longing for a 'mythical, feudal England', and a desire to escape 'mass-democratic, industrial modernity' and find solitude in wild nature (Kerridge 2015, p41). I read *The Owl Birds* as a prime example of this anti-modern writing, as I shall demonstrate in the next chapter.

First it is helpful to the reading of all the books in this thesis to know something about the development of birdwatching in the twentieth century. When *The Owl Birds* and *Adventure* were

published, public interest in natural history in general, and in ornithology in particular, was at an all-time high. The surge in enthusiasm for birdwatching can be traced to the 1930s, with the founding of the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) in 1933 being an important catalyst (Macdonald 2002, Moss 2005, Birkhead 2008, Davis 2010, Toogood 2011). The BTO stressed the importance of enabling amateur birdwatchers to make a contribution to national research: the idea was to have a network of enthusiastic people whose observations would be incorporated into a central knowledge base. The trust was careful to stress the egalitarian nature of the project. Special training was not necessary; participants should simply be people of good behaviour, interested in birds but not necessarily knowledgeable about them, and capable of recording their observations in plain language (Macdonald 2002, p60).

Toogood (2011) links what he calls the 'new ornithology' (p348) with the Mass Observation project, formed in 1937 as 'a scientific study of human social behaviour, beginning at home' (2011, p349) and with the similar objective of recruiting a network of ordinary people to keep detailed records of regular observations. For him, they both represent 'a new openness of opportunity and a degree of change to doing observation, in particular the dissolution of highly specialist knowledge as a precursor to observation' (Toogood 2011, p350). This deconsecration of the lone, privileged expert and the corresponding focus on networks and collaboration prefigures the mindset that would give rise to the welfare state. As Addison puts it, from 1940 'egalitarianism and community feeling' were 'the pervasive ideals of social life: whether or not people lived up to them, they knew that they *ought* to' (1994, p18, emphasis in original).

Birdwatching continued to gain cultural prominence throughout the Second World War. It is interesting that at a time of national shortages, when the Government strictly rationed the number of books publishers were allowed to produce and stipulated that they should be in the public interest, books about birds proliferated. James Fisher's *Watching Birds* (1941), for example, sold more than three million copies and is just one of a multitude of books about birds and other aspects of natural history that appeared in the period. Fisher was also known for 'bridging the gap between professional and amateur ornithologists' (Birkhead 2008, p223), and *Watching Birds* suggests a desire to break down other kinds of barriers too, as this extract demonstrates:

All sorts of different people seem to watch birds. Among those I know of are a late Prime Minister, a Secretary of State, a charwoman, two policemen, two kings, one ex-king, five Communists, four Labour, one Liberal and three Conservative Members of Parliament, the chairman of a County Council, several farm-labourers earning sixty

shillings a week, a rich man who earns two or three times that amount in every hour of the day, at least forty-six schoolmasters, and an engine-driver (Fisher 1941, p13).

There is a clear resonance here with the idea of ‘welfare state nature writing’. The implication is that birdwatching is a democratising activity, and Fisher clearly intends to imply that class distinctions are irrelevant to its practice. In his preface, he declares that he has written his book for ‘ordinary people’ and not ‘the privileged few’ (p11), and the birdwatchers he knows do indeed come from a wide range of backgrounds. However, these ‘all sorts of different people’ are defined by either their occupations or their social standing, and in some cases by how much they earn. Rather than erasing class boundaries, such a taxonomy has the effect of reinforcing them. Additionally, only one of these birdwatching enthusiasts is definitely female, and she is the charwoman. Women are similarly shadowy in *The Owl Birds* and *Adventure*, appearing not at all in the former and only in the stereotypically feminine guises of a nurse and a mother in the latter. This is characteristic of the times: despite the increase in women’s employment during the war, there was little substantial change to the underlying social and economic structures that kept men and women in separate spheres, with women being overwhelmingly associated with domestic or caring roles and men being assumed to have the more interesting lives. If anything, these boundaries became more rigid (Smith Wilson 2005, p247).

As birdwatching grew in popularity, so the birds themselves began to acquire a cultural significance that was often related to ideas about national identity (Macdonald 2002, Davis 2011). Macdonald cites examples of Norfolk farmers in the 1930s rejecting measures to protect skylarks, since they were known to overwinter in Germany, and of the well-known ornithologist David Lack scrutinising the robin in 1946 to see how truly British it was (2002, p58). The celebrated author and broadcaster Julian Huxley gave a series of radio talks in which he claimed that one important feature of birds is that they enable people to orientate themselves to a country (Macdonald 2002 p59). ‘An American landscape may now and again look surprisingly like an English one,’ he said, ‘but its birds will speedily remind you of its alien character’ (Huxley 1949, p6). More than that, according to Huxley, birds can actually embody the essence of Britishness:

(T)he yellow-hammer’s song seems the best possible expression of hot country roads in July, the turtle-dove’s crooning of midsummer afternoons, the redshank’s call of sea-breeze over saltings and tidal mudflats, the robin’s song of peaceful autumnal melancholy (1949, p7).

It was as though Britain could not be Britain without this specific population of birds. In a similar vein, Fisher justifies the publication of *Watching Birds* during wartime by describing birds as ‘part of the heritage we are fighting for’ (1941, p3).

In my introduction I suggested some reasons why birds are ‘good to think with’. In the context of the Second World War, they took on additional significance, for everyone knew this war would be dominated by aerial bombardment. In a speech in 1932, Stanley Baldwin had declared: ‘The bomber will always get through’ (*HC Deb* 1932), radically destabilising the ancient sense of security that had derived from Britain’s status as an island. The artist Paul Nash wrote graphically of the way aerial threat changed perceptions of the sky:

But when the War came, suddenly the sky was upon us all like a huge hawk hovering, threatening. Everyone was searching the sky expecting some terror to fall; I among them scanned the low clouds or tried to penetrate the depths of the blue (1947, p5).

Nash’s writing evokes the spatial destabilisation that people felt in the presence of military aircraft: the sky was no longer an airy space above but had suddenly lowered and become threatening. Additionally there was temporal disruption brought about by the speed with which an enemy located hundreds of miles away could launch an attack of unprecedented intensity (Orr 2005, p461). In the light of all this, it is unsurprising that aircraft spotting became something approaching a national sport. Macdonald has demonstrated that contemporary discourse around bird identification and aeroplane spotting overlapped to the point of ‘blurring ... the attributes of natural and mechanical’ (2002, p66) and concludes: ‘With such confluences of the technological and natural, aircraft could easily exist in the same ecological, national space as the birds of the modern birdwatcher’ (p67). A visual example of this conflation can be seen in some paintings of the time, as in the example by WF Monnington [on page xxx](#).

Here the Spitfires swoop through a pastoral scene of rolling fields and grazing cattle. The sky is filled with the contrails of the aircraft, a sight that became familiar to many British people during the most intense months of aerial attack. On the one hand, this representation of the planes renders them less threatening: they are reassuringly at home in the English rural idyll. Gruffudd takes this view, when he writes that the horse and wagon in the foreground ‘appear to borrow from Constable’s *The Hay Wain*’ but glosses over the fact that the cart has tipped up and the horse is bolting, suggesting that this is unsurprising in the presence of a low-flying plane. (1991, p23). I think there is more going on here. The art critic Jonathan Jones describes *The Hay Wain* as ‘that supreme icon of the English landscape’ (2001, no pagination). The upsetting of the hay



Southern England, 1944. Spitfires Attacking Flying-Bombs. Walter Monnington. © IWM (Art.IWM ART LD 4589)

tain in Monnington's painting strongly suggests that a particular version of England has been destabilised by the presence of warplanes. This tension between English pastoral idyll, a militarised landscape and ideas of nationality is present in both *The Owl Birds* and *Adventure*, as I shall demonstrate in the following chapters.

One reason then for the huge growth in the popularity of birdwatching relates to the intertwining of birds and planes in the public imagination. Additionally, I believe the widespread fear of aerial attack encouraged an identification with birds as civilians struggled to cope with the peculiar nature of the Home Front in the Second World War. On January 26 1941, a few weeks before she committed suicide, and while Britain was on high alert for invasion, Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary: 'We live without a future. That's what's queer: with our noses pressed to a closed door' (Leonard Woolf 1972, p364). This sense of having no horizon, of existing in a severely constricted space, was common at the time. Six months earlier, the Ministry of

Information had distributed fifteen million copies of a leaflet entitled *If the Invader Comes*, one for every household in the country. It gave a list of instructions about what to do in the event of invasion. The first read: 'IF THE GERMANS COME, BY PARACHUTE, AEROPLANE OR SHIP, YOU MUST REMAIN WHERE YOU ARE. THE ORDER IS, "STAY PUT"' (Ministry of Information 1940, emphasis in original). It continued: 'If you run away, you will be exposed to far greater danger because you will be machine-gunned from the air'. As Hennessy puts it, even ordinary civilians could not escape the front line. It ran through every front room and every back garden (2006, p12). In complete contrast, birds have unlimited horizons and a vast and panoramic view of their surroundings. Free to fly where they will, regardless of national borders and checkpoints, they do not have to remain fixed to situations that terrify them.

Helen Macdonald's memoir *H is for Hawk* is at one level an extended meditation on the way that identification with birds can be a means of escape from an intolerable human situation. Explaining her compulsion to train a goshawk after her father's sudden death, she writes: 'The hawk was everything I wanted to be: solitary, self-possessed, free from grief, and numb to the hurts of human life' (2014, p85). It is a key contention of this thesis that for people living through one of the most traumatic periods of British history, birds offered a model for everything they wanted to be but could not: they could easily flee distressing situations and make new homes wherever they wanted. As *The Owl Birds* puts it: 'Birds did not have to bother about wars, or roofs over their heads. The whole world was their home' (Stanford 1949, p33).

Chapter 1

Avocet

Sweet disregarders of man's miseries
And his most murderous methods, winging slow
About your perilous nests – we thank you

Lt Willoughby Weaving (1885–1977)
'Birds in the Trenches'
(Lewis-Stempel 2016, p81)

The avocet (*Avosetta recurvirostra*) is a strikingly beautiful wader with black and white plumage and a long, slender, upturned bill that resembles the blade of a stitching awl, a tool used for sewing heavy materials such as leather or canvas. It is this that gives the avocet its folk name of 'awl bird', from which J.K. Stanford drew the title of his 1949 story *The Awl Birds*. *The Awl Birds* was originally published as a short story in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1948, under the title 'Bledgrave Hall'. It then appeared as a novella in the USA as *The Awl-birds*, and subsequently in England in 1950, where it received favourable reviews, with *The Times* even describing it as worthy of comparison with Paul Gallico's wildly popular *The Snow Goose* (Davis 2010).

It is significant that Stanford chose to use a traditional folk name for the avocet, since this immediately sets up a link with a huge surge of interest in rural English tradition during the 1920s and 1930s. In this period, vast numbers of books and articles about the English countryside were published. Brace calls such publications 'countryside writing' (2003, p381n). They overlapped with what we would today call 'nature writing', but were generally more concerned with rural culture than natural history. Brace describes them as 'a large, eclectic and diverse body of non-fictional rural writing which comprises visual and written descriptions of (mainly) English rural life, characters, landscapes, settlements, traditions, architecture, crafts, geography and topography, and takes the form of personal memoir, travel writing, thinly veiled political treatise, anthologies and essays' (2003, p381n). In the same period, visiting the

countryside became increasingly popular, and Matless has coined the phrase ‘motoring pastoral’ to describe the way that motoring at this time ‘became styled as a modern practice in pursuit of an older England’ (1998, p64).

As Matless implies, contemporary writing about the countryside was commonly inflected with a celebration of the past and a desire to locate the roots of modern life in ancient, native soil. Commentators have advanced a variety of explanations for the craze. Macdonald sees it as a reaction to the trauma of World War 1, an attempt to ‘recover something essential about the nation that had been lost’ (2014, p104). Esty describes it as evidence of a subconscious anticipation of the loss of Empire, a ‘re-substitution of England’s own fetishized or primitivized past for the vanishing pleasure of colonial exoticism’ (2004, p41). For MacKay, it was a ‘rebranding’ of Britain as ‘something that might conceivably be worth going to war over this second time’ (2007, p5). Overall, the effect was to tie ideas of British identity to particular features of the English countryside to the point that the ‘essence’ of Britishness was seen to reside there (Plain 2013, p45).

This backward-looking stance towards the English countryside is precisely what is found in *The Owl Birds*. Combined with the main character’s determination to separate himself from other people, it is the reason I identify the book as belonging to what Kerridge calls ‘anti-modern’ nature writing, characterised by a rejection of ‘mass-democratic industrial modernity’ and ‘a defensive, anti-urban desire for solitude’ (2015, p41). As Gloyne cycles towards the newly-purchased Bledgrave Hall, he recalls fragments of English nature poetry and resolves to buy pictures by English painters to hang in his living room (Stanford 1949, p26). One of these artists, Arnesby Brown (1866-1955), was known for his landscape paintings of East Anglia, which ‘deliberately resisted Modernist influences’ (Tate 2004). As Gloyne travels along the fringe of the marsh, he repeats to himself that ‘Nothing, nothing had changed, thank God!’ (Stanford 1949, p25) and anticipates a recurrence of the ‘ecstasy’ that he experienced when he visited the house as a boy (p23). ‘The marshes!’ he exclaims inwardly. ‘It was for them that his whole being had yearned during those years in London and the desert and in forlorn prison-hutments’ (p23).

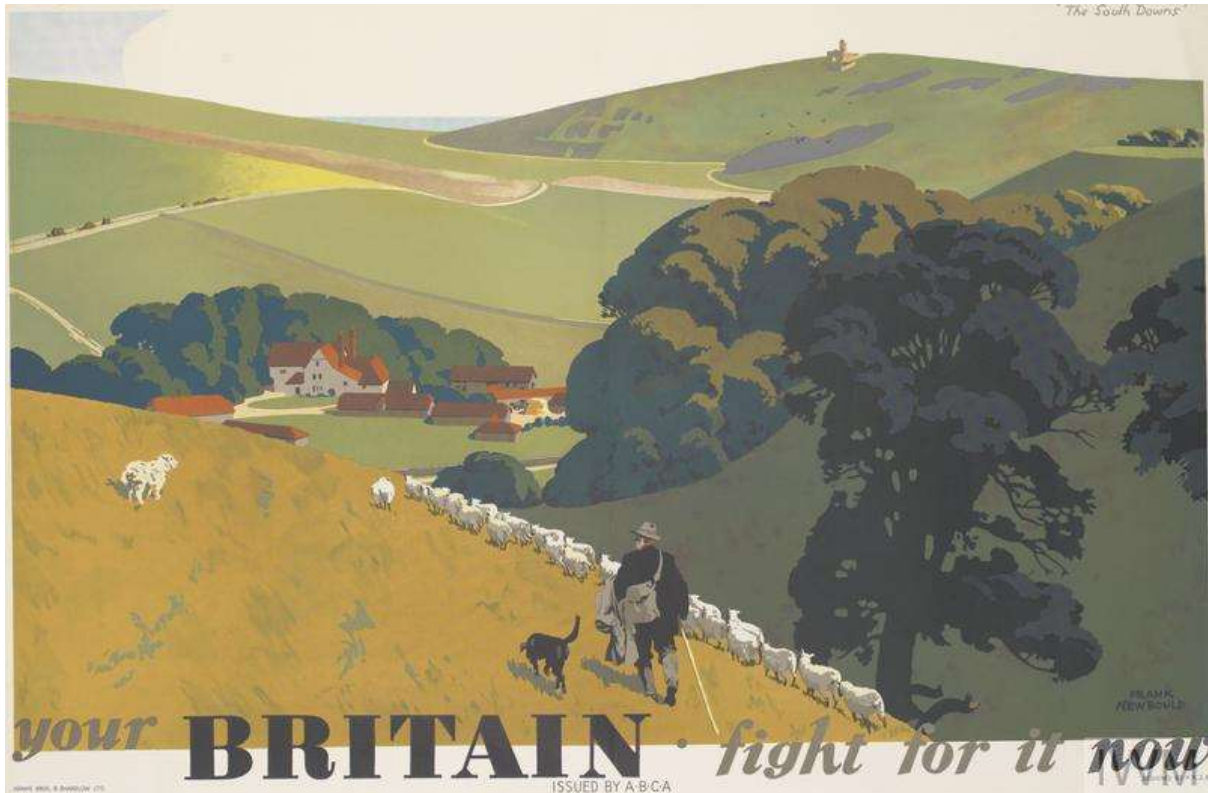
Gloyne’s thoughts are in the pastoral mode, showing nostalgia for a lost golden age and a desire for the countryside to be immutable, and contrasting the city unfavourably with the country. Leo Marx identifies a recurrent pattern in the representation of pastoral idyll, and that is the invasion of what he calls ‘the machine’. The machine can be anything that shatters ‘the peace of an

enclosed space' (2000, p29). Most importantly, it is 'a sudden, shocking intruder upon a fantasy of idyllic satisfaction' (2000, p29). In *The Owl Birds* the machine is the legacy of war. During the Second World War, huge tracts of East Anglia were evacuated so that they could be used as military training grounds. *Adventure* includes a description of the LRPs flying over one of these areas:

They passed over a wide tract of countryside strangely still and deserted in the evening's gold light ... It was a battle area over which they passed, fifteen thousand acres of country from which every person had been moved so that the soldiers could be trained for the North Africa landings ... Some of the cottages had been gashed by shells, and a burnt-out tank, a wrecked lorry, the litter of an army, were already partly screened by the anarchic growth of a countryside gone wild (Allsop 1972, p99).

Emptied and abandoned, half-reclaimed by the more-than-human world, this wrecked village has, through militarisation, been 'inscribed with new meanings', to use Davis' phrase (2010, p88). The same is true for Bledgrave. As Gloyne emerges from the wood on his bicycle, he expects to see 'a mellow old house ... dreaming behind its creeper in the sunshine' (Stanford 1949, p23). Instead he is shocked to discover 'a cluster of broken walls and smashed cottages and ruined yards, and, beyond, the shell of a great half-roofless house, forlorn among wastes of nettles and briars' (Stanford 1949, p29). Bledgrave Hall, once 'a house that had always kept its denizens warm and dry ... and a farm which had slowly enriched the nation through the years' is now smashed to pieces, having been used for target practice by troops on their way to Normandy (Stanford 1949, p30). Gloyne reflects that he 'had walked, all unprepared, into this ruin' (Stanford 1949, p31), a poignant phrase that evokes the disorientation of many returning servicemen. The interwar idea that the essence of Britishness resided in the English countryside had been carried over into wartime recruitment posters, such as those by Frank Newbould (example on page xxx), which exploited the style of prewar tourist advertisements (Mellor 1987). The idea was that such visions of an idealised, pastoral England would evoke patriotic feelings. Soldiers who had carried this kind of image with them while they were fighting would, like Gloyne, be ill prepared for the Britain they returned to, whether that was a bombed-out city, or a village where the evidence of war, such as coils of barbed wire, burst sandbags and grieving widows, might be more subtle but no less disorientating.

The country house is a common trope in English literature, often representing a particular idea of Englishness, one that is characterised by ideals of 'community, simplicity, responsible use of wealth and property, good housekeeping and hospitality' (Pohl 2000, p224). It is possible to read



Frank Newbould poster, produced by the War Office, 1942. © IWM (Art.IWM PST 14887).

into Gloyne's great distress over the damage done to Bledgrave Hall a deeper anxiety about the damage done to Britain as a nation by the war. That this anxiety is focused on an old country house is further evidence of the narrative's anti-modern stance. Matless has described how the architects of post-war reconstruction considered the private country house to be a relic of the past and to have no role in a future Britain, an attitude that was anathema to anti-modernists (1998, p222). When Gloyne sets himself to rebuilding Bledgrave, connecting the repairs he is doing with 'the workmanship and infinite labour those bygone masons had put into all they had done' (Stanford 1949, p36), he is positioning himself as the agent who will ensure things continue as they always have done. When he flies into a rage over a letter from a naturalists' club asking permission to ramble on his property (Stanford 1949, p44), he is further consolidating his anti-modern stance, for this club and its town-dwelling members' desire to visit the countryside, are examples of the recent democratisation of natural history that I described in the introduction to this section.

By the time spring comes, 'Derick's haggard looks had almost gone and his pent-up rages with them' (Stanford 1949, p42). The reader is meant to understand that the peace and seclusion of

Bledgrave, and the beautiful landscape with its 'day long sunshine and springing grass and stone curlews wailing musically' (Stanford 1949, p42) have brought healing to this damaged soldier. One sign of this recovery is that he no longer wakes 'dreaming that he was lying in a minefield' (Stanford 1949, p43). Yet Gloyne is self-deceived, for he is very much lying in a minefield. Earlier the book related that some of the land adjoining Bledgrave had been seeded with mines for a military training exercise, and that Gloyne had deliberately left them in place as a way of securing his isolation (Stanford 1949, p38). This is one of the ways that he ensures that 'the privacy for which he had yearned for so many years was almost inviolate' (Stanford 1949, p38). The deadly explosives lying just below the surface of the land are mirrored in Gloyne's explosive temper that lurks below his outwardly peaceful demeanour. Although his 'pent-up rages' are supposed to have almost disappeared (Stanford 1949, p42), his fit of rage over the naturalists' letter suggests otherwise. The legacy of war lingers on.

That both Gloyne's temper and the unexploded mines are occluded in the account of his recovery demonstrates a fear of confronting the human capacity for destruction and the difficulty of countering its effects. Further evidence of this anxiety is revealed in the account of the avocets' arrival. As Cocker and Mabey record, avocets were once common in England, but were hunted to extinction in the mid-nineteenth century (2005, p192). *The Auk Birds* also recounts this story, linking the avocets to other vanished species such as the black tern and the marsh harrier, which 'man, the destroyer, had banished ... for all time' (Stanford 1949, p46). This is an example of the use of nonhuman animals to address an issue that is too painful or too dangerous to confront directly, in this case the human animal's capacity for violence and destruction. The evidence of 'man the destroyer' in war is elided in *The Auk Birds*, but the damage done to birds in the past can be acknowledged instead.

Cocker and Mabey describe as 'mischievous' the claim by renowned ornithologist Chris Meade that the avocet's return to Britain is something we 'owe to Hitler' (2005, p192). Meade had a point, though, because it was precisely the militarisation of the Suffolk countryside that led to the creation of an ideal habitat for these waders. Avocets like to nest beside coastal lagoons (RSPB no date. a) and as Davis relates (2010, p127), the first of the 1947 arrivals settled at Minsmere, which had been a battle training area since 1943 and was flooded as an anti-invasion measure. Soon after, they came to Havergate Island, where more flooding had occurred as a result of a bomb from nearby practice ranges damaging a sluice. In addition, the evacuation of civilians had assured that their new nesting grounds were almost undisturbed. Thus also the avocets at

Bledgrave settle in 'a long fleet of shallow water, dotted here and there with the craters of bygone mortar bombs' (Stanford 1949, p45). The choice of nesting site is significant in this text in two ways. First, it links the birds to Gloyne through the militarised landscape: it is a minefield and some bomb craters that have ensured the peace required by both Gloyne and avocet in order to return to their former selves. In Gloyne's case, this is psychological restoration after his hugely stressful job as a desert sapper; for the avocets it is recovery from the persecutions of the nineteenth century. Second, the avocets are shown to perform a redemptive role. They have turned the war-scarred landscape into a symbol of hope for the future by choosing to breed there. This idea of birds being redemptive for humans occurs to some degree in all my chosen texts, most notably *The Peregrine*, and I will examine the significance of it more closely in that chapter.

Just as *The Owl Birds* and *Adventure* feature a damaged serviceman as their hero, so they settle on a similar type of villain: an egg collector. Percy Warler in *The Owl Birds* is vilified in extreme terms. In Gloyne's words:

The thing was vermin, a menace not only to his beloved Bledgrave but to England. He was as much a saboteur as any Hun in the war. He was the same type as the man who would steal things from the Tower or St Paul's or filch some relic of the ages as a "souvenir" ... This was one of the King's enemies. (Stanford 1949, p83).

For a story set in 1946, there could hardly be a more forceful way of depicting a villain than to compare him to 'any Hun in the war'. The passage does not stop there but goes on to construct, through its use of metonymy, something even more sinister, almost the archetype of a traitor. Here 'the Tower' stands for a particular version of English history centred on royalty, riches and power, and 'St Paul's' for the nation's heritage of both Christian faith and architectural excellence. The fact that Warler would be prepared to steal from both for his own private satisfaction marks him out as the worst kind of villain, almost the personification of selfishness.

Such an extreme manifestation of evil must clearly be punished. The passage quoted becomes even more significant when the reader realises that it constitutes Gloyne's reasoning over whether or not to warn the egg collector that he is about to flee across a field seeded with unexploded mines. Gloyne consciously overrides his military instinct that he 'must stop the blighter somehow though it went against the grain' (Stanford 1949, p83) and remains silent as he watches Warler disappear over the crest of the hill, until he hears 'a heavy detonation followed quickly by two more' (Stanford 1949, p85). With a horrible kind of symmetry, the man who

spent hours of his leisure time blowing the life out of eggshells has had his own life blown away by the contents of a different kind of shell. Meanwhile, Gloyne, who has effectively just committed murder, falls asleep on the grass (Stanford 1949, p86).

Why does the text insist on such a violent end for Warler? To answer this question it is necessary to examine the history of oology in Britain, its changing status in relation to ornithology, and the symbolic importance of eggs, particularly in the anxiety-ridden period immediately after the Second World War. Oology was a popular form of natural history collecting in Victorian times, and was seen as 'a healthy, respectable pastime for children and adults' (Cole 2016, p18). It was also respectable scientifically: at a time when few had access to equipment such as binoculars or telescopes, the easiest way to increase knowledge of birds was by killing them and preserving their skins, and by collecting their eggs. Most serious oologists insisted on taking the entire clutch of eggs from a nest, since even eggs from the same species could show considerable variation. The collections could be enormous, as *Adventure* demonstrates in a description referring to that book's egg collector villain, Colonel Goodwin:

Standing in the colonel's study ... were rows of cabinets containing thousands of eggs. In one sense they made an admirable display, for they were arranged with geometrical perfection, classified in species, subspecies and families, and all neatly labelled with name, year and place of collection. There were many duplications. A single egg had to be rare indeed to be admitted to the cabinets. Ordinarily the colonel worked only in clutches. These were displayed together to stress variations in colouring and markings. He was especially proud of his sixty-eight clutches of red-backed shrike eggs ... his twelve sets of dotterel's, two sets of golden eagle's, ten sets of bearded tit's, the single clutches of kite's and marsh harrier's, and the two honey-buzzard's eggs which he had taken from the New Forest (Allsop 1972, p172).

Unlike other Victorian crazes, such as those for collecting ferns or seaweed, oology continued to be popular in the twentieth century. However, it became the subject of increasingly fierce debates among ornithologists over both its ethical validity, and its usefulness as a scientific practice (Cole 2016). As early as 1910, Mr J.L. Bonhote, a member of the British Ornithologists' Club, made an impassioned speech at the end of a meeting that had involved the display of several clutches from a private collection, including those of the very rare ruff:

I am the last to decry collecting: how many of us owe our interest in birds to the egg-collections we made as boys at school, and where would our knowledge of the science of

ornithology be were it not for collections? But the good of collecting lies in its use and not in its abuse, and I do not hesitate to say that no scientific purpose is served by the accumulation of masses of clutches or by the destruction of a single clutch of one of our very rare breeding species. Such acts only pander to a collector's greed (quoted in Snow 1992, p166).

He went on to move a resolution, carried almost unanimously, 'that this Meeting strongly disapproves of the collecting and exhibiting of large series of clutches of eggs of British breeding birds, or of British-taken eggs of our rare breeding species, except for the purpose of demonstrating some new scientific fact'. The mention of 'pandering to a collector's greed' is telling here: both *The Owl Birds* and *Adventure* characterise their villainous oologists as being excessively greedy, a character defect which, I shall argue, was particularly feared and condemned both during and immediately after the Second World War. The privileging of eggs from British breeding birds is also significant, since oologists commonly went on trips abroad in search of eggs from non-British species, or sent them back to Britain from their colonial outposts. However Bonhote makes no mention of these in his motion. *The Owl Birds* also emphasises that Percy Warler's eggs were 'British taken' (Stanford 1949, p57).

Opposition to egg collecting continued to grow, and although oologists defended themselves vigorously, arguing that they were the true 'protectionists' and had contributed most to the specialist knowledge of ornithologists, their practice fell increasingly into disrepute. Disquiet was expressed for several reasons: birds might become distressed by having their eggs taken; an egg was a potential living animal and therefore should not be destroyed; and egg collecting could have a serious impact on rarer species (Cole 2016). In 1954 the Protection of Wild Birds' Act made it illegal to take birds' eggs from the wild. What started as a respectable pastime had become a wildlife crime.

The decline in the acceptability of oology ran parallel to the democratisation and increasing popularity of birdwatching which I described in the introduction to this section. In this context Toogood claims that the burgeoning popular literature on science was part of a general unburdening of what 'self-styled "modern" naturalists' considered to be 'the ignorance and selfish concern of latter-day Edwardian naturalists for specimens, lists and numbers of records for personal use' in favour of 'a belief in popular experimentality and wider, if inchoate, notions of public good that might flow from collective action' (2011, p350). 'Selfish' and 'Edwardian' are good descriptors for Warler and Goodwin and their obsession with 'specimens, lists and

numbers of records for personal use'. Significantly, both of them were too old to fight in the Second World War. Worse, Warler had actually profited from it: 'He had had a very lucrative war with so many game-keepers called up, and only a few "security areas" to hamper his movements, and everyone too busy to bother about eggs' (Stanford 1949, p60). His selfishness is epitomised by his refusal to loan his excellent field glasses to the war effort: instead he had 'scoffed at the proposal made by the War Office in 1940 that owners of valuable binoculars should lend them for the use of the rude soldiery in the desert' (Stanford 1949, p66).

In the quotation above, Toogood contrasts the selfishness of the Edwardians with the prioritising of collective action and public good that are characteristic of the 'welfare state' mentality. The sense at the time was that the nation must not, at any cost, undergo a repeat of the situation after the First World War, when returning soldiers were promised a land fit for heroes but endured instead mass unemployment, an acute housing shortage and widespread poverty. It was this that paved the way for the publication in 1942 of the Beveridge Report on the future of the social services. From then on, reconstruction became a major focus of political debate, a reconstruction characterised by the abolition of poverty (Addison 1994, p18). Thus although *The Owl Birds* generally takes a determinedly anti-modern stance, the text is also at pains to make clear that it rejects totally any suggestion of allegiance with the generation that took Britain into the First World War and failed to prevent the next one. This is partly why the greedy, self-serving oologist, born into a generation that was seen to have failed the country, fitted so naturally into the role of villain, even to the extent of being considered 'a menace to England'. However, to understand fully why the portrayal is quite so extreme, it is necessary to examine the metaphorical significance of egg collecting.

An egg is a very powerful symbol of potential life. As Cole (2016) points out, it occupies a liminal status between living and non-living. The potential life in a wild bird's egg is particularly vulnerable, as *Adventure* makes clear, with LRP eggs being, at various points, punctured by gravel from the hooves of a rearing horse (Allsop 1972, p55), crushed under the wheels of a tractor (p108) and eaten by an arctic skua (p149). In both books, immediately before the appearance of the egg collector, each protagonist has a nightmare in which they are unable to save the eggs. Locke's is particularly terrifying and involves him having to run across a desert to answer an urgent summons from the LRP:

As he ran he knew that it was no use, and suddenly he saw the white-blue sky darken and a writhing black cloud was descending upon the nest. Then he saw it was not a cloud but

a flock of bird-like things spiralling down on vast blurred wings. He saw them enveloping the nest, and the bird, now screaming with a human voice, was swamped and lost in the writhing black pile. He collapsed and lay flat with his face pressed into the burning sand, sobbing and groaning (Allsop 1972, p152).

This merging of the bird's nest with a scene of wartime horror and a human scream is telling and makes clear that at one level the protection of the birds has come to stand for the protection of Britain itself. The spiralling wings are a figuring of aerial attack; the writhing pile recalls scenes of post-Blitz devastation.

In my introduction to this section I showed how tightly British birds had become entwined with ideas of British identity during the war years. In the light of this, the desperate defence of the unborn avocets and LRPs, and the extreme vilification of the egg collectors gain added significance. For Locke and Gloyne, the liminal status of the eggs has come to symbolise the profound anxieties of the time: the hatching of the eggs is equivalent to the salvation of the British people and the future of the nation. The alternative is unthinkable, or would be if the disaster of the First World War and its aftermath were not so fresh in people's memories. The older oologists have been complicit in that disaster and their culpability is symbolised by their greedy collections of blown eggs. Rather than protect the potential life huddled inside the fragile shells, they have delighted in destroying as much of it as possible; for them it has been a kind of game involving a satisfying combination of tactics and strategy, a challenge aimed at increasing their status amongst their peers. But for Locke and Gloyne, representatives of the next generation, the neatly labelled shells that the oologists are so proud of are like the rows and rows of geometrically arranged crosses in the cemeteries of northern France: evidence of a catastrophic loss of life, a failure of responsibility that can never be forgiven.

Thus *The Owl Birds* is clear that it rejects the values of the oologists' generation; nevertheless it is determinedly anti-modern in its outlook, as the concluding lines of the story demonstrate:

Strangers had come to disturb the peace of Bledgrave and Bledgrave had swallowed them as it had swallowed so many earth-shaking events in the last four hundred years. Wars came and went but Bledgrave remained (Stanford 1949, p90).

In this configuration, the survival of the avocet eggs is a way of validating the text's anti-modern stance. As I argued earlier, Bledgrave stands for a particular idea of an idyllic England and the fact that it has 'swallowed' the threat to the eggs suggests that this construction of national identity has prevailed. The answer to whether humans are capable of creating a world worth

living in is here shown to be affirmative, so long as that world conforms to the mythical, feudal England that is conjured through anti-modern sentiment. However, the verb 'swallowed' is a verb of erasure. When Bledgrave swallows the threat from the egg collector, it also erases Gloyne's violence and the fact that Warler was murdered. When it swallows the earlier 'earth-shaking events', it erases the violence of the preceding four centuries, the years that saw the combined effects of imperial expansion and industrialisation bring anything but peace to millions of ordinary people at home and abroad.

Chapter 2

Little Ringed Plover

We spread our
wings, reticulating
our air-space. A man stands
under us and worries
at his ability to do the same.

RS Thomas (1913-2000)
'Thirteen Blackbirds Look at a Man'
(Thomas 1983, p174)

The little ringed plover (*Charadrius dubius*) is a tiny plover weighing no more than fifty grams. Until the mid-twentieth century it was an 'ultra-rare vagrant' in England and Wales (Cocker and Mabey 2005, p197) but there are now around 1,300 breeding pairs (RSPB no date, b). Its most distinguishing characteristics are the striking gold rings around its eyes and a preference for laying eggs amidst what Cocker and Mabey describe as 'the detritus of twentieth-century industrial society' (2005, p197). Nesting sites includes refuse tips, gravel pits, flooded slag heaps, factory dumps and the clinker in a heap of junked car bodies (Cocker and Mabey 2005, p197). The first LRP nest in Britain was discovered at Tring Reservoirs in 1937, but it was not until 1944 that breeding pairs returned to the country, one at Tring again and another beside a gravel pit in Middlesex. *Adventure* opens dramatically with the arrival of these 1944 pairs in the midst of an enormous stream of migratory birds crossing the English Channel, and goes on to track the early stages of the birds' establishment as a breeding species.

Intertwined with the story of the LRPs is that of RAF pilot Richard Locke, who has been invalided out of the war with TB. As in *The Owl Birds*, the ex-serviceman's relationship with the rare birds is shown as healing, helping Locke to recover from depression and a sense of inadequacy derived from his exclusion from war action. There are some parallels between Locke's situation and that of author Kenneth Allsop (1920-1973), who was released from military service in the RAF due to an injury that led to one of his legs being amputated (Davis 2011, p229). *Adventure* won the prestigious John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize in 1950 but quickly went out of print until it was reissued by Macdonald in 1962 and by Penguin in 1972. It is now out of print again but deserves a revival for it is an extraordinary book with many characteristics of what Buell calls an 'aesthetics of relinquishment', a type of environmental writing that is 'self-consciously devoted to resisting anthropocentrism, sometimes to the point of wholly eliminating human figures from its imagined world' (Buell 2005, p100). In *Adventure*, the first human voice is not heard until page 57 of the 1972 edition, and Locke does not appear until page 71, only to disappear again between pages 85 and 131.

Much of the time, then, the story is told from the birds' point of view. An oil-skinned fisherman, for example, appears as 'a glistening, bilious yellow and a curious shape of bulges and points' (Allsop 1972, p47). Of course this cannot be how an LRP actually sees a fisherman. Birds' eyes are very different from humans': they are much larger relative to the size of their body and are usually positioned on the sides of the head, giving them a far greater field of view. Some waders are thought to be able to see through an arc of more than 300 degrees without moving their heads (Perrins 1987, p24). Allsop's description is probably closer to the way a human baby would see the fisherman if it had not encountered oilskin waterproofs before. This is a subtle example of anthropomorphism, something Allsop employs with great skill throughout *Adventure*. The writer who sets out to focalise a narrative through a nonhuman animal always risks losing sight of the alterity of that animal, resulting in what Derrida calls 'an anthropomorphic taming, a moralizing subjection, a domestication' (2002, p405). However, it is impossible for humans to talk about nonhuman animals in detail without some use of anthropomorphism. Cocker describes effective anthropomorphism as writing that 'makes the animal or plant instantly accessible ... yet without diminishing its separate non-human identity' (2010, p13), and this is what Allsop achieves with great skill. When he compares part of the male LRP's courtship display to 'a ceremonial goosetep' for example (1972, p34), he is using an image that would resonate immediately with a reader in 1949, and one that also provides a vivid description of the LRP's actions, as the picture **on page xxx** demonstrates.



LRPs about to mate. Picture by Peter Preece.

As Kerridge argues, when anthropomorphism is used well, it can cause humans to pay animals closer attention and, in the process, to learn much more about them (2014, p51). The goosestep image is part of a much longer description that also compares the LRP to a waltzing dancer, a moth, a pigeon and a stuffed toy (Allsop 1972, p34). It is writing born of long and close attention and a desire to depict the bird as faithfully as possible, not an attempt to identify it with a Nazi soldier. In fact the whole of *Adventure*, with its cinematic descriptions and careful use of imagery, is an example of what Kerridge is referring to when he says that '(T)he anthropomorphic response to animals and the realist approach can lead to each other, frame each other' (2014, p54). Both are necessary for humans not just to learn about the more-than-human world but also to arrive at ethical decisions about how they relate to that world. When humans interpret animal expressions and gestures they are, as Kerridge also points out, using skills they have developed as part of their early socialisation to help them to understand who they are and who others are (2014, p52). A book like *Adventure*, which achieves a fine balance between realistic and anthropomorphic approaches, enables the reader to understand, even if only subconsciously, that socialisation is not just a matter of living effectively with other humans, but with the more-than-human world as well.

The question of how humans should live is fundamental to the dominant question about human identity that I have identified in all the texts examined in this thesis, namely whether people are capable of creating a world worth living in. More than any of the others, *Adventure* suggests that such a world must allow for the mutual flourishing of both human and nonhuman animals. The dramatic opening chapter, describing the arrival of thousands of migratory birds in England, demonstrates the high regard in which the book holds both human and nonhuman life. The reader is plunged into a great river of birds, a highly charged situation where every moment may

spell the difference between life and death. Militarised language dominates: the birds coagulate into an 'armada' (Allsop 1972, p17); swifts fly 'in silent dark squadrons' (p17), and the LRPs' wings are 'spread like a pilot's chevron' (p18). As Kerridge has pointed out, the location of the flight in April 1944 invokes the D-Day invasion force which would set out just over a month later (2015, p35), and the text lurches between hope and fear, just as life did for millions of people during the Second World War. At the same time, Allsop's precise, poetic descriptions allow the different birds to retain their alterity: willow warblers are 'the delicate green and yellow of freshly unwrapped lime leaves' (1972, p17) and the nightjars with 'fringes of stiff bristles around their enormous mouths' are returning to 'fern-shaggy hillsides' (p18). These birds are a long way from being co-opted as ciphers into a human fable. So vivid is the writing that when the birds are caught in the cliff-top storm, their multiple, violent deaths come as a real shock. I agree with Kerridge that the deaths are on one level 'a way of glimpsing the terrible moments on the D-Day beaches without having to face them directly' (2015, p36). This is an example of humans using animals as proxies to speak about things they cannot otherwise articulate. Additionally, however, Allsop's faithfulness to ornithological fact allows for distress over the actual bird deaths. The close and at times emotional association between human and nonhuman animals' lives that this passage sets up lays the foundation for the rest of the book's concern with how post-war development will affect the whole of the more-than-human world.

The idea of a dynamic association between human and bird that characterises *Adventure* takes on a personal shape in the book's exploration of the transformation that the nesting LRPs effect on Locke. Discharged from the sanatorium where he had spent almost three years, and with no hope of rejoining the war effort, he is initially unable to overcome 'the absurd melancholy which was a weight in his stomach' (Allsop 1972, p80). After discovering the LRP nest, however, he is filled with joy: 'he thought he had never been happier' (Allsop 1972, p146). He describes the discovery of the birds as 'in a way a vindication of himself' (p144). This is a strong statement, implying that two tiny birds can compensate for a long illness and a sense that he is failing the national effort. Lorimer, drawing on Deleuze and Guattari, suggests that close, extended relationships between nonhuman animals and the human animals who study them can result in 'lines of flight' that provide an escape from an 'earthbound, heavy identity as a clumsy human towards a new lighter mode of being' (2007, p922). As Locke devotes entire days to observing every detail of the LRPs' lives, he develops 'a curiously intimate bond' with them (Allsop 1972, p157). Even though the relationship is not reciprocal – as far as we know, the birds are unaware of him - his deep connection with the LRPs corresponds to Lorimer's interpretation of 'haecceity' as a 'moment of

awe-full or enchanting proximity to another animal' (2007, p918) that results in a new way of looking at the world (p922). In *Adventure* this shift in perspective is the catalyst for Locke's recovery. The book thus makes an important link between human wellbeing and strong connections with the more-than-human world, a link that is attracting increasing interest today (see for example AHRC 2015).

Like *The Awn Birds*, *Adventure's* answer to whether humans are capable of building a world worth living in is affirmative. Also like *The Awn Birds*, this positive response is tied up with a very particular idea of the kind of country that Britain needs to become. In contrast, however, *Adventure* is, as Kerridge says, an example of 'welfare-state nature writing', emphasising the idea of the British countryside as 'a possession held in common by the people in a newly democratic and consumerist era of national parks and popular recreational motoring' (2015, p38). I would say it is even more radical than that, since its primary focus on the birds hints that it is not just human animals who hold the countryside in common but nonhuman ones as well. A similarly inclusive approach is found in the popular Collins New Naturalist series of books, launched in 1945. Written by experts in order to make their knowledge, and by extension the countryside, more accessible to the lay person, many of these books are careful to include humans in their descriptions of the natural world. The first New Naturalists book on birds, for example, was *Birds and Men* (1951), written by EM (Max) Nicholson (1904-2003), who was hailed on his death as 'the most important environmentalist, conservationist and ornithologist of the twentieth century' (Moss 2005, loc 1939). In his preface, Nicholson says he is aiming 'to complete a picture of the impact of civilisation on our bird life ... to trace the shaping of our towns and countryside and the life-histories and ecology of their most characteristic birds' (1990, pxiii). Like Allsop, Nicholson refuses to situate the birds as less important than humans. The book's conclusion is optimistic. Although Nicholson acknowledges that the powers-that-be will always tend to subordinate birds' interests to those of humans, he anticipates a happy future of co-existence, writing that 'the close and growing similarity between the interests of birds and people in the shaping of the landscape encourages a hope that with intelligent and imaginative study Britain can be much improved as a habitat for both' (p230).

Adventure's radically inclusive stance is also demonstrated by a determination not to privilege some kinds of environments over others. Where *The Awn Birds* celebrates the East Anglian marshes by framing them as wild, isolated and beautiful, Allsop, in his 1949 introduction, welcomes

the opportunity of showing that bird life can be found in richness at places poor in obvious aesthetic attractions, places which, however dismal and ravaged to the human eye are attractive to birds because of their natural and artificial features, their reservoirs, sewage farms, waste ground – and gravel pits’ (1972, p9).

These places are all examples of ‘edgeland’, a term coined in 2002 by the geographer Marion Shoard to describe the ‘unplanned, certainly uncelebrated and largely incomprehensible territory where town and country meet’. Such landscapes now appear frequently in the so-called ‘new nature writing’, an obvious example being Michael Symmons Roberts’ and Paul Farley’s 2011 book *Edgelands*, which sets out to explore places such as business parks and landfill sites ‘where urban and rural negotiate and renegotiate their borders’ (2012, p5). Once again Allsop is ahead of his time.

Like *Birds and Men*, *Adventure* is positive about the future of both human and nonhuman animals. The fact that the LRPs nest beside a gravel pit that is part of the post-war reconstruction effort links the birds to optimistic ideas of building a new nation. When Allsop writes in his introduction that the edgeland habitats are attractive to wildlife ‘because of their natural and artificial features’ (1972, p9, emphasis added), the implication is that they offer exciting potential for human and nonhuman animals to coexist in a way that benefits both. Also like *Birds and Men*, *Adventure* ends positively, with Locke predicting that in twenty years’ time the LRP will be as common in Britain as the redshank (Allsop 1972, p188). However, this optimism is by no means sustained throughout the novel. Passages that focus on more advanced forms of human technology disclose an underlying anxiety about the power of humans to destroy the more-than-human world. There are intimations of alarm about the direction that agriculture and science might be taking, an alarm that both the 1960s texts examined in this thesis and the current ecological crisis show to be amply justified. In retrospect, today’s reader can see that *Adventure* appeared at a crucial moment in environmental history, on the cusp of these developments that would result in such catastrophic changes to the environment. I read the tension between optimism and anxiety that characterises much of the book as evidence of an intuitive foreboding about the path that the Western world was about to follow.

These conflicting attitudes can be seen especially clearly over the course of the female LRP’s quest to find a nesting site on her second visit to England (Allsop 1972, pages 100-135). The episode begins on an upbeat note. The female and her new mate fly to Rewcote Pits, where they bred successfully the previous year. Like Gloyne at Bledgrave Hall, she finds her earlier home to

be 'all changed' (Allsop 1972, p100). The excavation work has intensified and the peninsula where she had her nest is now covered with machines that are portrayed with words that evoke ravenous monsters: the scrubland has been 'gnawed away'; loads of earth are being dug up by a machine 'with great jaws'. The noise is 'shattering'; it comes from 'engines in the air', a description that evokes the raucous din of mechanical warfare. This suggests Leo Marx's idea of 'the machine in the garden' again, but unlike *The Owl Birds*, *Adventure* is accepting of the disruption. The birds are able to fly on in search of an alternative site, quickly reaching an altitude from where they can see 'a fluff of green leaves', 'the lustre of a winding river', and 'a jigsaw pattern of lakes and land where there was the movement of birds' (Allsop 1972, p100). Close up, and focalised through the tiny birds, the digging at the gravel pits is distressing, but the rapid shift to an aerial view suggests that, put in context, it is no more than an interruption in an overall scene that can accommodate both nesting birds and human development.

The optimism continues at a sewage farm (Allsop 1972, p101), where the descriptions weave between human interventions in the landscape – the footbridge, the distributor pipe, the osier beds – and the activities of an enormous bird population. The scene is almost Bruegelesque: partridges are scampering, a kingfisher is pouncing and more than forty moorhens are strolling around. 'Scores of starlings' are even playing on the rotating filters, 'enjoying their turn on the roundabout', jumping 'like children over skipping ropes'. The whole area seems like a more-than-human version of the inclusive, welfare-state Britain that was being promised to war-weary citizens. This is a place where 'man's apparatus blended with and met their needs ... aptly' (Allsop 1972, p102). The LRP eggs are eventually destroyed by a farmer's rib roller, but once the barley was planted, the pulverised shells 'gave a little nourishment to the sprouting upthrusting seeds in the darkness of the soil' (Allsop 1972, p108). In this way, human activity is incorporated harmoniously into the wider ecological cycle.

The question arises as to whether *Adventure* is being overly optimistic. Matless (1998) describes planning policy immediately after the Second World War as being focused on balancing town and country in a harmonious whole, and it might be argued that the book has absorbed some of this prevailing ideology. However, from a historical and ecological point of view, *Adventure* is accurate in showing both sewage farms and contemporary agricultural practice as hospitable to birds and other forms of wildlife. The sewage farms created from the late nineteenth century were, according to Nicholson, 'an inspired if unintentional contribution to the art of attracting rare birds' (1990, p222). So attractive were they that one ornithologist writing in 1957 could

comment acerbically that some birdwatchers had ‘tended to become too sewage-farm minded and to forget the birds of hedgerow and meadow’ (Boyd 1957, p253). Similarly, agriculture in the immediate postwar period was relatively benign environmentally: hundreds of miles of hedgerow still existed; chemical fertilisers and pesticides were not widely used, and the soil had yet to be depleted by intensive cultivation. All this was about to change, though, as *Adventure* seems to intuit. By the end of the twentieth century, along with the radical changes in farming practice, most of the traditional sewage farms would disappear, to be replaced by less hospitable treatment plants

The tone of the book darkens when the LRPs reach the sludge disposal dump. This site, just twelve miles from Charing Cross, is also host to hundreds of birds but the description is much less harmonious and not at all bucolic. The main bird population is a colony of black-headed gulls, and as in so much literature, including du Maurier’s ‘The Birds’, the gulls are presented negatively. They live in a ‘squalid slum’ (Allsop 1972, p111); they are rowdy, bickering and ‘savage-beaked’ (p112), and in a showdown between a gull and a rat, the rat loses (p113). Cocker and Mabey trace antipathy to gulls back to their old Greek name, *laros*, meaning ‘ravenous seabird’ and suggest they may be the victims of human projection:

Gulls form the one bird family with equal mastery of land, sea and air, and an underlying element in our regret may be this sheer adaptability. Could we possibly project on to them some of the unconscious regret that we feel at our own relentless ecological dominance? Are they perhaps too successful, too numerous – too human – for their own good? (2005, p231)

Adventure gives some credence to this theory. There is a symmetry between the thronging gulls and the ‘hundreds of cars’ that pass along the nearby road to London (Allsop 1972, p111), and only aeroplanes can drown out their raucous calls. The sense is that this particular edgeland is far from benign and instead characterised by squalor and a tendency to dominate by force.

The negative tone intensifies when the LRPs reach the new airport. Here, for the first time, the effect of development on the landscape is portrayed as disruptive, not only to its more-than-human features but also to ordinary human life. Trees and bushes have been destroyed and rivers rerouted; in addition, roads, lanes, houses and cottages have all vanished (Allsop 1972, p114). The progress of the development is related in the passive voice: it ‘was still only partially built’; it ‘was planned to be the largest parallel runway aerodrome in the world’. The lack of a named agent gives the impression that the development might be proceeding under its own

auspices, beyond the control of the ordinary, right-thinking human beings who would have lived in the demolished cottages and used the obliterated lanes to communicate with each other. There are intimations of nostalgia here that recall the anti-modern stance of *The Owl Birds*, and despite the presence of larks, which ‘climbed and descended their silken ropes of song’, an essentially pastoral image right in the midst of the construction work, there is a clear insecurity about the speed of technological development and the ability of humans to control it.

When the LRPs fly in parallel with a Constellation aircraft, which is coming in to land after a twenty-one hour flight from the USA, the book is unequivocal in its verdict that, however grand the aeroplane, the LRPs are superior. ‘Theirs was the true beauty, the perfect synchronization’ declares the narrator, continuing:

While the Constellation slanted in, guided by radio instructions from the control tower ... the plovers sped side by side, their guide the knowledge of the wind currents, their equipment the keenness of eye and the delicate strength of feathers (Allsop 1972, p114).

Here too there are shades of the pastoral privileging of ‘nature’ over urban civilization, recalling the stance of *The Owl Birds*. There is also a clear separation of bird from plane that contrasts with the way they were often intertwined during the war (see introduction to this section, page xxx). It may be significant that the Lockheed Constellation was not a military plane but one of the world’s first commercial aircraft, commissioned by the American tycoon Howard Hughes, who wanted ‘a secret weapon in stealing market share from his competitors’ (Lockheed Martin 2017, no pagination). Lockheed’s chief research engineer Kelly Johnson was even more ambitious, striving for an aircraft that ‘would carry more people farther and faster than ever before, and economically enough to broaden the acceptance of flying as an alternative to train, ship and automobile’ (Lockheed Martin 2017, no pagination). The commercial aspirations of both Hughes and Johnson are clear. When *Adventure* compares the ‘complex and costly’ Constellation unfavourably with the LRPs, there is a sense that with the commercial transatlantic plane, human ambition is in danger of overreaching itself. This is another marker of the particular moment in time represented by *Adventure*. These days, between 2,000 and 3,000 aeroplanes cross the Atlantic between the USA and Europe every day (NATS 2014, no pagination), and aviation is the fastest-growing contributor to climate change (Friends of the Earth 2005, p1).

This anxiety over human technological progress manifests again and more strongly in the birds’ encounters with the supersonic rays (Allsop 1972, p118). There have already been hints that the LRPs are becoming confused by the human changes to the landscape: as soon as they land at the

airport they are 'tense and disorientated' (p114); afterwards they 'flew away with a desolate aimlessness' (p116). This is in stark contrast to the migratory flight that opens the book, where the overriding sense is one of purpose. There the birds move like a river, in varying states of exhaustion but all flowing inevitably to a single destination (Allsop 1972, p17), even if some are defeated by the storm. There is a sense of interdependency between the different species of bird. The encounter with the supersonic rays could not be more different. One individual bird after another becomes completely disorientated. Images of insanity and fragmentation dominate: the jackdaw does 'a crazy loop' and other birds appear 'bewitched'. The imagery reaches a peak with the LRPs, who cannot even co-ordinate their wings (p118). The book is careful to state that the radio station is 'experimental', a word that renders it threatening and risky. This implication is justified by the reference to a man in the station quietly congratulating himself on his success, oblivious to the havoc he is creating in the more-than-human world. Worse still, the chaos has come about as the result of experiments on milk, normally associated with ideas of nourishment and nurturing. Here is a powerful image of the human capacity to wreak unintentional environmental chaos.

The birds eventually lay their eggs at Poile Reservoir, suggesting that this artificial construction is a fundamentally positive intervention in the landscape. This sense that humans and nonhumans can and do, unconsciously, work together to create new habitats is underlined by the extended description of the origins of the little patch of grass, from discarded seed in a pet goldfinch's cage via dustcart, wild goldfinch and sparrowhawk attack to grow in some sandy mud beside the reservoir (Allsop 1972, p126). The splitting of the rubbish bag at the municipal tip is mirrored in the sparrowhawk's splitting of the goldfinch's stomach, as if to suggest that human activity in the ecosystem is as 'natural' as that of the birds. In other places, though, the human effect on the reservoir landscape is described in more unsettling terms. The war is still present in the form of the German prisoners, who drive huge machines with caterpillar tyres that have already destroyed dozens of eggs (p123). The site is compared more than once to a desert, with torrid heat and blinding reflections from concrete (p128). Even the sunset seems 'artificial'; it is 'theatrical, over-coloured as a bad oil painting' and the clouds are 'like tufts of blood-soaked cotton wool' and gulls, menacing again, fly through the dusk like 'a squadron of heavy bombers' (p129). This is more than a refusal to romanticise nature: it is a conjuring of the eerie that reveals a deep disquiet over the lingering presence of the war and the menacing possibilities of a technological future. These intimations of disaster take on substance in the two 1960s texts that form the second part of this thesis.

PART TWO: *The Peregrine* and *A Kestrel for a Knave*

INTRODUCTION

The Peregrine (1967) and *A Kestrel for a Knave* (1968) were written at a time associated in the cultural imagination with what Plain calls the ‘impulse of liberation’, particularly sexual liberation (2010, p46). The late 1960s were the years of protest, youth culture and the breaking-down of previously strict social hierarchies. They also fall within the so-called ‘age of affluence’, a period frequently dated from the end of rationing in 1954 to the OPEC oil crisis of 1973 (Black and Pemberton 2004, p5). The welfare state had brought unprecedented security to the general population, and consumerism was on the rise: for example, the housing boom of the 1950s included a huge increase in private home ownership and cinema audiences went into freefall from the early 1960s as people increasingly stayed in to watch television, while off licences mushroomed as people chose the three-piece suite at home over an evening in the pub (Black and Pemberton 2004, page 6).

These are not the dominant themes of *The Peregrine* and *A Kestrel for a Knave*, however. *The Peregrine* is situated entirely outdoors and hardly mentions human beings. Billy Casper’s home life is characterised by constraint rather than freedom and shows no evidence of the consumer durables that were becoming so popular. It is as though his family is stuck in an older and more marginal world. Nor is there any sign of change in gender hierarchies: no women at all appear in *The Peregrine*, and the world of *A Kestrel for a Knave* is rigidly patriarchal. The more relevant historical context for these books is a different kind of ‘revolution’, namely the profound post-war changes in agricultural practice which arose, at least in part, from deep anxiety about how Britain would feed itself.

The Second World War had demonstrated how vulnerable the nation’s food supplies were, and from 1945 onwards, tariffs on food imports and direct subsidies of different kinds were developed to ensure that agriculture was profitable for farmers (Shoard 1980). This economic support coincided with technological changes that made it possible to turn far larger areas of the countryside than previously over to food production, a move that had a dramatic effect on ecosystems. First there was mechanisation: between 1920 and 1980, the number of tractors on British farms increased from 10,000 to more than 500,000 (Shoard 1980, p15). Mechanisation led to the wholesale destruction of hedgerows, as larger fields were necessary in order to manoeuvre heavy machinery around the land. In addition, the machines made it easier to clear landscape

features such as woodland, also an important wildlife habitat, and turn the ground over to food production. Secondly, the use of pesticides and fertilisers skyrocketed. Before the war, most crops had been fertilised by manure or by alluvium from flood deposits. After 1945, however, artificial, inorganic fertilisers became almost ubiquitous. The use of nitrogen-based fertilisers, for example, grew by eight hundred per cent between 1953 and 1976 (Shoard 1980, p18). Pesticide use also increased dramatically, with the number of pesticides approved for agriculture rising twelve-fold between 1944 and 1975 (Shoard 1980, p18). All this led to a catastrophic disruption of the ecological balance of farmland, and farmland comprised by far the largest proportion of the land surface of England. Anger over these anthropogenic changes to the countryside flares throughout *The Peregrine* like a slow-burning fuse.

Changing agricultural practices did not just affect wildlife, either. Between 1948 and 1979, the number of full-time agricultural workers in Britain fell by sixty-six per cent (Shoard 1980, p16). In *A Kestrel for a Knave*, Billy Casper, is described as a ‘wild child’ and shown to be at home roaming the woods and fields near his mining village home. Yet when he attends his ‘careers’ interview he is offered a choice of only manual or office work, and the most obvious manual work is down the pit (Hines 2000, p169). The lack of choices available to Billy is portrayed mainly as a failure of the education system; however, the post-war changes in land management have also affected his future. In my reading I show the increasing disconnection of working-class people from the more-than-human world is a significant concern in the book.

In my introduction to the first part of this thesis, I described the surge in interest in birdwatching that began in the 1930s. This continued well into the 1960s and beyond. Gifford describes the period between 1960 and 1980 as one in which Britain ‘turned into a nation of birdwatchers’, with membership of the RSPB rising from 10,000 in 1960 to 300,000 in 1972 (2016, p8). With car ownership also increasing, many of these enthusiasts would use their leisure time to visit the growing number of nature reserves, and amateur birders continued to contribute to scientific surveys, as they had done in the period around the Second World War. Gifford argues that this is one important reason why *The Peregrine*, with its dramatic references to the impact of pesticides on one of the country’s most iconic birds, made such a cultural impact. Not only did it have a ready readership of bird enthusiasts; that readership also understood the links between land use and ecological health, even if the word ‘ecology’ was only just passing into common parlance (Gifford 2016, p2). Beyond the field of birdwatching, too, there was growing awareness of the impact of human actions on the more-than-human world. The Cuban missile crisis of 1963

forced the idea of nuclear annihilation into the public imagination. Even as prime minister Harold Wilson was promising that the 'new Britain' would be forged in the 'white heat' of 'scientific revolution' (Wilson 1963), evidence was mounting that scientific invention could bring untold damage alongside its benefits: this was also the era of Thalidomide, oil spills and myxomatosis. Much would depend on humans' ability to use technology responsibly and ethically, and the first half of the twentieth century gave precious little reason for optimism.

Chapter 3

Peregrine

Look! Look! he is climbing the last light
Who knows neither Time nor error, and under
Whose eye, unforgiving, the world, unforgiven, swings
Into shadow.

Robert Penn Warren (1905-1989)
'Evening Hawk'
(Ferguson, Salter and Stallworthy 2005, p1459)

The peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) is a large, bulky falcon: the female can weigh up to 1.3kg, equivalent to a grey heron, and the male up to 750g. It nests on mountain crags and sea cliffs (Perrins 1987, p100) and is the fastest animal that has ever lived, famous for its vertical stoops towards prey that are thought to reach speeds of over 350 kilometres per hour (Cocker and Mabey 2005, p146). In her cultural history of the genus *Falco*, Macdonald writes of their peculiar fascination for humans: 'They excite us, seem superior to other birds and exude a dangerous, edgy, natural sublimity' (2006, p7). The lives of humans and peregrines have been intertwined for hundreds if not thousands of years, being associated with nobility all over the world (Macdonald 2006, p14), and a favourite with falconers since at least the ninth century (Cocker and Mabey 2005, p148). Of all the birds in this thesis, the peregrine is the one with the densest layer of cultural accretions, inhabiting 'a secondary human landscape that combines a dense forest of historical reference with an elevated plateau of high praise' (Cocker and Mabey 2005, p145).

If the cultural representation of the peregrine falcon is a landscape, then J.A. Baker's *The Peregrine*, the story of one man's intense relationship with the birds he tracks across the countryside near his Essex home, is a towering peak. When the book appeared in 1967, it was

widely praised and won the Duff Cooper Memorial Prize. However until recently, virtually nothing was known of the author. ‘John A Baker is in his forties and lives with his wife in Essex’, read the biographical note to the 1970 Penguin edition. ‘He has no telephone and rarely goes out socially’ (quoted in Fanshawe 2010, p16). Over the years, the many fans of Baker’s writing have worked hard to assemble his papers and an archive opened at the University of Essex in 2016. A biography is due later this year (Macfarlane 2017a). Among *The Peregrine*’s keenest admirers are some of today’s most prominent nature writers. Cocker calls it ‘the gold standard of nature writing’ (2010, p4). James Rebanks, author of *The Shepherd’s Life* (2015) describes it as ‘stunning’ and claims to read from it every week. ‘No one else has even come close’ (*Herdwick Shepherd* 2017). Macfarlane has written a preface and an afterword for different editions of the book (2005, 2017b). In a newspaper article he cites it alongside Nan Shepherd’s *The Living Mountain* (1977) as one of the two books that has had greatest influence over today’s landscape writers (2017a, no pagination). Not a nature writer, but nevertheless a huge cultural figure, Werner Herzog sets it as required reading for his film students and has described it as ‘a most incredible book’ (Herzog no date, no pagination).

Unlike the other books in this thesis, *The Peregrine* is usually thought of as primarily a nature writing text. However, I would argue that it does not sit neatly within any single genre but is, like the 1940s texts, better described as a hybrid. Most of it is arranged like a diary, but few diaries exhibit the linguistic virtuosity that characterises Baker’s style. Some of the entries appear like field notes and so suggest a quasi-scientific authority: if they were recorded ‘in the field’ then surely there must be a truth to them. Yet Macfarlane reports that while writing the book

Baker went back to his journals and destroyed nearly all the passages in which he had recorded his field-sightings of the falcons. He left no account of why he had done so, and no version of the originals. By means of this redaction, he ensured that the most astonishing sequences of the published book flew free from any tether, and could not, as it were, be read back against the real (2017b, loc 2760).

One effect of Baker’s deletions may well be to ensure that the book flies ‘free from any tether’; another is to cast doubt on the reliability of what he reports. Cocker outlines a number of objections that ornithologists have raised about the book, including the challenge from birdwatchers who were active in the same valley as Baker but rarely saw a single peregrine (2010, p8). Cocker’s riposte is that Baker’s detractors ‘fail to appreciate the difference between the literal truth of a notebook and the literary truth as expressed by Baker’ (2010, p9). This answer is unsatisfactory, though, since ‘literary truth’ is not generally presented in the form of field notes.

The book is perhaps better described as a memoir, though it is hard to discern in it the clear episodic structure that characterises most memoirs. If genre provides clues as to how a text should be interpreted, then the difficulty of pinning *The Peregrine* down to any single genre mirrors the difficulty of knowing how to interpret the times when what is happening is both unprecedented and unimagined. For Baker, as I shall go on to demonstrate, this was true of the times he was writing about: everything he held most precious seemed to be threatened with destruction. Additionally, in common with *Adventure*, *The Peregrine* is so focused on the more-than-human world that there is a sense that human genres cannot stretch to fit what the text is trying to do.

Most criticism of *The Peregrine* singles out Baker's extraordinary writing style for praise. It is one in which language is pushed to new limits and imagery and syntax startle on every page. He frequently wrenches words from their usual function and turns them into other parts of speech. An adjective may become a verb, or an intransitive verb adopt an object: a flock of dunlin 'rained away inland, like a horde of beetles gleamed with gold chitin' (p52) ; 'The north wind brittle icily in the pleached lattice of the hedges' (p103). A frequently-quoted passage is:

... the peregrine lives in a pouring-away world of no attachment, a world of wakes and tilting, of sinking planes of land and water. We who are anchored and earthbound cannot envisage this freedom of the eye (Baker 2010, p46).

This dizzy, elemental shifting between land, air and water occurs often and evokes a sense of soaring and swooping, while the neologistic compound 'pouring-away', one of many that appear throughout, suggests both the way that height and velocity might affect the peregrine's viewpoint, and also the more metaphorical idea of the bird being free from all attachments. The second sentence, comparing the human situation unfavourably with that of the bird, is a theme that runs relentlessly throughout the book, and one that I shall go on to explore. Inevitably, Baker also makes use of anthropomorphism. Here his imagery can be as arresting as his language, but I do not always find it unproblematic. When he writes: 'A cock blackbird, yellow-billed, stared with bulging crocus eye like a small mad puritan with a banana in his mouth' (2010, p105), I can visualise the blackbird well, but I am unsure about the comparison of a bird with a deranged cleric. The banana would have to be unpeeled to match the yellow of a blackbird bill. If effective anthropomorphism is writing that 'makes the animal or plant instantly accessible ... yet without diminishing its separate non-human identity' (Cocker 2010, p13), then this fails: the bizarre human image is too overwhelming and detracts from the quiddity of the blackbird.

Near the start of the book, Baker writes: ‘The hardest thing of all is to see what is really there’ (2010, p33). Part of the reason why he reached so hard and so ambitiously for a language that would portray the peregrines as they are was that he feared for their extinction. The discovery, in 1960, that peregrine populations were in freefall was completely unexpected. Pigeon racers in Wales, convinced that peregrines were killing unprecedented numbers of their birds, had petitioned the Home Office to remove their protected status. A census followed and the results were shocking. Far from increasing, peregrine falcons were in catastrophic decline. It was, wrote the raptor specialist Derek Ratcliffe, ‘a spectacular crash of population with a speed and on a scale seldom found in the vertebrate kingdom’ (quoted in Macfarlane 2017b, loc 2848). Evidence began to mount that this was due to the increasing use of agricultural pesticides. The effect on peregrines was twofold. First, they were ingesting pesticides in sub-lethal quantities from their granivorous prey. The subsequent build-up of chemicals killed them outright. Additionally, far fewer chicks were hatching. Ratcliffe had been concerned since the 1940s that peregrines were damaging increasing numbers of eggs in their nests. Eventually he proved that ingestion of DDT was resulting in female peregrines laying eggs with thinner shells. This was one of the factors that led to the chemical being withdrawn (Cocker and Mabey 2005, p150).

It wasn’t just about pesticides either. As Macdonald points out, the threat to the peregrines was revealed at a time of ‘extreme Cold War paranoia’ (2006, p121). She describes how the two threats were mirrored in public information notices:

Parallels between radiation sickness and pesticide poisoning were graphically traced: again and again the public stared at neat little pyramidal diagrams showing how radioactive fallout fell onto grass, was eaten by cows, accumulated in their milk and finally ended up sequestered in the bones of nursing mothers. These bioaccumulation diagrams were almost indistinguishable from others showing the build-up of DDT in the tissues of another top predator, the peregrine (2006, p121).

Here is another aspect of the deep-seated association between peregrines and humans that I referred to at the start of this chapter. The fate of the peregrine is seen as ‘an ominous foreshadowing of mankind itself’ (Macdonald 2006, p121).

In her seminal work *Silent Spring* (1962), Carson had also drawn an implicit parallel between pesticide poisoning and radioactive fallout. The white powder that falls on the imaginary American town in her prologue stands for the agrichemicals she is about to denounce, but also evokes the fallout from a nuclear attack. Macfarlane points out that Baker began writing *The*

Peregrine shortly after the Cuban missile crisis, and that the massive nuclear power station at Bradwell-on-Sea lay ‘right in the heart of Baker’s hunting territory’ (2017b, loc 2866). I agree with his assertion that the book is ‘nuclear as much as pesticidal’ (2017b, loc 2865); the link can be seen clearly in this passage, in which Baker refers to the disaster afflicting the peregrines:

Few peregrines are left, there will be fewer, they may not survive. Many die on their backs, clutching insanely at the sky in their last convulsions, withered and burnt away by the filthy, insidious pollen of farm chemicals. Before it is too late, I have tried to recapture the extraordinary beauty of this bird and to convey the wonder of the land he lived in ... It is a dying world, like Mars, but glowing still’ (Baker 2010, p31).

The references to burning and glowing, the establishment of a link between the peregrine habitat and a dying planet the size of Mars: all this evokes the threat of nuclear annihilation that stalked the public imagination throughout the Cold War. This passage and other parts of *The Peregrine* contain elements of ‘toxic discourse’, a cultural genre defined by Laurence Buell in 2001 to encompass texts that deal with the effects of pollution. In particular, there are the ‘totalising images of a world without refuge from toxic penetration’ and the ‘threat of hegemonic oppression’ (Garrard 2012, p14). However, for Buell this threat is likely to come from ‘powerful corporations or governments’ (Garrard 2012, p14) whereas in *The Peregrine*, as I shall demonstrate, it is the entire human race that represents a terminal threat to the rest of the world.

Macfarlane describes *The Peregrine* as ‘a book in which very little happens over and over again (2005, pxii). Certainly the sixty thousand words are on one level a repeating pattern: the narrator goes out to watch peregrines; the peregrines hunt other birds; usually, but not always, they succeed in catching one. However, I perceive a faint narrative thread running through this patterning. *The Peregrine* is the story of a man who wants to slough off his own identity and merge it completely with that of the bird. As Macfarlane points out (2005, pxiii), a single sentence about the killing of a dunlin can stand for the entire book: ‘The dunlin seemed to come slowly back to the hawk. It passed into his dark outline, and did not reappear’ (Baker 2010, p56). This suicidal merging of one creature with another is what *The Peregrine* seeks throughout, and over the course of the book the distance between Baker and the peregrine is shown, through a series of close encounters, to be narrowing. Macfarlane writes of the subject-object distance almost closing, ‘only to yawn wide once more’ (2017b, loc 2829). Although I agree that the gap never closes completely, I think he has missed the fact that it is possible to trace the incremental shrinking of the distance between bird and man in a way that lends some narrative cohesion to a text that, for all its extraordinary descriptions, can appear fragmented and repetitive.

Baker's desperation to fuse himself with the bird takes on the nature of a quest. For ten years I followed the peregrine,' he writes. 'It was a grail to me' (2010, p31). The Holy Grail was believed to be the cup used at the Last Supper and to have been filled at the crucifixion with the blood that flowed from the side of Christ (British Library, no date). In Western literature there could be no more powerful symbol of purification. Just as the quest for the Holy Grail in medieval literature was a search for the ultimate spiritual experience, so Baker's pursuit of the peregrine is inflected with ideas of sacred ritual:

Wherever he goes, this winter, I will follow him. I will share the fear, and the exaltation, and the boredom, of the hunting life. I will follow him till my predatory human shape no longer darkens in terror the shaken kaleidoscope of colour that stains the deep fovea of his brilliant eye. My pagan head shall sink into the winter land, and there be purified (Baker 2010, p48).

Baker seeks a kind of personal redemption in his pursuit of the peregrine, and it will manifest in the bird no longer treating him as an object of fear. For this to happen, he must cease to be human for he believes that 'No pain, no death, is more terrible to a wild creature than its fear of man' (Baker 2010, p113). This is an anthropocentric assertion and an example of the way humans can only ever imagine how the more-than-human world conceptualises them. It is substantiated by a succession of appalling examples of animals dying as a result of human activity: a red-throated diver 'sodden and obscene with oil'; a poisoned crow with 'bright yellow foam bubbling from its throat', and a rabbit 'inflated and foul with myxomatosis' (p113). Despite their extreme weakness, each animal pushes itself to its limits in order to escape an approaching human. Baker's desire to be accepted without fear by a wild bird can thus only be possible if he is able somehow to separate himself from the rest of humanity and be considered a falcon himself. Humanity, in this configuration, is irredeemable. Just as the Christian metanarrative in the grail motif requires that humans are taken into the identity of Christ in order to achieve salvation, so Baker seeks to be caught up in the identity of the peregrine as a way of escaping human taint.

In October, when the diary begins, Baker must crouch motionless in order to not to scare the bird (2010, p53). On the 28th, the tiercel flees from his 'fetid human smell' (p67) but by 2nd November he is 'more willing to face me now, less ready to fly when I approach' (p71) and by the 6th, the distance that Baker can approach to has shrunk from two hundred yards to fifty (p72). On 29th December, the bird seems almost habituated to his presence:

For the first time, I realised that he may watch for my arrival in the valley. The predictability of my movements may have made him more curious and more trusting. He may associate me now with the incessant disturbance of prey, as though I too were a species of hawk (p116).

Baker is approaching his ultimate goal of losing his human identity to the point where the hawk can accept him. On 6th March, the tiercel approaches him with eyes that are 'fearless and bland' and only at the last minute wrenches himself away in 'an anguish of fear' (p132). By the 20th, Baker can stand 'twenty yards from his perch' (p145) and the peregrine does not even take flight when Baker claps his hands (p145). At the beginning of April, with the peregrines on the verge of migrating, Baker intuits that he will find the bird eight miles away on the coast. The falcon is there. Approaching him on his hands and knees, Baker finally dares to stand up: the bird is just five yards away, on the other side of a low wall. Will he take flight? 'I climb over the wall and stand before him,' writes Baker in a sentence that evokes ideas of worship and self-offering linked to the grail motif. Baker moves his arm, the falcon makes eye contact and then falls asleep (p169). Baker is no longer an object of terror, but of supreme indifference. The idea of a deity falling asleep in the presence of one of its most ardent worshippers has a bathetic quality. Although the hawk has lost his fear of Baker, Baker has not become a bird.

The peregrines' increasing acceptance of Baker is mirrored by changes in his behaviour that are increasingly hawk-like. On 30th November he finds himself crouching over a bloody pigeon kill 'like a mantling hawk' and writes: 'Unconsciously I was imitating the movements of a hawk, as in some primitive ritual; the hunter becoming the thing he hunts' (2010, p92). As his identity merges with that of the birds, his antipathy to other people intensifies. Using the first person plural to refer to them and himself, he writes:

We shun men. We hate their suddenly uplifted arms, the insanity of their flailing gestures, their erratic scissoring gait, their aimless stumbling, the tombstone whiteness of their faces (2010, p92).

Very few humans appear in this book but they are all, as here, associated with death. Each one is engaged in some kind of destruction. Farmers on tractors appear from time to time, and in the context of the DDT situation, they are, by implication spreading fatal chemicals. There is mention of a hare being hunted with dogs (p82), and later on, invisible but noisy men are heard shooting thousands of pigeons that 'go down before the guns, like the cavalry at Balaclava' (p118). 'We stink of death,' writes Baker, this time meaning himself and other human animals. 'We carry it with us. It sticks to us like frost. We cannot tear it away' (p113).

The Peregrine's extreme antipathy towards other humans recalls *The Owl Birds'* denigration of the egg collectors. If Percy Warler had been successful, he would have brought avocets back to extinction in Britain. In *The Peregrine* too, extinction threatens. Shortly before the quotation above, Baker describes observing a pair of peregrines who had nested on some cliffs in the south of England. But the nest was empty, presumably because of shell-thinning, and as a result the birds 'had no meaning' (Baker 2010, p110). Referring to the pesticides they had ingested, he writes:

Foul poison burned within them like a burrowing fuse. Their life was lonely death, and would not be renewed. All they could do was take their glory to the sky. They were the last of their race (p110).

In terms of what the text reveals about wider contemporary anxieties about human identity, this despair over the poisoned birds takes on added significance when one considers the way that birds have, historically and culturally, stood for continuity, even immortality, a link that arises from the phenomenon of migration. Although poorly understood until the twentieth century, the tendency of birds to disappear and then reappear again at fixed times over the years has always provided a reassuring sense of stability in an uncertain world. In a poem entitled 'Swifts', Ted Hughes expresses relief at the first sight of the birds in May: 'They've made it again, / Which means the globe's still working' (Armitage and Dee 2009, p128). If, one year, the swifts did not 'make it', the implications would be as momentous as the earth no longer turning on its axis. As I wrote in my introduction to this thesis, there is also an ancient association of birds with the divine, by virtue of their ability to inhabit the sky; thus migration can also appear to represent a kind of return from the dead, or immortality. All this is caught up in Baker's horror at the threat to the migratory peregrines. If the peregrines are in some sense immortal, then it is easier to understand the book's extreme loathing of human beings. If 'Man the destroyer', as *The Owl Birds* has it (Stanford 1949, p46), can kill even what is immortal, then 'man' is the conduit through which evil triumphs. In complete opposition to the Christian metanarrative of redemption and resurrection, death has conquered life.

Thus *The Peregrine* rejects human exceptionalism in the strongest terms. If anything, it is the hawks that are the privileged subjects. While this is understandable, given the threat of an anthropogenic extinction, there are elements here of a particular construction of wildness, in which 'nature' is seen as pure and humanity as tainted (Garrard 2012, p15; 66). Such a construction can be a useful tactic in conservation, but it risks reinforcing the problematic idea

that humans are in some way separate from ‘nature’, and, additionally, can lead to a damaging erasure of human history. Garrard uses the example of the Yosemite national park, where the myth of ‘uninhabited wilderness’ was used to justify the expulsion of Ahwahneechee Indians and white miners who had lived and worked there (2012, p77). Baker’s refusal to represent the rest of humanity as anything other than destructive is in this vein: many of his contemporaries were engaged in environmental activism and conservation, not least those who uncovered the reasons behind peregrine decline.

Two contemporary writers who approach *The Peregrine* differently to those referred to earlier in this chapter are Helen Macdonald and Kathleen Jamie. Macdonald, an experienced falconer, describes rereading *The Peregrine* after her father’s fatal heart attack. She found it horrifying: ‘His hawks were made of death’ (2014, p200). She is concerned about the effect that Baker’s peregrines have on people who have not encountered them outside his book. Whereas she had met plenty of ‘cheerful, friendly falconer’s birds that preened on suburban lawns’ (2014, p200), most of her bird-loving friends, having read Baker’s book before they saw a live one, ‘can’t see real peregrines without them conjuring distance, extinction and death’ (2014, p201). When she continues ‘Wild things are made of human histories’ (2014, p201), she is making an important point about the effect that cultural representations of the more-than-human world have on the way that we respond to it, including the way we respond to other people. Elsewhere she describes how the peregrine in particular has frequently been held up as ‘the spirit of a lost age – either of vital, primeval nature, or of glorious myth and heraldry’ (2006, p164). In this configuration, the peregrine signifies a contrast with degenerate modern civilization, rather as it is in *The Peregrine*. Macdonald cites Henry Williamson’s 1923 fable *The Peregrine’s Saga* as both an example of this and a warning of where such a stance – which is close to the anti-modern approach of *The Owl Birds* - can lead. In Macdonald’s reading, Chakcheck, the peregrine hero of Williamson’s book, is ‘an analogue of the *Übermensch*, the “superior man” who redeems Western civilization from its moral decadence and loss of vision’ (2006, p164). An episode where Chakcheck is first trapped by and then escapes a man employed by ‘a maculate Yiddish birdfancier’ (cited in Macdonald 2006, p164) is for her a clear foreshadowing of Williamson’s later support for the British Union of Fascists.

I am not suggesting that Baker shared Williamson’s political stance: apart from anything else, so little is known about him that this would be ridiculous, as well as deeply unfair. I simply want to draw attention to where some aspects of his approach can lead, and in particular to the way the

peregrine has been made to stand for an idea of untainted wildness that is human in origin and does not inhere in the bird itself. In fact peregrines have shown a stunning ability to adapt themselves to modern life and are increasingly seen nesting in city centres: in 2016 there were sixteen pairs in New York alone (Macfarlane 2017a, no pagination). Thus the birds themselves have conclusively given the lie to the longstanding idea that falcons were ‘the opposite of modern civilization, the scion of ageless mountains, not a citizen of modern streets’ (Macdonald 2006, p164).

An essay by Jamie (2005) demonstrates a contrasting approach to Baker’s. In it, she observes a pair of peregrines on a cliff face she can see from her attic window. Unlike Baker, her attitude to the birds has a communality about it. She describes how ‘half the town’ can hear the female calling, and recounts conversations with other people who share her fascination. Where Baker’s birds are presented in exalted, even reverential, terms, Jamie’s descriptions can verge on the mischievous. ‘The male peregrine was there today, sitting side-on, glumly inspecting his feet,’ she writes. ‘He lifted first one yellow talon then the other, like one who has chewing gum on his shoe’ (2005, p32). Her imagery draws directly from the urban human world and her brazenly anthropomorphic attribution of glumness to the bird reads as a deliberate attempt to demythologise it and highlight the tendency that human animals have to hang their own meanings on nonhuman ones. Jamie also refers to Baker’s book in this essay, but whereas the writers I cited earlier in this chapter speak about it in terms verging on the awestruck, she is more pragmatic. ‘Who was this man who could spend ten years following peregrines?’ she asks. ‘Had he no job?’ (2005, p43). She remarks that there is ‘almost a tradition in literature of lone men engaging with birds’ (2005, p38), a statement that this research project would tend to support. By contrast, her experiences of birds are inseparable from her everyday responsibilities:

Between the laundry and the fetching kids from school, that’s how birds enter my life. I listen. During a lull in the traffic, oyster catchers. In the school playground, sparrows ...
The birds live at the edge of my life. (2005, p39).

In Jamie’s worldview, human and nonhuman are linked inextricably: she alludes to the kind of interconnectedness that I have already said is essential at a time of ecological crisis.

I do not wish to be unfair to Baker. Jamie pays him an important tribute when she says that he helped her to see the birds better and then goes on:

This is the paradox: here is a person who would annihilate himself and renounce his fellows, who would enter into the world of birds and woods and sky, but then in an act

of consummate communication to his human kind, step back into language and write a book still spoken of forty years on (Jamie 2005, p43).

There is no doubt that Baker's extraordinary writing has entranced countless readers and inspired them to look at the more-than-human world in new ways, as well as alerting them to the ease with which humans can wreck their only home. However, the book's extreme antipathy to humans and its co-opting of the bird into a particular construction of untainted wildness are problematic in the way they draw dividing lines between different forms of life. In the context of the 1960s, though, when awareness of the damage humans were wreaking on the environment was growing in parallel with Cold War anxieties over the threat of nuclear annihilation, the book's negative tone is understandable. Its response to the question of whether humans are capable of creating and sustaining a world worth living in is an emphatic 'no'.

Chapter 4

Kestrel

My heart in hiding

Stirred for a bird – the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889)

‘The Windhover’

(Ferguson, Salter and Stallworthy 2005, p1166)

The Common Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*) is one of Britain’s commonest raptors and has been dubbed the ‘motorway hawk’ because of its habit of hovering over road verges. As with the peregrines of the previous chapter, its extraordinary mastery of the air has fascinated humans for centuries. ‘The hovering kestrel is as inspiring a vision of avian perfection as a peregrine in its headlong dive or a fishing gannet,’ write Cocker and Mabey (2005, p142). Also like the peregrines, these days it is happy to nest amidst urban sprawl. However, the bird in *A Kestrel for a Knave* is taken from a rural setting, something that has tended to surprise the book’s readers. In the afterword to the Penguin Modern Classics edition of his novel, Hines writes that one of the questions he is most frequently asked is how he knows so much about the countryside if he comes from Barnsley. He goes on:

It’s an ignorant question but understandable, because many people still have a vision of the north filled with ‘dark satanic mills’, mines and factories, and not a blade of grass in sight. When I try to explain that the mining village in which I was born and brought up – just a few miles from Barnsley – was surrounded by woods and fields, I can tell they don’t believe me (Hines 2000, p199).

Such a misconception about the place of the countryside in the industrial north is deep seated and spreads well beyond the classrooms and literature festivals where Hines used to be invited to

talk about his much-loved novel. For example, Head, discussing the relationship between post-war novels and depictions of rurality, suggests that one of the reasons for the decline in fictional representations of nature is ‘the post-war identification of working-class experience with the industrial north of England’ (2002, p190). Implicit in this claim is an assumption that ‘nature’ is irrelevant to the northern working-class experience. There is a link here with the way that the Second World War recruitment posters **I refer to on page xxx** located rural England firmly in a pastoral version of the south. Such preconceptions may explain why the little criticism that exists of *A Kestrel for a Knave* tends to pass over the extended descriptions of the countryside surrounding Billy’s town. In addition, despite the fact that the central theme of the book is the relationship between a bird and a boy, critics have failed to engage fully with the importance of the more-than-human world to the book as a whole. Generically, the book has tended to be identified with the so-called ‘working-class novel’ (Hawthorn 1984; Haywood 1997; Day 2001; Kirk 2003) and as a result, critics may have seen only what they expected.

Another reason may be that the better-known film of the book, *Kes* (1969), was directed by Ken Loach, whose name is practically a byword for radical politics and social critique. In fact, Loach’s film has several scenes that demonstrate the close proximity of rural and industrial in the story. For example, Jud’s walk to the pit is full of sunshine, birdsong and trees. As Hill points out, the effect is to show that ‘the world of nature does not signify an alternative to, or “escape” from, the world of work and industry, but rather the very location in which such mundane, everyday activities are undertaken’ (2011, p116). This corresponds to the attitude of the novel. However, the film omits scenes that are crucial for recognising that the full extent of Billy’s alienation is revealed only in a careful reading of his relationship with the more-than-human world. These include Anderson’s tadpole story (Hines 2000, p75) and the closing part of the book, in which Billy flees to the disused cinema (Hines 2000, p187).

The exception to the type of criticism that I have referred to above is a recent essay in which del Valle Alcalá interprets *A Kestrel for a Knave* through the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari and suggests that Billy’s relationship with Kes – his ‘becoming-kestrel’, to use the Deleuzian term – opens ‘a hitherto unexplored trajectory of being, composing a new cartography of subjectivity that is no longer determined by external factors or by the overarching dictates of an abstract capitalist machine’ (2016, p393). As del Valle Alcalá suggests, to read Billy only in terms of his economic situation is to cage him even more firmly in the capitalist system that is failing him, whereas to read him in terms of the dynamics of his relationship with the bird opens the

possibility of a much fuller understanding of his potential. In my reading, I will focus on how the more-than-human world plays a crucial role as a site of resistance and identity formation for Billy, as well as being a place in which historic ideas about class and land ownership are inscribed. I will pay close attention not just to Billy's relationship with the kestrel, as del Valle Alcalá does, but also to the varied natural and built environments in which the story takes place. In so doing, I will demonstrate that the book is permeated with a profound anxiety about the future of humanity that is related not only to the dehumanising effects of industrial modernity but also, in a way that is ahead of its time, to the danger of people's weakening connections with the more-than-human world in the decades following the Second World War.

One consequence of reading *A Kestrel for a Knave* solely as a 'working-class novel' is that the focus is likely to be on the extent to which Billy's alienation arises from the fact that the only future available to him is that of becoming a waged labourer like his miner brother, Jud. It is not that this reading is invalid, but rather that it is incomplete. Despite the political edge to the book, Billy is, as del Valle Alcalá says, much more than 'an endorsement of essentialist socialist constructions of the working class' (2016, p 374). While I accept that the lottery of his birth into a working-class family in a mining town is part of the reason for his fragmented sense of self, Billy can only be fully understood if it is recognised that his primary wound arises from the loss of his father and the subsequent disintegration of his home environment. This aspect of Billy's identity is something that Day misses when he says that 'Billy's hawk symbolises his spirit' (2001, p187) and quotes the passage where Billy tells Mr Farthing that Kes is 'not bothered about anybody, not even about me' (cited in Day 2001, p187; see Hines 2000, p146). In fact Billy is very bothered indeed about the other people in his family at least: when he writes a 'tall story' in his English class, he conjures a happy home and his father returning (Hines 2000, p89); when he is at his lowest point after Kes dies, he heads almost unconsciously for the disused cinema where he had his last experience of happiness with his father (Hines 2000, p194). Day's misreading is the result of reducing Kes to a mere cipher in the text, assuming that her sole function is to tell the reader more about Billy, rather than paying attention to her avian quiddity. A reading that recognises the distinctness of Kes's identity also allows for a more nuanced understanding of Billy, whose identity is shaped by two profound experiences of disconnection. One is the savage rupture of any sense of belonging to a family when his beloved father walks out after discovering Billy's mother's adultery (Hines 2000, p195). The other is the alienation he experiences, along with his peers, as a working-class teenager growing up under industrial capitalism. Working

against both these disconnects is his relationship with Kes and with the wider natural world that surrounds his mining town.

Billy first encounters kestrels on an early morning walk when he is captivated by the hovering and stooping of a pair that is nesting in the wall of an ancient monastery (Hines 2000, p35). In my introduction I suggested that birds are 'good to think with' because they embody both similarity to, and difference from, humans. This encounter highlights the obvious contrast between the birds' freedom and Billy's lack of life choices, and between their ability to soar high in the sky and the fact that Billy's future will almost certainly be played out below the ground in a dark coal mine. As the book progresses, it probes more deeply and subtly into both the contrasting and the contiguous aspects of the situation of bird and boy. One reason why it is able to do this so effectively is that Kes becomes a trained falcon and thus takes up a richly creative space on the boundaries between wild and domesticated. In fact Kes, like other trained falcons, can be said to transcend the wild-domesticated binary by co-operating freely with Billy while still retaining the ability to fly away.

Like Kes, Billy also embodies aspects of what might be called 'wildness'. These emerge partly through his refusal to compromise at school, such as when he ultimately triumphs over Mr Sugden's bullying in the showers after PE, using the exceptional, monkey-like climbing skills that he demonstrates throughout the book (Hines 2000, p133). More significantly for my reading of the book, Billy's wildness is also demonstrated through his sensitivity to the more-than-human world. In the following extract, he is on the walk on which he will eventually discover the nesting kestrels:

A cushion of mist lay over the fields. Dew drenched the grass, and the occasional sparkling of individual drops made Billy glance down as he passed. One tuft was a silver fire. He knelt down to trace the source of light. The drop had almost forced the blade of grass to the earth, and it lay in the curve of the blade like the tiny egg of a mythical bird. Billy moved his head from side to side to make it sparkle, and when it caught the sun it exploded, throwing out silver needles and crystal splinters. He lowered his head and slowly, very carefully, touched it with the tip of his tongue. The drop quivered like mercury, but held. He bent, and touched it again. It disintegrated and streamed down the channel of the blade to the earth (Hines 2000, p30).

This careful, detailed description recalls some of the closely-observed nature passages in *Adventure*; together with the references to precious metals and mythical creatures, it demonstrates how close Billy is to participation in a world of beauty and creativity that lies almost literally on the doorstep of the squalor and violence that characterise his home and school. The way Billy touches the raindrop with his tongue evokes a very young child exploring the environment: it is a kind of playfulness that is also a way of learning. However, in Billy's education there is no room for play. School is a joyless place where he is being prepared for a particular kind of work, one that stands in binary opposition to the idea of play and assigns him a dehumanising role in the machine of industrial capitalism. Images like this of physical contact between humans and the more-than-human world play a powerful role in *A Kestrel for a Knave*, a point I shall develop more fully when I discuss Billy's relationship with the bird.

Billy's affinity with the more-than-human world is depicted as something unusual. Although he had been expecting some other boys to come out nesting with him, they have all failed to turn up, and Jud draws attention to his difference by calling him 'Billy Casper! Wild man of the woods!'. He continues: 'I ought to have thi in a cage. I'd make a bloody fortune' (Hines 2000, p45). There is a hint here of a theme that goes on to become more dominant at the end of the book, which is that the further the teenagers of Billy's town are acculturated into the expectations of school and work, the weaker their connection with the more-than-human world. Jud, who is already working in the mine, is at the far end of this scale, and as a result he can only see Billy's wildness as something that could be captured and commodified.

Thus Billy's situation is simultaneously akin to Kes's, and radically different. He is like Kes because he inhabits a marginal space between wild and domesticated, but unlike her because, crucially, their training has different goals. The purpose of Kes's training is to allow her to retain her wildness and her agency, to make her own decisions about whether to obey her trainer or not. As Billy explains to Mr Farthing:

(I)t makes me mad when I take her out and I'll hear somebody say, "Look there's Billy Casper there wi' his pet hawk." I could shout at 'em; it's not a pet, Sir, hawks are not pets. Or when folks stop me and say, "Is it tame?" Is it heck tame, it's trained that's all.' (Hines 2000, p146).

In complete contrast, the goal of Billy's education is to strip him of his individuality and agency in order that he can be slotted into the capitalist system. His 'careers' interview offers a stark choice between office and manual work. In a telling detail, the cover of the pamphlet entitled

LEAVING SCHOOL situates the school leaver inside, while the window onto the world of tree, bird and sky – the world in which Billy is most obviously himself - is out of reach behind the boss's desk (Hines 2000, p172). This contrast between Billy and Kes illustrates the Marxian concept of alienation, in particular the idea that workers within the capitalist mode of production experience estrangement from their *Gattungswesen*, or 'species-being' (Mészáros 1970, p14). While Kes, in Mr Farthing's words, 'just seems proud to be itself' (Hines 2000, p147), Billy is being progressively cut off from opportunities to fulfil his potential as a human being, which in his case would almost certainly involve meaningful work outside.

Kes offers Billy a chance to resist the expectations placed on him by school. In training her, he becomes both teacher and student, and this aspect of the boy-bird relationship is an opportunity for the book to figure a different type of education to the one Billy experiences in the bottom stream of a secondary modern school, where he has 'a job to read and write' (Hines 2000, p170). Once he decides to train Kes, he is driven to get hold of a book on falconry by any means. The class on fact and fiction with Mr Farthing shows that he has mastered a range of technical words that he needs in order to fly her. For a few minutes, the teacher-pupil relationship is radically subverted as Billy takes control of the signifying system, telling Mr Farthing what the words mean and how to spell them (Hines 2000, p79). Such a role reversal, however temporary, shines a powerful light on the extent to which Billy is denied the chance to fulfil his potential as a result of being trapped in a system that is determined to dictate the narrative of his life. In addition, the teaching methods he describes are characterised by gentleness and attentiveness, in complete contrast with the way he is bullied and shouted at in school.

As he captures the class's attention with his fluent descriptions, Billy demonstrates that his connection with the bird is enabling him to fulfil a key feature of his *Gattungswesen*, namely the skilled use of language. The use of complex language has historically been cited as something that sets humans above other kinds of animal. However, this is not the message of *A Kestrel for a Knave*. Billy's powers of expression are seen as essential to his individuality, but the book also demonstrates an underlying anxiety that industrial modernity is working to separate humans from their own animality and that this constitutes part of the estrangement from their full humanity. One of the ways that Billy is shown as more in touch with his animal self is through images of physical contact. When his hands are bleeding after handling the kestrel eyasses, it is 'as though he had been nesting in a hawthorn hedge', the image setting up a direct connection between Billy and the birds (Hines 2000, p54). The significance of physical connection with the

more-than-human world can also be seen in a slightly different way in the English lesson. When Farthing asks Anderson to tell the class a ‘really interesting fact’ about himself (Hines 2000, p73), Anderson responds with a story about putting his bare feet into a pair of wellingtons full of live tadpoles (Hines 2000, p75). To twenty-first century sensibilities, this sounds alarming. But as Kerridge relates in his memoir of growing up in the 1960s, it was not unusual for children, especially boys, to develop a fascination with amphibians:

Children were routinely given frogspawn or tadpoles, and older boys often kept newts or Grass Snakes in tanks for a while ... These were still the days when boys of eight climbed trees and dammed streams and lit campfires in the woods, dreaming that they were Robin Hood ... The collecting of wild birds’ eggs had only recently been made illegal (2014, p11).

Anderson’s account is at heart another story of play, recalling Billy’s tasting of the raindrop. The tadpoles on the edge of this mining village are abundant in a way that is hard to imagine now, even in the countryside. ‘Edges of t’pond are all black with ‘em,’ says Anderson (Hines 2000, p73) and after what seems like hours of ladling, the wellies are ‘just jam packed with taddies’ (p74). The thought of putting them on is first frightening and then disgusting – ‘I could feel ‘em all squashing about between my toes’ (p74) - but once he gets used to them, Anderson is emboldened:

... it was all right after a bit; it sent your legs all excited and tingling like. When I’d got ‘em both on I started to walk up to this kid waving my arms and making spook noises; and as I walked they all came squelching over t’tops again and ran down t’sides. This kid looked frightened to death, he kept looking down at my wellies so I tried to run at him and they all spurted up my legs. ...

It was a funny feeling though when he’d gone; all quiet with nobody there, and up to t’knees in tadpoles’ (Hines 2000, p75).

The episode has led Anderson through a whole gamut of emotions from disgust to excitement; then it has enabled him to play-act with the other children; finally, left alone, he experiences the eeriness that can come from encountering the more-than-human world. Anderson in this story is alive to all his senses and processing new experiences in a way that seldom happens in the classroom where, as Billy says, the teachers ‘talk to us like muck ... callin’ us idiots, an’ numbskulls and cretins’ (Hines 2000, p101). As Hines makes clear in his afterword, one of the main themes of *A Kestrel for a Knave* is the injustice of the education system. ‘The eleven-plus

system was ruinously divisive at all levels,' he writes (2000, p201). In Anderson's story, and in Billy's experience of teaching himself to train Kes, there are hints of a more experiential and much more humanising way of learning that engages all the senses and does not divide children from each other. Anderson's story paves the way for Billy to tell the class about Kes, and he also uses strongly physical terms to describe achieving his ultimate ambition of flying Kes free and having her return to him:

'She came like lightning', head dead still, an' her wings never made a sound, then wham! Straight up on to t'glove, claws out grabbin' for t'meat,' simultaneously demonstrating the last yard of her flight with his right hand, gliding it towards, then slapping it down on his raised left fist (Hines 2000, p85).

The moment of physical contact between bird and boy represents a rare moment of joy and achievement in Billy's life. 'It wa' a smashin' feeling,' he says. 'You can't believe that you'll be able to do it. Not when you first get one, or when you see 'em wild' (Hines 2000, p85).

In complete contrast, Jud's experience of physical contact with Kes leads him to kill her. As if by way of excuse, he says:

'It wa' its own stupid fault! I wa' only going to let it go, but it wouldn't get out o' t'hut. An' every time I tried to shift it, it kept lashing out at my hands wi' its claws. Look at 'em, they're scratched to ribbons!' (quoted in Hines 2000, p183).

When Billy's hands were scratched by kestrels, he was compared to a bird nesting, but the lacerations on Jud's hands render him brutal, first killing the kestrel and then physically fighting with Billy. As stated earlier, Jud, who is already working in the mine, is portrayed as more thoroughly alienated than the other young men in the book, and this is one of the signs of it: a loss of connection with his own animality, which could have led him into an intelligent relationship with the bird.

Kes's status as a trained falcon also enables the book to draw attention to the long history of class prejudice in England, one that extends back well before the Industrial Revolution. The title of the book is taken from the 15th century *Boke of St Alban's*, quoted more fully in the epigraph:

An Eagle for an Emperor, a Gyrfalcon for a King; a Peregrine for a Prince, a Saker for a Knight, a Merlin for a Lady; a Goshawk for a Yeoman, a Sparrowhawk for a Priest, a Musket for a Holy water Clerk, a Kestrel for a Knave' (Hines 2000, p7).

People and birds are here arranged in strict order of status, with the knave, or Billy, at the bottom. Barry Hines' brother, Richard, whose experiences of training kestrels were part of the

inspiration for *A Kestrel for a Knave*, recalls in his memoir his amazement at discovering that medieval falconers flew peregrines on the moors near the Hines' Barnsley home. 'Yet had I lived in those times, I wouldn't have been allowed to fly a peregrine on the moor,' he writes (Hines 2016, p62). Nor could he have flown a goshawk or a sparrowhawk: his social class would have allowed him only to have a kestrel, a bird 'derided by falconers in the Middle Ages' (Hines 2016, p 63).

However, in Marxian terms, this feudal era was less oppressive than the age of capitalism, since despite the strict hierarchy, a culture of connection prevailed. Marx and Engels express it rather unrealistically:

The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the natural feudal ties that bound man to his 'natural superiors', and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self interest, callous 'cash payment' (Marx and Engels 2010, loc 135).

The medieval labourer working long, backbreaking hours for the lord of the manor might have been hard pressed to find much that was idyllic in his life. Marx and Engels' sentiments are mostly an example of the nostalgic tendency that Raymond Williams identifies in *The Country and the City* when he notes that complaints over the loss of 'Old England' and its 'timeless agricultural rhythms' can be found as long ago as in William Langland's 14th century book *Piers Plowman* (cited in Tally 2013, p87). Nevertheless, it is at least true that in feudal times workers were more closely connected to the more-than-human world than they were under industrial capitalism. This earlier period is evoked in *A Kestrel for a Knave* when Billy discovers that the birds are nesting in the wall of a ruined monastery, a relic of a pre-industrial age when people of his class would have had more opportunity to work outside. The current economic system works to exclude him from the land: as he pursues the kestrels, he is confronted by the farmer who tells him to 'bugger off' because 'this is private property' (Hines 2000, p37). This passage is further evidence of the book's concern that under industrial capitalism, working-class exclusion extends to a separation from the more-than-human world. 'You ought to have seen it, mister, it was smashin',' enthuses Billy, only to be laughed at because the farmer and his little girl can see the kestrel every day on their private land. 'I wish I could see it every day,' replies Billy poignantly (Hine 2000, p38). Discussing the representation of the rural in post-war fiction, Head refers to the writing of Hardy and Lawrence, saying that they confront the reader with 'superficially "natural" images in which questions of social history are inscribed in the landscape' (2002, p189).

The implication is that such writing ceased after the 1950s, but in this and other episodes in *A Kestrel for a Knave*, Hines is seen to be doing the same thing .

The encoding of class structures within Billy's surroundings is a recurrent theme, notably in the description of his paper round. This early episode locates Billy as a child of the estate, suspect in comparison to the 'grand lads' from areas such as Firs Hill (Hines 2000, p14). It also highlights the hybridity of Billy's surroundings: from the top of the town, he can see the estate sprawled on the bottom of the valley; beyond that is the pit and behind it 'a patchwork of fields ... giving way to a wood' (Hines 2000, p18). Natural features within the built environment serve to illustrate social stratification: on Firs Hill there are wide verges, trees and rhododendrons; the rich children whose father owns a Bentley live in a detached house set back from the lane. However, despite his estate origins, Billy is at home all over the town and knows how to negotiate the varied terrain: he is sly and successful in his thefts of chocolate and orange juice, and moves around as swiftly and sure-footedly as a fox might, climbing fences, squeezing through hedges and using short cuts to help him complete the job before school starts. After the death of Kes, both his perception and his negotiation of his environment undergo distressing changes, a sign not only of his deteriorating mental state but also of his decreasing ability to resist the pressure to order his life in the way dictated by the prevailing power structures. This is a point to which I shall return.

Earlier I said that Billy's unhappiness arises not just from his position as a working-class child trapped in an oppressive system, but also from the loss of his father, which in turn means he has no safe space to call home. The importance of this aspect of Billy's life to *A Kestrel for a Knave* is demonstrated by the fact that it is where the book starts: 'There were no curtains up' (Hines 2000, p9). This opening sentence immediately evokes ideas of poverty and discomfort, which are quickly reinforced by the information that Billy's bedroom is cold and that he shares not just the room but his actual bed with Jud, who starts his day by thumping him 'in the kidneys' (Hines 2000, p10). Billy's mother is also portrayed in relentlessly unsympathetic terms. For example, she tries to hit him when he wants to go to school instead of running her errands (p24); her reputation for promiscuity leads to Billy being bullied (p92); and most damningly of all, her infidelity is shown to be what drove his father away (p195). Haywood compares her to the 'hedonistic single mother' of Alan Sillitoe's *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1997, p105), a 'type' he also identifies in Helen in Sheila Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* (p106). To be the son of such a woman is, according to Haywood, to be 'a classic case of "maternal deprivation"' (p106).

Both Hines and Haywood ignore the patriarchal power structures that trap Mrs Casper in a role where she has virtually no control over her own life. It is these same structures that give Jud such power over Billy: with his father gone, Jud assumes dominance in the household as the next oldest man, a move that from a Freudian perspective can be seen to increase Billy's sense of alienation. When Jud and his mother are getting ready to go out on Saturday night, they engage in sexually charged banter in which he is ignored (Hines 2000, p47). Unsurprisingly, Billy's Tall Story includes the fantasy that Jud has gone to join the army and is never coming back (Hines 2000, p89).

In my introduction to this thesis I said that a nest is a powerful image for the security of a human home. A writer who has explored this metaphor exhaustively is Gaston Bachelard, whose philosophical treatise *The Poetics of Space* (1958), is helpful for understanding both the profound dislocation that Billy experiences as a result of his unloving home, and also the importance of the home he creates for Kes. For Bachelard, the essential quality of a home is that it is where a person is protected, it is like a cradle, it is 'where the protective beings live' (2014, p29). This is the opposite of Billy's experience and the multiple disconnections with which he is struggling support Bachelard's claim that 'without it, man would be a dispersed being' (2014, p29). In keeping with *A Kestrel for a Knave's* claim that the fully integrated human is one who is in touch with their own animality, Bachelard also suggests that the human instinct to create a sheltering home is a primal one:

It is striking that even in our homes, where there is light, our consciousness of well-being should call for comparison with animals in their shelters ... If we were to look among the wealth of our vocabulary for verbs that express the dynamics of retreat, we should find images based on animal movements of withdrawal, movements that are engraved in our muscles (2014, p112).

Such an image occurs near the start of *A Kestrel for a Knave*, after Jud has left the shared bed and forced Billy to get out into the cold to switch off the light: 'When he got back into bed most of the warmth had gone. He shivered and scuffled around the sheet, seeking a warm place' (Hines 2000, p11). Billy's scuffling movements recall a small creature like a mouse: he is responding to an instinctive urge to seek out shelter and the 'original warmth' that is characteristic of the womblike first home (Bachelard 2014, p29).

For Bachelard, the image of a home as a nest works best when the home is a very simple one: he uses Van Gogh's pictures of peasant cottages, which the painter compared to wrens' nests, as an

example (2014, p118). It is in just such a simple home, created out of a shed, that the reader of *A Kestrel for a Knave* first encounters Kes:

In front of the shed a small square of ground had been covered with pebbles and bordered with whitewashed bricks, set into the soil side by side, at an angle. The roof and sides of the shed had been patched neatly with lengths of tarpaulin. The door had been freshly painted, and a square had been sawn out of the top half and barred vertically with clean laths. On a shelf behind the bars stood a kestrel hawk (Hines 2000, p26).

This small, nest-like shelter for the kestrel fulfils multiple purposes in Billy's life and in the book. On an obvious level, it highlights the contrast between the way Billy cares for the kestrel and the treatment he receives from the so-called carers in his life. It also offers him a creative outlet that is missing from his education: the careful tarpaulin patching and the creation of a barred window are evidence of this. Macdonald highlights the way that falconry has historically granted men 'a legitimate form of domesticity' (2006, p97), quoting spy-hero Richard Hannay in John Buchan's 1936 thriller *Island of Sheep*, who says: 'If you keep hawks, you have to be a pretty efficient nursemaid, and feed them and wash them and mend for them' (cited in Macdonald 2006, p97). Thus caring for Kes allows Billy to resist incorporation into the kind of brutalising hypermasculinity that is modelled through characters like Jud, Mr Grice and Mr Sugden.

In Bachelardian terms, Kes's shed allows Billy a space to be completely human. Explaining to Mr Farthing why he no longer gets into trouble with the police, Billy says he no longer needs to go around with his old gang. Referring specifically to Kes's home, he says:

(S)ometimes I go down to t'shed an' sit wi' a candle lit. it's all right in there. I've got a little paraffin stove that I found, an' it gets right warm, an' we just sit there. it makes you feel right cosy an' snug sat there wi' t'wind blowin' outside (Hines 2000, p102).

The use of the pronoun 'we' is an important sign of the way Billy's identity is developing in relationship with Kes: he has found a being to which he can belong. Although the book makes clear at the start that Kes is female (Hines 2000, p26), Billy almost always refers to her as 'it'. In this strongly gendered society, the choice of a gender-neutral pronoun removes Kes from one of the oppressive structures that blight human lives and allows Billy a freedom that is missing from his other relationships.

For the first time in his life, or at least since his father left, he has also found a proper shelter where he feels protected. His description of sitting quietly with the candle resonates with

Bachelard's description of what he calls 'the ultimate poetic depth of the space of the house' (2014, p28). Bachelard goes on:

If I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace.

Thought and experience are not the only things that sanction human values. The values that belong to daydreaming mark humanity in its depth (2014, p28).

There is not much space, if any, in Billy's life for daydreaming. The capitalist machine has little need of poets or people whose time appears to be spent unproductively. A warm, secure and accepting home may help to compensate for this, but it is only with Kes that Billy knows the pleasure of a companionable silence, only in Kes's home that he can find a space that is truly his own with the freedom to think his own thoughts.

The first sign that something terrible has happened to Kes is an empty shed (Hines 2000, p172). With the door hanging open and wood splintered, Billy's only refuge has been violated. From this point on the narrative becomes increasingly tense, and Billy's desperate race through the darkening woods contrasts starkly with his moonlit excursion of the year before when he went to fetch Kes from the nest. His deft negotiation of different terrains is replaced with stumbles and trips, and when he emerges into the farmland, the wall of the monastery, that relic of an earlier, pre-capitalist age of connection, and a communal landmark for centuries, has been destroyed (Hines 2000, p179).

The final stage of the book describes Billy's ghastly flight through the estate, dead hawk clutched in sweaty palm (Hines 2000, p188). Where the paper round highlighted variety in Billy's environment, the emphasis now is on the sameness of his surroundings:

On both sides of this road, and the next, and along all the Roads, Streets, Avenues, Lanes and Crescents of the estate, the houses were of the same design: semi-detached, one block, four front windows to a block, and a central chimney stack. This pattern was occasionally broken by groups of pensioners' bungalows, tucked into Closes, but built of the same red brick as all the other dwellings (Hines 2000, p188).

The uniformity of the homes mirrors that of products issuing from the conveyor belts of capitalism. The layout of the estate is an example of what Tally calls 'conceptual gridding', a state attempt to segment the rank and file and 'assign stable places' (2013, p136). Whereas Billy's paper round showed him negotiating space in a way that defied these kind of prescriptive boundaries, now he is seen to be caught inside them. And whereas his paper round was full of

references to the more-than-human world, the emphasis now is on its absence. The gardens are mostly ‘uncultivated squares of stamped soil’ (p188), though a few have lawns with stone birds, gnomes and artificial toadstools ‘all illuminated in unnatural shades’ (p189). Cars are parked on seeded verges and trees have been reduced to ‘saplings surrounded by guards of spiked railings’ that are used as open litter bins (p190).

Finally, Billy arrives at the disused cinema, the site of his last happy memory of his father. That memory is full of sensory impressions: a bag of sweets between his thighs, multi-coloured lights, the smell of cigarette smoke, the warmth and nearness of his father (p195). Now everything is dark and cold, and as Billy calls to mind the rest of the evening with its violence and shouting, he enters a quasi-hallucinogenic state in which he imagines himself on the big screen, flying Kes. His mental disintegration is mirrored in the staccato quality of his language: ‘Billy as hero. Billy on the screen. Big Billy, Kes on his arm’ (Hines 2000, p196). He tries to imagine Kes attacking Jud, but the repeated refrain ‘No contact! No contact!’ is not just about the failure of this image. In the context of the rest of the book, it is *A Kestrel for a Knave*’s final verdict on Billy’s fate. Severed from his family, severed from meaningful work and increasingly severed from the more-than-human world, Billy’s disconnection is complete. This separation, which can only be seen fully in a reading that pays careful attention to the representation of the more-than-human world, is depicted as a loss of humanity and anticipates present-day ecological thinking in its understanding that human flourishing is dependent on a recognition of our interconnectedness with the wider natural environment.

Conclusion

In this research project I set out to investigate what bird narratives from the mid-twentieth century could reveal about anxieties around human identity. I had become convinced that people often use nonhuman animals as a way of saying things that they cannot otherwise articulate. I therefore expected that if I examined the representations of the birds in my chosen texts, I would gain insights into issues that were difficult or impossible to confront directly at the time they were written. The 1940s, 1950s and 1960s were a time of great social upheaval in Britain and initially I expected to find that the birds were being used to examine the way that ideas about human identity were being affected by issues such as immigration, second-wave feminism and the challenges to previously rigid social hierarchies. However, my readings soon revealed that one overarching question about what it meant to be human dominated all four texts. This was whether people were capable of creating and sustaining a world fit to live in. I therefore decided to focus on this and not the more humancentric anxieties, both for reasons of space and because I felt this would yield findings that were more original and more relevant to present-day anxieties about the future of the planet.

My analysis of the texts was informed by three areas of critical inquiry: historical contextualisation, ecocriticism and animal studies. I discovered that the retrospective application of these critical frameworks to texts written in the mid-twentieth century was fruitful in two ways. First, it enabled me to demonstrate that books that had not previously been the subject of much critical analysis (*The Owl Birds* and *Adventure Lit Their Star*) had much to say regarding historical constructions of national identity and the way these could be encoded in attitudes to the more-than-human world. Second, it allowed me to open up new readings of better-known texts (*The Peregrine* and *A Kestrel for a Knave*), revealing that these books were characterised by a deep pessimism about the future of Britain and the wider world that went beyond the concerns for which they are generally known, namely the decline of peregrines and the destructive effects of industrial capitalism on the working classes.

I was able to demonstrate that in the case of the 1940s' texts, the answer to whether humans could create a world worth living in was positive but heavily influenced by specific and mostly opposing ideas of the kind of country Britain needed to become after the Second World War. I showed how some of the particular characteristics of the birds at the centre of the narratives, and also the habitats where they preferred to nest, were emphasised in ways that reinforced these different ideas about national identity. For example, the avocets' preference for seclusion was

used to shore up an anti-modern approach to the British countryside that is partly characterised by a desire for solitude, while the LRPs' love of gravel pits and other sites disrupted by industrial development was part of a mostly optimistic, 'welfare state' approach to the countryside as something held in common for enjoyment by both human and nonhuman animals.

Just twenty years later, but in the wake of dramatic changes to land management in the UK, the two 1960s' texts were answering the overarching question in the negative. I found that as well as being openly horrified by the effects of industrial agriculture on wildlife, *The Peregrine* was also permeated with a terror of nuclear annihilation. I was surprised by the strength of the book's antipathy to humans and was able to demonstrate that one result of this was that the birds were being co-opted into an idea of salvific wildness that did not inhere in their actual identity as birds.

A Kestrel for a Knave is well known for its deep pessimism about the alienation and exclusion of working-class people that results from industrial capitalism. By foregrounding the representation of the more-than-human world in this text, I demonstrated that this pessimism arises partly out of a previously unremarked concern for the way that capitalism tends to alienate people from their own animality. I was also able to show that previous criticism had tended to overlook the fact that Billy's fragmented sense of identity results as much from the loss of his father and a secure home as it does from his position as a working-class child.

My research has shown that literary analysis that focuses on the meanings that humans give to the more-than-human world can reveal much about contemporary human culture and attitudes to social identity. Such insights are of more than academic importance. At a time of ecological crisis, understanding what lies behind the ways that humans interact with the more-than-human world is an essential part of working out how to meet the challenges of that crisis.

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