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DOBSON, Joanna

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‘A Menace to England’: The Egg Collector as Arch-Villain in Two 1940s Bird Novels

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Joanna C. Dobson 
Sheffield Hallam University, UK

Abstract

This paper examines the figure of the egg collector as an arch-villain in two novels about rare birds that were published in the 1940s: *Adventure Lit Their Star* by Kenneth Allsop, and *The Awl Birds* by J.K. Stanford. Drawing on insights from birdwatching literature published in the same period, I demonstrate that the extreme vilification of the egg collector in both texts represents a dramatic change in attitude towards a pastime that was previously considered beneficial for both adults and children. This about-face, I suggest, can be explained by reading the desperate rush to protect the birds’ eggs as an expression of deep contemporary anxieties over the future of Britain after the Second World War, and in particular a concern that the failures of the period after the First World War should not be repeated.

Keywords

Egg collecting, birds, Second World War, animal studies, nature writing

Introduction

The Awl Birds by J.K. Stanford and *Adventure Lit Their Star* by Kenneth Allsop are both lightly fictionalised accounts of events that caused a stir in the world of British ornithology and beyond in the period around the Second World War.¹ *The Awl Birds* tells the story of the avocet’s return to Britain as a nesting bird after an absence of more than

Corresponding author:

Joanna C. Dobson, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, UK.

Email: jcdobson@my.shu.ac.uk

100 years, while *Adventure Lit Their Star* (from now on referred to as *Adventure*) charts the efforts of the little ringed plover (LRP) to establish itself as a breeding bird in Britain. Beyond this thematic congruence, 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 war-related interventions in the landscape. In addition, and most importantly for this paper, both books feature tense standoffs with a villainous egg collector, or oologist as they were also known.

The Awl Birds first appeared in 1948 as a short story in *Blackwood's Magazine*, under the title 'Bledgrave Hall'. The following year it was published in novella form in the USA as *The Awl-birds*, and in 1950 the novella was released in England, where it received favourable reviews, with *The Times* even describing it as worthy of comparison with Paul Gallico's much-loved *The Snow Goose*.² Despite this, it is now available only as a facsimile reprint. *Adventure* was published in 1949, and the following year it won the UK's prestigious John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize for the best work of literature by an author aged under 35 years. However it quickly went out of print until it was reissued by Macdonald in 1962 and then by Penguin in 1972. It is now out of print again and the books have received little recent critical attention, with the notable exceptions of an article on *Adventure* by Richard Kerridge and a section of Sophia Davis' broader analysis of the cultural construction of the avocet.³ I am particularly indebted to the work of Davis, whose PhD thesis, which has since been published by Palgrave Macmillan, was a key source.⁴

This article is the first to focus on the figure of the egg collector in the books. It is especially concerned with understanding why the oologist is vilified in such extreme terms. Despite the fact that, as I shall demonstrate, the books represent very different approaches to nature writing, they are united in their condemnation, even though egg collecting was perfectly legal at the time. I will suggest that the intensity of the opprobrium heaped on these men is an outworking of much deeper seated anxieties about the future of the nation following the Second World War.

The main character in *The Awl Birds* is Derick Gloyne, an ex-sapper who has spent time in a German prisoner of war camp. As soon as he returns to the UK, in 1945, he goes to an estate agent and buys Bledgrave Hall, a large house in Suffolk where he spent many happy childhood holidays. The astonishing discovery that avocets are breeding near the hall after an absence from the country of more than a century leads him to adopt a round-the-clock vigil over the nest. However, he inadvertently lets his secret slip out to a friend and this leads to an egg collector, Percy Warler, staging a raid on the nest. Gloyne triumphs over the egg collector, but only by allowing him to flee, unwarned, over a field seeded with unexploded mines.

When it comes to the main characters, *Adventure* is notable for the small role played by humans compared to the LRPs and other wildlife. The first human voice is not heard until page 57 of the 1972 edition, and the human protagonist, Richard Locke, does not appear until page 71, only to disappear again between pages 85 and 131. Locke has been an RAF pilot during the Second World War, but TB confines him to a sanatorium for 2 years. During an extended and frustrating period of convalescence, he discovers a

pair of nesting LRPs, among the first to breed in the UK. This nest is also threatened by an egg collector, Colonel Goodwin, who is foiled when Locke cunningly distracts him with a fake nest containing snipe eggs.

In terms of genre, the books defy easy categorisation. For example, 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, was one of the volunteers who maintained a round-the-clock vigil over their nest.⁵ 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’.⁶ This is a contrast with his later book, *Rare Bird* (1959), which takes as its starting point an ‘extremely rare, erratic migratory wanderer to Britain’,⁷ the black-winged stilt which nested in Nottinghamshire on a single occasion in 1945. Allsop’s ‘author’s note’ positions this book firmly as fiction, stating that ‘[t]he events described in this book have no connection whatever with that occurrence and place’.⁸ *Rare Bird* is dedicated to Henry Williamson, author of the best-selling *Tarka the Otter* (1927), who strongly influenced Allsop and whose focus on natural historical observations and the animals’ emotional responses is also a strong feature of *Adventure*.⁹

The meticulous descriptions of the birds and their habitats that are key elements of both *The Awl Birds* and *Adventure* could lead them to be classed as ‘nature writing’. In addition, both books show characteristics that are usually associated with novels, namely a strong narrative drive and an interest in the psychological recovery of their protagonists from difficult experiences. In their hybridity, they foreshadow a current popular trend in mixed-genre, nature-focused writing exemplified by books such as *H is for Hawk*, *The Outrun* and *Out of the Woods*.¹⁰ It is notable that these more recent books are explicitly autobiographical and confront themes such as grief, addiction and sexual abuse directly, whereas *Adventure* and *The Awl-Birds* approach the traumatizing nature of their protagonists’ experiences more obliquely. In the 1940s it was unusual, if not unacceptable, for people to talk openly about personal difficulties. Lucy Noakes draws on a wide range of texts to demonstrate that, overwhelmingly, ‘good wartime citizenship’ was seen to depend on ‘stoical acceptance of suffering’:

British people were told that their private grief and anguish should be subordinate to the collective war effort – that the outward maintenance of stoicism was one of the ways that they could help to win the war, maintaining morale, and thus making the sacrifices of death and grief worthwhile. Images and narratives of stoicism in the face of death and disaster appear again and again in wartime popular culture, always present but increasing in number as the (Second World) war went on.¹¹

Emerging from this culture of repressed emotions, *The Awl Birds* and *Adventure* both demonstrate what Helen Macdonald refers to when she writes: ‘We use animals as our proxies. We use them to speak for us, to say things that we cannot otherwise articulate’.¹² In this article, I will use the figure of the egg collector villain to explore some of the ways in which the rare birds are used as proxies to express anxieties about the future of Britain that were difficult to articulate more explicitly. First I

will provide some contextual information about the status of birdwatching and egg collecting in the period.

The Rise of Birdwatching

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.¹³ 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.¹⁴

Mark Toogood links what he calls the 'new ornithology'¹⁵ with the Mass Observation project, formed in 1937 as 'a scientific study of human social behaviour, beginning at home'¹⁶ 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'.¹⁷ This de-consecration 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'.¹⁸

Birdwatching continued to gain cultural prominence throughout the Second World War. It is noteworthy that at a time of national shortages, when the Government rationed the number of books publishers were allowed to produce and stipulated that they should be in the public interest,¹⁹ books about birds proliferated. James Fisher's *Watching Birds*, for example, sold more than three million copies and is just one of a multitude of books about natural history that appeared in the period.²⁰ As birdwatching grew in popularity, so the birds themselves began to acquire a cultural significance that was often related to ideas about national identity.²¹ 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.²² The celebrated author and broadcaster Julian Huxley gave a series of radio talks in which he claimed that one important feature of birds was that they enabled people to orientate themselves to a country.²³ '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'.²⁴ 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.²⁵

It was as though Britain could not be Britain without this specific population of birds.

In a similar vein, Fisher justified the publication of *Watching Birds* during wartime by describing birds as 'part of the heritage we are fighting for'²⁶ and went on to imply that they constituted part of the reward awaiting patriotic citizens once hostilities ceased:

After this war ordinary people are going to have a better time than they have had; they are going to get about more; they will have the time to rest from their tremendous tasks; many will get the opportunity, hitherto sought in vain, of watching wild creatures and making discoveries about them.²⁷

There is a hint here that 'wild creatures' may play a therapeutic role in the lives of people recovering from difficult situations. Stephen Moss suggests that this therapeutic potential was particularly helpful for soldiers stationed abroad.²⁸ He cites examples of servicemen being comforted by the songs of birds such as the common sandpiper and the nightingale that they associated with home. I would argue that birds also offered an important emotional outlet for civilians struggling to cope with the peculiar nature of the Home Front in the Second World War.

Everyone in Britain knew this war would be dominated by aerial bombardment. In a speech in 1932, Stanley Baldwin had declared: 'The bomber will always get through',²⁹ radically destabilising the ancient sense of security that derived from the nation's island status. 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.³⁰

Nash's writing evokes the spatial destabilisation that people felt in the presence of military aircraft. There was also temporal disruption brought about by the speed with which an enemy located hundreds of miles away could launch an attack of unprecedented intensity.³¹ Virginia Woolf captures something of this disorientation in her diary entry for 26 January 1941, a few weeks before she committed suicide, and while Britain was on high alert for invasion. 'We live without a future', she wrote. 'That's what's queer: with our noses pressed to a closed door'.³² This sense 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"'. It continued: 'If you run away, you will be

exposed to far greater danger because you will be machine-gunned from the air'.³³ As Hennessy puts it, even ordinary civilians could not escape the front line. It ran through every front room and every back garden.³⁴ 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, they do not have to remain fixed to situations that terrify them. As *The Awl Birds* says: 'Birds did not have to bother about wars, or roofs over their heads. The whole world was their home'.³⁵

Before turning to the decline in the popularity of egg collecting that ran alongside the rise of birdwatching, I will describe two types of nature writing that characterise this period in order to demonstrate a fundamental difference between the two novels under discussion.

'Anti-Modern' and 'Welfare State' Nature Writing

Despite their similarities, *Adventure* and *The Awl-Birds* represent two radically different approaches to nature writing in this period. Richard Kerridge has coined the term 'welfare state nature writing' to describe writing that emphasised 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'.³⁶ He cites Collins' celebrated 'New Naturalist' series of books as typical of this stance. Launched in 1945, and still growing today, each volume is written for a general audience by an expert naturalist with the aim of presenting 'a portrait of the natural heritage available to the British people'.³⁷ The works of Fisher and Huxley cited above are further examples of this democratizing approach.

In many ways, *Adventure* maps neatly onto the 'welfare state' model. It opens with a dramatic account of migratory birds crossing the English Channel in April 1944. As Kerridge has pointed out,³⁸ the birds are described in militarised language: they are 'an armada'; they speed 'in tightly packed squadrons'.³⁹ This, together with the fact that they are approaching the British coast, recalls German bombers during the Blitz or the Battle of Britain. However, the date invokes more strongly the D-Day invasion force, which would set out just a month later. Thus the embattled state of the nation is linked with the natural phenomenon of bird migration, a very clear example of 'the mutual dependency of one part of the biosphere and another'.⁴⁰ In this way, right from the outset, *Adventure* emphasises ideas of co-operation and interdependency that are characteristic of welfare-state thinking.

The habits of the LRP also lend themselves to this approach. One of the bird's distinguishing characteristics is a preference for breeding in edgeland sites, such as refuse tips, gravel pits and flooded slag heaps.⁴¹ The decision of the LRPs in *Adventure* to nest beside a gravel pit that is part of the post-war reconstruction effort links them almost irresistibly to optimistic ideas of building a new nation, one that will benefit people from every social class. More than that, *Adventure's* primary focus on the birds, and its decentring of the human characters, hints that it is not just human animals who will hold the countryside in common, but nonhuman ones as well. When Allsop writes in his introduction that the edgeland sites favoured by LRPs are attractive to wildlife '*because of their natural*

and artificial features' (emphasis added),⁴² the implication is that they offer potential for human and nonhuman animals to coexist in a way that benefits both.

Kerridge contrasts 'welfare state' nature writing with the 'anti-modern' approach, 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.⁴³ This attitude links to a huge surge of interest in rural English tradition that arose during the 1920s and 1930s, when vast numbers of books and articles about the English countryside were published. Catherine Brace calls such publications 'countryside writing'.⁴⁴ 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'.⁴⁵ In the same period, visiting the countryside became increasingly popular, and David 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'.⁴⁶

As Matless and Brace imply, writing about the countryside in this period 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 the First World War, an attempt to 'recover something essential about the nation that had been lost'.⁴⁷ Jed 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'.⁴⁸ For Marina MacKay, it was a 'rebranding' of Britain as 'something that might conceivably be worth going to war over this second time'.⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰

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 marks the book out as an example of anti-modern nature writing that is underscored by the avocets' preference for seclusion, 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.⁵¹ When Gloyne arrives at Bledgrave Hall, which he has not seen since his childhood, he is in for a shock. He expects to see 'a mellow old house ... dreaming behind its creeper in the sunshine'.⁵² Instead he is greeted by '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'.⁵³ 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.⁵⁴

The country house is a common trope in English literature, often representing a particular idea of Englishness characterised by ideals of 'community, simplicity, responsible

use of wealth and property, good housekeeping and hospitality'.⁵⁵ It is possible to read 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. 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',⁵⁶ 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,⁵⁷ 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 characterise the welfare state approach. Throughout the book, Gloyne shows that, in typical anti-modern fashion, he prefers to act alone. When he briefly considers informing the Natural History Museum about the breeding avocets, he realises that would lead to members of the public coming to 'his' marshes 'like a pack of wolves'. He concludes: 'No! no! a thousand times no! All the secret individualist in Derick Gloyne revolted'.⁵⁸ This is a stark contrast to Locke's approach in *Adventure*: as soon as he realises he has found breeding LRPs, he sends a telegram to his old schoolfriend and fellow bird enthusiast James Scott and welcomes a visit from him and two other ornithologists.⁵⁹ Additionally, when Locke enlists the help of two young boys in the effort to foil the egg collector, he further demonstrates his willingness to look ahead to the future, the children symbolising hope for a reconstructed, postwar society.

Despite its anti-modern stance, *The Awl Birds* does communicate, through the avocets at its centre, a message of hope for the future that is similar to that of *Adventure*. Avocets had been common in England but were hunted to extinction in the mid-nineteenth century.⁶⁰ Mark Cocker and Richard Mabey describe as 'mischievous' the claim by ornithologist Chris Meade that the avocet's return to Britain is something we 'owe to Hitler',⁶¹ but Meade had a point, 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,⁶² and as Davis relates, 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.⁶³ 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 ensured that their new nesting grounds were almost undisturbed. Similarly, the avocets in *The Awl-Birds* settle in 'a long fleet of shallow water, dotted here and there with the craters of bygone mortar bombs'.⁶⁴ And so, like the LRPs, and despite their very different characteristics, the avocets are on one level symbols of hope, even redemption. Through their choice of nesting site, they are turning a war-scarred landscape into a place of optimism.

Egg Collecting in Decline

While birdwatching was in the ascendant from the 1930s onwards, egg collecting was in decline. Oology had been a popular form of natural history collecting in Victorian times, and was seen as 'a healthy, respectable pastime for children and adults'.⁶⁵

It was also respectable scientifically: at a time when few had access to equipment such as binoculars, the easiest way to increase scientific 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, since even eggs from the same species could show considerable variations.⁶⁶ The eggs were blown to stop them from rotting – that is, a small hole was made in both ends so that the oologist could blow through the top to force the yolk out through the bottom – and the shells were carefully catalogued and mounted. The collections could be enormous, as Colonel Goodwin demonstrates in *Adventure*:

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 which filled four drawers and ranged from light pink with zones of reddish spots to white with purple-grey spots. Even nearer his heart were 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 two honey-buzzard's eggs which he had taken from the New Forest fifteen years before.⁶⁷

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 its ethical validity, and its value as a scientific practice was also called into question.⁶⁸ 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, and bring the scientific study of birds into bad repute.⁶⁹

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'.⁷⁰

The mention of 'pandering to a collector's greed' is telling here: both *The Awl Birds* and *Adventure Lit Their Star* characterise their villainous oologists as being excessively

greedy. 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 Awl Birds* also emphasises that Percy Warler's eggs were 'British taken',⁷¹ a point to which I shall return.

Opposition to egg collecting continued to grow through the first half of the twentieth century, and although oologists defended themselves vigorously, often arguing that they were the true 'protectionists' and had contributed most to the specialist knowledge of ornithologists, their practice fell increasingly into disrepute.⁷² Disquiet was expressed for a number of reasons: individual 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 the populations of some rarer species.⁷³ In 1954, the Protection of Wild Birds Act made it illegal to take birds' eggs from the wild.

As with the democratisation of birdwatching, the decline in the acceptability of egg collecting can be seen as part of what Toogood describes as a general unburdening by 'self-styled "modern" naturalists' of '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'.⁷⁴ 'Selfish' and 'Edwardian' are good descriptors for Warler and Goodwin. 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'.⁷⁵ 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'.⁷⁶ *Adventure* is slightly less condemnatory of Goodwin, with Locke labelling the oologist 'an historical relic, a hangover from the bad old days of the nineteenth century when even old ladies and clergymen had the collecting fever'.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, the words 'relic', 'hangover' and 'bad old days' indicate the same decisive rejection of the values of the older generation.

Toogood contrasts the alleged 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 and the ending of poverty became a major focus of political debate.⁷⁸ Thus although *The Awl Birds* generally takes a determinedly anti-modern stance, the text is also at pains to make clear, through its treatment of Warler, 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.

Villainous Egg Collectors

An egg collector is an obvious choice for a villain in a story about rare birds. That notwithstanding, the vilification of the oologists in these two texts is so extreme as to merit further attention. It is difficult to imagine how *The Owl Birds* in particular could be stronger in its condemnation of Percy Warler, the man who nearly escapes with a clutch of precious avocet eggs. In the words of the protagonist, Derick Gloyne,

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.⁷⁹

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'. Nevertheless, this 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. That Warler would 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 is part of Gloyne's justification for not warning Warler that he is about to flee across a training field seeded with unexploded mines. Gloyne, an ex-sapper, consciously overrides his military instinct that he 'must stop the blighter somehow though it went against the grain'⁸⁰ and remains silent as Warler disappears over the crest of the hill:

He looked at his watch mechanically. Sixty seconds, seventy-five, a hundred and twenty, a hundred and forty, he must be in it now, but it was a badly-laid field, mines in clusters of two and three here and there, not laid by a sapper at all. But the beggar had thought nothing of taking an egg about to hatch. 'They' could always lay again ... Ah ... From up the heath came a heavy detonation followed quickly by two more.⁸¹

Given that egg collecting was completely legal at this time, albeit increasingly controversial, the killing of Warler seems at best an overreaction.

Allsop, in *Adventure*, creates a more subtle portrait of the egg collector, Colonel Goodwin, but although he is described in less extreme terms, he is still characterised as a traitor:

He applied to collecting the same energy and method with which he had planned Army exercises. After each Christmas he began mapping the spring offensive. By the time he set out for the first forage, the back of his Morris packed with padded boxes, climbing irons, telescopic mirror, thigh waders, nailed boots and suitcase, he had in his despatch case a neatly typed timetable, background notes and Ordnance Survey maps of the areas to be raided.⁸²

Of necessity, Goodwin's military-style excursions take place in the spring, which is the nesting season. However, by describing them as a 'spring offensive', the text evokes the German attacks on the Western Front in 1918, thus creating another severe vilification of a man who was not at the time doing anything illegal. It goes on to recount how Goodwin has been criss-crossing the country from Norfolk to the Cairngorms, collecting crossbill, greenshank, and crested tit eggs: 'Then he had turned south stopping for a few days in Essex to strengthen his nightingale drawer, next objective little ringed plover'.⁸³ The sense is of an enemy plundering Britain for selfish gain; more specifically, because the plunder is taken from birds' nests, these 'offensives' are assaults on the British countryside, repository for centuries of so many ideas about what it means to be truly British. There is a parallel here with Warler's supposed readiness to appropriate the essence of British heritage.

Thus, despite the fact that the two books are examples of radically different attitudes to nature, with *The Awl Birds* demonstrating an anti-modern stance and *Adventure* being an example of 'welfare-state' nature writing, they use a similar plot and are united in their vilification of the egg collectors. Why do both books settle on the egg collector as a villain and construct him in such forceful terms? To answer this question, it is important to consider the symbolic importance of eggs and how their liminal status on the boundaries of life and not-life might have gained significance in this anxiety-ridden period.

The Liminal Egg

An egg is a very powerful symbol of potential life. As Cole points out, it occupies a liminal status between living and non-living.⁸⁴ 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 horse, crushed under a tractor and eaten by an arctic skua.⁸⁵ 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. In *The Awl Birds*, Gloyne's is linked to his explosive rage, which has recurred throughout the book and might today, along with the nightmares, be seen as evidence of post-traumatic stress disorder:

He dropped off to sleep about 1 a.m. and woke in a sweat twenty minutes later dreaming that someone had erected a hide on the little island in the night, and caused all three pairs of avocets to desert. They must be so near hatching! It would break his heart if anything came to spoil their chances now, when for weeks they had weathered May frosts, harriers, crows, gulls, and other vermin. If any human being ...! He stopped: he must not think like that. For nearly a year those blind rages of his had been getting less but he knew that if anyone went after the avocets now, he could not trust himself.⁸⁶

Gloyne's nightmare of someone erecting a hide on the avocet's breeding ground evokes the wartime fear of enemy occupation. Locke's dream in *Adventure* is similarly and even more terrifyingly entangled with images of war. It involves him running 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.⁸⁷

Gloyne's images of enemy occupation, and Locke's merging of the nest with a scene of wartime horror and a human scream, make clear that on one level the protection of the birds has come to stand for the protection of Britain itself. In Locke's dream, the spiralling wings figure aerial attack; the writhing pile recalls post-Blitz devastation.

In the light of this, the desperate defence of the unborn avocets and LRPs, and the extreme denigration of the egg collectors, gain added significance. For Locke and Gloyne, ex-servicemen showing signs of lasting trauma from their war experiences, the liminal status of the eggs has come to symbolise the profound anxieties of the time. The dreams suggest that the hatching of the eggs has become metaphorically 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. 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.

Egg Collecting and the Biodiversity Crisis

In the period after the Second World War, interest in nature in general and birds in particular continued to surge. The RSPB opened its second reserve, Minsmere, in 1947.⁸⁸ The National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act of 1954 – the same year that egg collecting was made illegal – led to the establishment of ten national parks and made provision for many more nature reserves. The stage seemed set for wildlife to flourish.

The paradox is that in the same period, birdlife has declined catastrophically. Since 1966, Britain has lost at least 44 million individual birds.⁸⁹ Tree sparrows have declined by 97 per cent since 1970, grey partridges by 93 per cent and corn buntings by 90 per cent. Turtle doves, wood warblers, willow tits, lesser spotted woodpeckers, nightingales and curlew are all in danger of extinction in the UK.⁹⁰ This is despite the fact that the RSPB has seen its numbers rocket from 10,000 in 1960 to more than a million today, making it the largest conservation charity in Europe.⁹¹

In his multi-award-winning book *Rebirding*, Benedict Macdonald lays the blame for this chiefly at the door of intensive agriculture practices, which have increased

exponentially since the Second World War. In that time, Britain has lost 97 per cent of its hay meadows and on average 50 per cent of its hedgerows, both of which provide important habitats for birds and for the insects on which they depend for food.⁹² Widespread use of pesticides and fertilisers has exacerbated the problem.

Macdonald compares the situation in the UK with the rest of Europe. Britain, he says, is a 'unique desert'.⁹³ Eastern European countries that have retained more traditional farming practices have not seen the same rapid decline in bird species. Even in countries that do practise intensive agriculture, such as Germany, the decline has been less severe, mainly because they take a very different approach to conservation. Macdonald stresses that birds 'have evolved to live in boundless populations, connected across large tracts of preferred habitat'.⁹⁴ In contrast to other European countries, Britain has tended to set aside relatively small and unconnected areas for nature. Meanwhile agriculture, forestry and recreational shooting have destroyed habitats on huge tracts of land that were once rich in wildlife.

Macdonald is one of a growing number of people calling for a wholesale shift in the way land is managed in the UK so that much larger areas can be set aside for wildlife. Such an approach, often termed 'rewilding', can lead to unexpectedly rapid restorations of biodiversity, as has been seen on the Knepp Castle estate in West Sussex, for example.⁹⁵ He compares the boldness of vision that is now required to the one that gave rise to the National Health Service in 1948.⁹⁶

Conclusion

I have argued that the extreme vilification of the egg collectors in *Adventure* and *The Owl Birds* is striking for two reasons. Firstly because egg collecting had been a socially acceptable pastime only a few years previously, and secondly because the two books represent such different approaches to nature writing, *Adventure* being characteristic of 'welfare state' nature writing, while *The Owl Birds* is a clear example of anti-modern attitudes. My explanation has focused on the way that humans often use nonhuman animals as a way of expressing feelings that are otherwise difficult to articulate. I have argued that given the unique nature of the Home Front during the Second World War, it is unsurprising that birds became a focus of interest, enjoying as they do the ability to fly away from situations that distress them. However, a close reading of the figure of the egg collector in both the books under discussion reveals an even deeper anxiety about the possibility of repeating the failures associated with the First World War. Such a reading demonstrates that the fragile life in the rare bird eggs that the protagonists of both books are so eager to protect is bound up with a profound and unspeakable fear about the future of the entire nation.

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ORCID iD

Joanna C. Dobson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0424-1966>

Notes

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