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C68

THE RIVERS OF ENGLAND.

By H. E. Bates.

IN such a small country as England, where almost every village is within shouting distance of the next and where towns sit on each other's doorsteps, we are all bound up with streams of some kind. Rivers and their tributaries snake across the country as thick as veins on a leaf. The island shape of the land, and its narrowness, has made it possible for rivers to rise within a mile or two of each other and yet flow in exactly opposite directions. Rivers all over the land almost join each other. They twist to avoid each other, run parallel with each other, blunder against each other. The land is even split up by rivers, here and there, into small inland islands, as the Isle of Oxney in Kent.

The land of streams.

The number of twiddling little streams in England is fantastic. They look, on the map, less like the veins on a leaf than a jumble of black snakes with their heads drinking at the sea. And not more than a tenth of them, I suppose, are navigable except by the adventurous, by pain of punt-poles. In such a country as America not more than half-a-dozen English rivers would, I suppose, be called rivers at all. That vast country would scorn the infantile paps from which most of the meadows of England draw suck. The fierceness of American summers would frizzle up their dribbles of milk like batter on a red-hot grid. Thames, from which at least ten million of us draw life, would find a place of respect, and with it Tyne and Trent and Tees and Severn. The rest would be less than playgrounds for the sailing of paper boats.

Yet these many small rivers are, in England, extremely precious. It is they who are responsible, primarily, for the moulding of the face of the land. With hills, they are the land's original features.

Carved by water.

We are inclined to forget this, to see the land as having been, always, a piece of ready-made architecture, complete in itself, completely finished, neatly decked with the red and grey of towns, the nest-coloured villages, the rule-divided fields, the dark sectors of woodland. Whereas the original shape of the land, as far as you can get down to it and if you can get down to it at all, must have had no outstanding features but the hills and these small despised rivers and the spread of scrub and marsh. And since civilization has tended to widen rivers rather than diminish them, there must have been a day when Thames and Severn had less nobility of breadth even than now, and when Nen and Bure and Test and Stour and so on were like a jumble of gentle worms.

Yet all the beauty of these streams lies in their pastoral smallness and gentleness. They have the same unpretentious loveliness as their unfanciful, monosyllabic names. And what curious mechanism of circumstances, anyway, coined these names?

From Tyne to Thames and Thames to Taw and Taw up to Tweed, the rivers of England share a collection of quaint, sturdy little names equalled only by one other section of names in the language, and that, oddly enough, of the fish which swim in them. These stumpy little names are not confined to one county or coast. They are common to the whole seaboard. They are even repeated. So that there are a whole handful of Stours and Ouses and Avons. And it would be hard to find, I think, another collection of such laconic, almost crusty monosyllables.

Buttery syllables.

The names of English villages form a line of buttery syllables that have in them, often, the very taste of the much-watered, very green English countryside. It is as though their names had been churned out of the cream of the landscape. That butteriness is tasted best in names like Collyweston, Fotheringhay, Stoke Bruern, Moreton Pinkney, Weedon Lois, Silverstone, Sibbertoft and Yelvertoft, which are all, it so happens, names from one tiny section of the land, the country about the Nen.

In other parts they grow richer perhaps, or softer, or creamier, or even sourer, so that there are names like bits of strong cheese, harsh on the tongue, with a sour strength in them. Such names as Hanging Houghton, Yardley Gobion, Furtho, Cold Higham, Tansor, Glapthorn, Blatherwycke, Shutlanger, Old, which are again names from the country of the Nen.

The names of hills and woods and fields have evolved out of the same rich ingredients of fancy and earth, as their names tell. Of hills: Strawberry Down, Pincushion Hill, Love's Hill, Bredon Hill, Snowdon, from small to great. Of woods: Pesthouse Wood, Buttockspice Wood, Silley Coppice, St. Mary's Wood, Porter's Coppice, No Bottle Wood, Skulking Dudley Coppice, Lady Copse. Of fields: Dark Closes, Vine Hills, Cat's Brain, Whorestone Furlong, Dead Shells, Lammas Mead, Deedman's Grave, Windesarse, Red and White Starch.

A fanciful pattern.

And since farms are bound up with hills and woods and fields, the names of farms also break out into the same homely and delicious poetry: Prince Rupert's Farm, Powder Blue Farm, Magpie Farm, Buttermilk Hall. Even the names of ponds and springs follow the same delightful pattern: Saffron Moat, Pottosy Pond, Cat's Water, Red Link. Even the names of roads: Salt Way, Watling Street, Icknield Way, Car Dike, King's Meadow Lane. And a man without any knowledge of the origins of his native tongue can feel in these names a creamy delicacy, a sturdy strength, a rough wantonness, as the case may be. They are rich with the colour and taste of the land.

But what has happened to the names of rivers? Where fields and farms and hills and ponds and even roads are named so richly, it would seem the most natural thing for the names of rivers to follow the same tradition. They might at any rate have revealed some benevolence of colour or similarity of sound or some air of pastoral tranquillity in keeping with the streams themselves. Thus, juggling with the names, we might have had Powder Blue River, Saffron River, Dead Shells River, the River St. Mary. Breaking away from that tradition, keeping closer to the life of rivers themselves, we might have had Swan River or Lily River.

Baffling monosyllables.

Such names belong as rightly and seemly to English countryside as campion and dandelion, as rook and blackbird, fox and otter, or better still to that tradition of old flower-names which our more proper, gentlemanly, otter-ripping age has strangled out of usage.

But the names of rivers pursue some odd course of independence which is baffling. Where we might expect River Swan or River Nine Springs, we have Ouse and Nen, names which not only look mysterious but which are mysterious. Of Nen we have, it seems, no satisfactory etymological explanation. My assumption of Nine, for Nine Springs, is based only on local hearsay. The name has gone, in ten centuries through some changes, Nyn, Nien, Neene, Ene, Nine, but has never really changed its crusty monosyllabic mould. And still, in this age of light, we are as much in the dark as to its meanings as ever.

"Thames, from which at least ten million of us draw life. . . ." The river at Cliveden Woods, Cookham.

Ouse would seem to have been Use, Usan, Wusan, thus breaking its mono-

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sometimes have overheard our conversations about you. The first time [my Aunt] saw you, she caught a glimpse of you at some pictures, she scolded me because your appearance did not satisfy her. "Well, I saw your Mr. B., and I don't think he looks poetical at all."—"No, I don't think he does, particularly," said I, trying to propitiate her. "Well, then, why do you admire his poems? How can a man write poetry who is not poetical? I don't know how that can be." "But that is very foolish. You confess he is not poetical, and yet you admire his poems."—I thought it hard to be called to account for your looks! . . .

[Browning returned in his next letter to the metaphor of the palm-tree, and explained that he was writing "because I rather need a pin-head-sized drop of palm wine just now."]

July 28, '64. 19, W. C.

. . . . I shall tell you exactly what it was I meant—not quite what you fancy—that I would not have you give away more in your generosity than you may need to account for, hereafter, in your justice, when some husbandman from a far country arrives and wants his whole palm tree: in other words,—no, there shall be other silences.

And now, the good of saying this is, that I can add with a safe conscience, "what wine you can afford, my own friend, I am quite thirsty enough for, and not a drop shall be spilt, do believe!" And then—do you want some the uses of my age? well, I *know*,—shall I say?—the signs and tokens, by this time, and how palm-wine is not proof-spirit, of which I am not without the experience of certain thimble-fulls: oh, the *vivandières* will press *le petite verre* on us old grey *moustaches*, "for love," if we flaunt a *chevron* or two, and have arms presented to us by the sentinels! And now, doing you this homage, let my own turn come, nor let mistake be feared, when I tell the pure truth that you are most dear to me, and will be ever so. I can live in very various spheres of activity, like those insects that people dry up and keep for years in a pill-box—something that had the sea to swim in once: I can't get *that* again, but any globule of your palm-wine will set me free within its circumference, to legs' content; and it is far more likely that you will decide "Enough of kicking and capering—back to your box now!" —than that I shall object,—(in the phrase of begging letter writers and so not inappropriate here!)—to partially recovering the use of my precious limbs. . . .

[Miss Wedgwood had lamented that in trying to influence others for good she had often been rebuffed. Browning was sympathetic:]

. . . It is one of the facts of my experience that one limits sorrowfully one's pretension to influence other people for good: I live more and more—what am I to write?—for God not man—I don't care what men think now, knowing they will never think my thoughts; yet I need increasingly to tell *the truth*—for whom? Is it that *I* shall be the better, the larger for it, have the fairer start in next life, the firmer stand? Is it pure selfishness, or the obedience to a natural law? How funnily and contemptibly one does good, when that happens! I had, two days ago, letters from the father—no, the husband of that unwise lady who came for my decision about Sludge*—and from the girl herself: he "is to be indebted to me all the days of his life," and she "has indeed been saved from fearful misery!"—By what?—And yet, by what, once, did I *not* try, with the utmost of my soul's strength, to demonstrate that out of figs and grapes could come neither thorns nor thistles—and all in vain!

I shall go to Wimbledon presently to meet Jenny Lind† at L^{y}. Westmorland's: do you remember our sitting behind her empty stool at Made. Schwabe's‡? I don't greatly take to that our most religious and gracious Queen of song, and mean to be prodigiously indifferent to her performances which will abound, I prophecy (*sic*). "Spite, spite!" . . .

Affectionately yours,

R. B.

[Browning went abroad with his son at the beginning of August, 1864. Writing from Cambo, near Bayonne, he made a gay reference to the critics who had complained that his poetry was unintelligible.]

Aug. 19, '64.

. . . I have got Virgil—for the boy's plague—Euripides, for my own solace—a volume of George Sand's plays—Oh, George!—and the *Travels of Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela*,§ which I must have been inspired to bring from Paris by an astonishing note of the translator's, evidently meant for me—you shall judge: the translator was a schoolmaster:—

"Rabbi Perida took such great care of his scholars, who from appearances were as promising as my own, that he made it a general rule to read and explain the same thing four hundred times over: but such was his fortune, that on a particular occasion, one of his hopeful pupils, either through stupidity or inattention, was at the end of the lecture as wise as he was at the beginning: whereupon the Rabbi gave a specimen of his patience by repeating the same lecture over four hundred times more. At this, a voice was heard from heaven, to the following purpose, 'Perida, either live four hundred years, or obtain innocence and eternal life for thee and thy posterity!'"

Perida, without hesitation, chose the latter: but his scholars, out of cruel kindness, cried "No, no, no—but four hundred years for Perida!" Their request was granted: he lived four hundred years: and if he was a schoolmaster all the time, I heartily pity him.

What do you say? I keep trying to be quite intelligible, next poem: what if the *Saturday Review* should get me four hundred years more of rendering-intelligible, by general outcry to heaven? Mind, this book, printed in 1783, has my grandfather's name among the subscribers—did he foresee the lesson he was securing to his descendant? . . .

God bless you,

R. B.

[Next week we shall print further letters ranging over a wide variety of subjects: gossip about Tennyson; how Browning would have written "Enoch Arden"; the death of W. S. Landor; how Mrs. Browning's "Sonnets From the Portuguese" came to light; Keats and his critics. These letters also show the progress of the correspondents' friendship and lead up to the sudden break between them in the spring of 1865, when Miss Wedgwood asked Browning not to see her again.]

THE RIVERS OF ENGLAND—

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syllabic shape a little, but still keeping close [illegible] that tradition of rough and seemingly uninspired brevity which governs the naming of almost all the rivers of this island.

They stand apart.

Those names seem often, in fact, less like names of rivers than of beasts and prehistoric beasts, as in Usk and Swale and Bure and Stour and Mole, or the syllables of some nonsense rhyme, as in Wensum and Yare and Swale and Idle; Tweed and Tees and Tyne and [illegible] or the names of crabbed women, as in Till and Tamar, or even of birds and birds now lost [illegible] in Dove and Parret, Kennet, Nidd and Aire. These are names, with one or two exceptions, which would seem to have no other place in the language, to belong exclusively and peculiarly to these rivers. Etymologists, no doubt, will explain them, which does not explain away [illegible] all their abrupt crudity, their bluff oddity of look and sound.

Only very occasionally does this long pattern break into easier colour and softer sound. Then we get Severn and Avon, only to find that Avon means nothing more than river, and Windrush and Cherwell, only to find that Cher is wrapped in mystery and that Well, O.E. *wielle*, means nothing more than stream. And we get, more rarely still, some name that clings to the [illegible] edge like a piece of French embroidery, too delicate, some name like Coquet or Eden or Isis, altogether out of place in that rough stitchery.

In defence of oddity.

But perhaps, after all, such an odd and unembroidered pattern of names is right. Rivers, unlike fields and farms and wood and hills, are not local. Thompson's Farm will do very well for those within a fox-bark of its [illegible] but beyond the parish boundaries it will be a mere piece of empty picturesqueness. [illegible] stone Furlong will have meaning, perhaps, for those who are near enough and old enough to know something of the history of the girl who stamped on it the mark of her profession. [illegible] will not do at all in some other place where, perhaps, ladies are and always have been more virtuous.

It is right that rivers should not bear, as other country places, the imprint of some local fancy or, more especially, of some [illegible] fancy lady. They require, since they are [illegible] far-reaching, general features of the landscape, some more universal name, a name that will be common to both source and mouth, that will serve equally well the cowmen of its [illegible] meadows, the dockers of its ports, the [illegible] walking over its bridges, the fishermen and [illegible] on its banks, the lovers watching its [illegible] lilies in the July sun.

Above local pettiness.

Such a name as Nen, seeming to mean nothing, is aloof, uncontroversial. It is above local [illegible] ness. It binds a whole section of the [illegible] gether. If rivers had been named according to local imagination, streams would have split up into the pettiness of parishes. As [illegible] they remain single forces, common inheritance, under common names. They are at once [illegible] pendent and universal.

All of which still does not explain that [illegible] of odd river names, with its Usk and [illegible] Till and Tamar, Nidd and Nen and [illegible] Wensum, running round the coast of England [illegible] some necklace of primitive crusty stone [illegible]

* * *

WHEN a warlike state grows soft and [illegible] they may be sure of a war; for commonly [illegible] states are grown rich in the time of their [illegible]ing: and so the prey inviteth, and their [illegible] valour encourageth a war.—BACON.

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* "Mr. Sludge, the Medium," *i.e.* David Dunglass Home, or Hume, whom Browning detected cheating. Later Home called on the poet at his house in Dorset Street and was ejected.

† Jenny Lind, Madame Otto Goldschmidt (1820-1887), soprano singer.

‡ In March, 1870, Browning wrote to Miss Isabella Blagden, "I have known Mad^{e} Schwabe this many a day; good impulsive, not wise at all but generous abundantly. I dined with her last year and heard Rubinstein."

§ *Travels of Rabbi Benjamin, Son of Jonah of Tudela* . . . faithfully translated by the Rev. R. Gerrans, Lecturer of Saint Catherine Coleman, and Second Master of Queen Elisabeth's Free Grammar School, Saint Olave, Southwark, London, 1784.