

# AT THE WATER'S EDGE

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*Seal Cull* (1979)

*Ill Fares the Land* (1994)

*One for Sorrow* (1994)

*Song of the Rolling Earth* (2003)

*Nature's Child* (2004)

# AT THE WATER'S EDGE

A PERSONAL QUEST FOR WILDNESS

by

John Lister-Kaye



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for  
Magnus Magnusson  
in gratitude

‘Wealth dies, kinsmen die, a man himself must likewise die. But one thing I know which never dies – world-fame, if justly earned.’

– Odin, in *‘Hávamál’* (*‘Words of the High One’*),  
*from the Sæmundar Edda (Old Icelandic mythological poems)*



‘Every once in a while we all need to get out, to give ourselves up to a favourite wild landscape, to explore and experience and to wonder. We should do this in every season and all weathers, by day and by night. We should touch and smell and listen. We should absorb moonlight on water, feel the wind in our hair, and discover the other creatures with which we share the world. We should be forcing ourselves to reconnect with wild nature and our origins. We need to do this before it’s too late.’

*Dr Jeff Watson, scientist and conservationist,  
1952–2007*





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## Preface

*January 9th* The frost's sunlit sparkle that opened our year was quickly banished by a shroud of grey. The nights have been raw and the days burdened with icy drizzle. For a week we have shivered in the damp of winter chill. I have left my desk and my fireside only reluctantly, briefly venturing out for my Jack Russell terriers, Ruff and Tumble, and always without conviction. Even they have been happy to scuttle back indoors. But today is different. At last a troubled sun has shouldered through, with bright lances of green striping the river fields, drawing me to my study window. Mist hangs over the river but the sun's courage is calling me out. It's not quite ten o'clock.

I left the dogs curled in their kitchen basket, pulled on my old jacket, my boots, hat and gloves, grabbed my binoculars and stick and set out on the circular walk I have done more times than I can count. I turned up the Avenue between the tall trunks of ancient limes and horse chestnuts, kicking the drifts of leaves across the path just for the reassuring swishing sound they make.

My walk takes me gently uphill, northwards with the sun at my back towards high, rocky crags and then turning to face the lurching clouds of the Atlantic west by following the Avenue's parallel lines of lofty trees, precisely planted

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by Victorian landscape gardeners. Now, more than a century later, in the reassuring way that nature always does in the end, the trees have broken free. The old drive they lined where carriage wheels once crunched on raked gravel is long disused, lost beneath a blanket of leaf mould, and their stretching, moss-sleeved arms have mingled overhead, forming a tunnel of bosky shade. Only the rigid spacing of the trunks reveals their hand.

In the lower branches of one of the limes a spider's web caught my eye. It arched from twig to twig in a mist of fine lace. It was strikingly beautiful, so much so that I stopped to look more closely at the intricacy of the design. It was studded with beads of dew. The weak, low-angled sunlight gleamed from tiny prisms, incidentally distilled from the night's cold air, an unnecessary adornment tipped in for good measure. The spider herself was invisible. She had withdrawn to a bark crevice, where she waited, with one foreleg fingering the pulse of a silken cord to alert her when her trap was sprung. I couldn't resist jiggling the web with a straw, imitating a moth struggling in its tacky mesh. She was fooled, but only for a second. She rushed out to rope her victim round and deliver the poisoned bite to paralyse her prey. Halfway to my straw she realised her mistake, stopped, seemed to think for a second and then returned to her lair. I smiled. That spider was smart. I knew I couldn't fool her twice.

That net was a killing machine – I knew that well enough – but that's not all I saw, nor what I chose to write in my journal. What had stopped me was the beauty of the morning caught in the dewy eye of her device. I was witness

to its delicacy, its symmetry and its inspirational cartwheel design. It was this beauty that possessed me and made me stand and stare. It possessed me not in a purely poetic sense, blinding me to everything else, but in the practical perfection of its own intricate existence. A spider's web doesn't *need* to be beautiful to work, but the presence of such radiance is a constantly recurring natural melody I have noted over and over again, almost always there, underscoring the drama of the moment.

Wherever I look in nature I find myself confronted by the paradox of sublime design and grim function, almost as though one is mocking the other – a deadly game, sometimes so violent and brutish that it takes my breath away – the stabbing bill of the heron, the peregrine's dazzling stoop, the otter's underwater grace in pursuit of a fish. And then the beauty floods back in as though some grander plan than evolution fits it all together with added value, that extra aesthetic ingredient, the work of some unnamed genius quite incapable of creating anything shoddy or brash. So I walk, and I watch, and listen, and slowly I learn.



Back at my desk I wrote this brief entry for the day's walk. It's a habit. I always try to write down what I have seen and perceived to be the truth, a journal of these secret and personal thoughts and undertakings. It's not a diary, nor in any sense a scientific record – but I have noted down those things that have caught my attention and hauled me off, incidents and happenings that I have wanted to remember

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and revisit, and which have helped me engage with the land and the animals and plants that share this patch of upland delight with me, the place I have come to know as home, theirs and mine.

Flicking back through these pages and volumes, I find a perpetually repeating theme. It is the timeless paradox of beauty and the beast inextricably tangled with the impact of man. It is the indescribable and often inexplicable beauty of nature and the overarching sense of wonder it carries with it, always drawn into sharp contrast by her utterly ruthless laws and the terrible truth of mankind's peaceless domination of his and their environment.

Slowly, as the decades have slid by, I have become intimate with my circular walk in a way few of us can hope to achieve in the hurly-burly of modern life. I never cease to be grateful that my work has permitted this level of involvement with the natural world. It doesn't matter what day or what season it is, my walk is an addiction and an escape. I'm taking off towards a loch – my loch encircled by wild and sensuous woods. I don't mean *my* as in my car or my coat, or as decreed by a deed in some lawyer's dusty safe, but *mine* in the sense that no one can ever steal or deny; a private, unassailable *mine*, the *mine* of hopes and dreams.

On a good day if I walk briskly I can do the whole circuit – up the burn, round the loch, across the bog, through the woods and back to the house again – in under an hour. But those days are only good from the perspective of wind in my hair and a spring in my step; good for heart and lungs. They usually mean my mind is somewhere else, transported, clogged with trivia and unable properly to take in where I

am and what else is with me – walking for walking's sake. Later, they become the bad days. When I sit to write my journal I can find nothing to say.

Other days are quite different. I only get to the end of the Avenue or to the bridge over the burn, or perhaps halfway round the loch before I realise I have run out of time and must turn back. I have sauntered and dawdled. The walking has been hijacked by some insect or bird I have seen or heard, by a strange footprint or maybe a rustle in the grass, something that freezes me to the spot – something that has caused me to fade into the undergrowth where I can transmogrify into the observer, not the observed. Too often shortage of time has meant I've had to tear myself away, only to regret it later. These are the days that fill my journal, that return to me again and again, resurfacing from my deep subconscious, where they lodged like pleasure-charged pockets of narcotic, days that have sent me back down the path with fresh images to hoard away, new riddles to crack.

I have lived here, on this little glen-side patch of the northern central Highlands of Scotland, for thirty years, man and boy, for I was a hot-headed and incautious youth when first I bought these few acres of rough land and made them my home and my work. It was an impulsive move, but one I have never regretted. I fell in love with the place then and that primal attraction has never waned, although, as in a good marriage, we have grown comfortable together as I have come to know and understand its ways.

All good farmers get to know the dynamics of their land: the wet and the dry ground, where the sun or the winds scorch thin earth, the hollows where frost lies all day and

how the invisible drainage runs. They will know where the cattle stand with their backs to the driving rain and where the sheep hunker down against a dry-stone wall; where the rushes constantly invade the grass and where every summer the stinging nettles and creeping thistles reappear however many times they are weeded out. So it is with a naturalist, although perhaps the cast of *dramatis personae* is longer and the plot a little more complicated, demanding both a predilection for nosiness and a well-developed capacity for dawdling.

I walk when the mood takes me. In summer it is sometimes absurdly early in the morning when the first birdsong tugs me from my bed, sometimes at lunchtime to take a welcome leg-stretch from sitting at a desk and sometimes a break from the dull routines of more dreary work, and occasionally as a closing thought in the long, elastic and emotion-tingling dusk Highlanders have dubbed 'the gloaming'. There are no rules. It is just an unplanned convenient amble and a way of keeping in touch with what lives and moves around me.

The path takes me across field edges, along an old farm track and, most importantly, beside the burn. This spills from the loch and runs down the fringe of the woods to the fields. Its friendly gossip brings a smile to my cheeks and its moods come and go with the clouds; the burn always has something to say. Long ago its flow powered a sawmill and the cobbled lade is still present for part of its course. I am lucky that my trail passes through so many different habitats, something that has happened more by chance than design as the route has established itself over the years, although a desire to feed my own curiosity has undoubtedly revealed its hand.



I have scant equipment. An old felt hat and a once-waterproof jacket, stout shoes and a long stick called a crummack to lean on (from the Gaelic *cromag*, a shepherd's crook, but with a wide curve for hooking a sheep by the neck, not the tight, conventional crosier shape for catching a leg), and, of course, my faithful Swarovski binoculars. Good binoculars are to a field naturalist as a set of spanners is to a mechanic, a stethoscope to a doctor. They must be clear, sharp and an effortlessly natural extension to the eyes and the hand. They are a vital, silent route to where you want to be. Bad binoculars are a distraction, an affront to the watcher and the watched, a hindrance that should be tossed away; better without any at all.

I have worn the same old khaki jacket for years, now tatty and torn, but soft and friendly and, above all, silent. Jackets that rustle are made and worn by people who think human, not wild. There was a time when I would have worn only tweed, but wonderful though tweed still is, its weight when wet and the length of time needed to dry it have pushed it aside in favour of modern convenience fabrics. My aim is to blend, not stand out; to be accepted, not to alarm.

I believe in routine and familiarity, those two. Nothing that lives on this land can fail to be aware of my scent and my regular and hopefully benign presence. Those are the keys I rely on to open nature's doors, to help me slough off some of the universal plume of dread that sheds from all humans like bad smoke. In winter I sometimes wear workman's leather gloves – cold is an unnecessary distraction and, besides, I cannot write with frozen fingers. In summer, if the midges on the moorland are intolerable, in my pocket

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I carry a veil to wear over my face; Highland midges can be irksome to the point of despair. On my belt I have a knife, and always, always, always my notebook and two pens in my pocket.

I go alone. Wildness favours the solitary. Company is good, but there are other times and better places for human companionship. And that's it; anything else is superfluous clutter that will detract, not enhance. And expectations? No, none of those. There is a trump card in the expectation game that nature loves to play.

This, then, is a sharing of thoughts and images rekindled from my journal, drawn from the rock and the wind, the snow and the rain, the trees and the birdsong and the blush of wild flowers that have welcomed every spring. Turning its pages and dipping in, I realise it has taken me over thirty years to cover little more than a mile.

John Lister-Kaye  
House of Aigas

## I

# The Lie of the Land

Nature knows nothing of landscape. For nature scenery is the natural habitat, while our landscape is the habitat manipulated by man for his own uses. If either man or the habitat changes then so inevitably must the landscape.

– Nan Fairbrother, *New Lives, New Landscapes*

The word ‘glen’ is sensuous. Like ‘mountain’, with which it is irredeemably paired, it stirs the spirit. When, quite unthinking, the word pops into my sentence as it’s always bound to when I’m talking about my home, I see strangers’ eyes brighten; eyebrows lift as though some inner book has been opened at a well-loved passage. That’s what Highland glens have always done: stir spirits and arouse passions in a country that spawned the word from its own language. In the Gaelic tongue *gleann* is a mountain valley, almost always with a river, a burn or a loch. It gives itself away.

All Scottish glens were carved by ice; the yawning, glacial troughs left as bare as a canvas for nature to paint afresh, scoured and desolate. For several thousand years after the ice melted away nature took over; it laid down primitive soils and, welcoming all comers, ultimately created great forests of pine, birch and oak. Stone Age, and later Bronze and Iron

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Age man hunted through a land rich in game where wolves howled at the stars and brown bears foraged for bilberries in the beneficent shade of the forest. Bronze Age farmers were the first to create clearings for their crops. Cultivation and the teeth of their grazing animals ensured the trees could not return.

When, fifteen hundred years ago, Celtic tribes from Ireland known by the Romans as the *Scottii* came rampaging into this land they called Caledonia, running the prevailing winds across the sixteen miles of petulant sea between Antrim and the Mull of Kintyre, their furious and warring invasion was certain to award it a new name – the land of the Scots. The Gaelic-speaking *Scottii* created a desolation and a deception of their own; the mountains became strongholds from which to raid and counter-raid, pillage and burn. From turf and boulders they constructed lowly hovels for their families and formidable stone towers and keeps rose up for their chieftains; on the flood plains they nurtured their meagre crops. In summer they looked to the high grazing of the mountains and moors for their cattle, sheep and goats, a transhumance which, unwittingly, was gradually creating a landscape of open vistas and bare hills. All those centuries ago mankind was busy taming this land, shaping it to his immediate needs, the needs we all share, for food, security and a home, without any inkling of the long-term consequences of his actions. With a relentless urgency to extract a living from the fragile soils, the forest wilderness was pushed back and another land began to emerge, a land that is immeasurably changed, but which still clings to that essential quality of wildness today.

My home sits in a bowl with one side broken away. As the glacier melted back, so the steep side of the valley washed out along a fault line, the friable conglomerate rock collapsing and flushing away to the sea. This hollow awards us shelter and a cascade of gravel terraces – now upland pasture – absent elsewhere in the glen. This geomorphological and glacio-fluvial legacy enabled people to farm the land long before the wild Gaels came barracking in and took over. It was the Bronze Age farmers who first created permanent settlements here, forging the lie, as they broke into our precious Highland soils some five thousand years ago – the lie that is deeply rooted in the romantic mythology of the Highlands, that the moors and hills are naturally bare and have always been that way.

Long before the first smoke curled from the thatched roofs of those early settlements, the glacier sculpted its U-shaped trough which gouges back into the mountains to the south and west for twenty miles. No ice creaks out of those high corries now, but every winter and spring the rain and melting mountain snows keep the brown spate waters of the river pulsing through, a seasonal flare of elemental spleen far beyond the control of mankind, and now the glen's most uplifting feature.

This half-tamed land of sheep pasture and forest is foothill country solemnly lifting to a spine of mountains beyond the immediate horizon, a luminous presence felt but unseen until much higher up. The valley sides are steep and rocky, swerving upwards to a cloud edge a thousand feet above sea level. Birch trees cling on between crags and scree slopes too dry and loose for roots. From afar the trees merge to a

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cloud of pastel softness, but when, breathless, you clamber up the rocks to their feet the sky has levered them apart and invited a spiny scrub of gorse and broom to share their thin mineral soils.

Far above the glen high, boggy moorland soothes the eye back into the mountains. On a clear winter day from the hill behind my home I can see the Affric Mountains' snowy peaks framing my wider world, alluring and mysterious, promising the adventure of real wildness beyond – a view and a promise always accompanied by a singing heart and an ascending spiral of the spirit.

This famous landscape of craggy peaks and purple moors is gripped in passionate affection by the Gaelic Highlanders – ‘Ye bonny banks and braes’ – revered and celebrated in folklore, ballad and verse, and loved by free spirits the world over. Yet the notion of wilderness this landscape evokes is the lie – the deep-rooted and fundamental deception that nature alone has shaped this land. To many visitors it is an unpalatable truth that, for all its uplifting qualities and romantic associations, it is man who has imposed his will on this desolate upland scenery by systematically removing the forests and exhausting the frail fertility of its soils.

To the east, across the river – the far rim of the bowl – woodland and dark conifer plantation on a high ridge of moraine bars the way to the sea and another world, a world to which inured glen dwellers like me do not really belong. Only five miles away the Beaully River is tidal. An east wind brings the tang of salt flats and the broad firth beyond like a ghost of the herring and sprats once so abundant in these coastal waters, a bounty that drew many people to settle

there. On the Black Isle, the island that isn't an island, trapped between the Cromarty and the Beauly firths, pink sandstone towns and former fishing villages cluster the shore of a much more fertile coastal plain which, for many centuries, sent Highland folk to their beds with full bellies. Their narrow streets and picturesque fishermen's cottages lining the shore also belie the stark and largely ignored truth that those inshore waters can no longer sustain the folk for whom these villages were built. Now they house holidaymakers, commuters to Inverness and the retired.

Across the Beauly Firth, some fifteen miles away, the Highland capital is now a bustling city, said at the turn of the millennium to be one of the most rapidly expanding communities in Europe. Beyond the horizon its amber lights glow on dark nights as if the forest is on fire. Horizons are what contain us every day. If you live in a bowl you sleep with dim horizons of darkness and rise with new light from beyond in the dawn. You dream in their cupped hands.

I have always wanted to live with wildness. In another age I fancy I might have chosen to be a pioneer settler on the very frontier of real wilderness. Oh! To have felt the earth tremble beneath those massed millions of buffalo hooves thundering across the American plains, and to have heard the night howls of the thousands of wolves in constant pursuit. Oh! To have known the unknown – like Meriwether Lewis and William Clark – a grizzly bear or an Indian camp around the next twist in the creek.

At times the Highland hills come close to the wilderness they seem to evoke, alluring echoes of their wilder, not so very distant past. I have never regretted migrating north

from my English ancestral homeland. In the context of wider Britain this muscular upland landscape still elicits the notion of true wildness; is still physically and emotionally demanding in ways we have forgotten across most of the rest of the country. Its rocks and its moors and its excoriating seven-month winters purge the soul like hyssop. We take them for granted at our peril.

The road that winds up the wooded rim heading out, away from the glen, leads within a few miles to the tangled world of city life – housing estates, shops, supermarkets, cars and warehouses. I go there when I have to, only grudgingly acknowledging my dependence. When I leave Inverness heading for home, I pass quickly through a farmed landscape of wide, arable fields of pasture, crops and plough, and the euphemistic, contrived greenness which, with the complacency of drab urbanisation, we have come to accept as the countryside norm. A downward somersault of the heart pursues me across a farmscape of mechanically levelled spaces cleared by growth economics, and now shared mostly by rooks and pigeons – the man-manipulated relics of a far more diverse and abundant wildlife that frequented these lands long ago. Buzzards and hooded crows wheel over pheasants squashed at the roadside. Here I feel out of place and burdened, despondent for country lives locked into the orthodoxy of political systems and tractor cabs, suppressed by dull routine and duller necessity.

But once I cross the old, three-arched, sandstone bridge over the Beaully River the glen road lifts and weaves and narrows, expelling my gloom. After a few miles the birch-woods and the river take over; houses vanish, squeezed out



by steepening valley sides and pressing trees. Arable farms dwindle away and become honest crofts, the once subsistence smallholdings of a native people who have lived out the turbulent choreodrama of this land for a thousand years, the reading of whose history is almost as cathartic an experience as the task of breaking and cultivating their tiny upland fields. That word 'glen' – that particular defining quality of Highland-ness – has somehow sneaked in and taken the landscape over, an unmistakable and palpable quality of separateness and latent wildness that awards it its special place in the consciousness of all Highland people.

What I love about glen land is its very rough-and-unreadiness, its sense of nature unbowed, its patrician intransigence, still struggling, damned if it's going to be reined in, and offering nothing to humans but back-breaking toil. Yet for all this, my mood soars with the wheeling buzzards to the steep valley slopes and the hills beyond. Those who have always lived here, the glen's dwindling residuum of native Highlanders, seem to reflect the land's resistance; they are also patrician and unflinching, clinging to these unrelenting metamorphic rocks with a poetic tribalism celebrated across the globe.

Above the flood plain and the steep valley sides the soils are acidic, dark and wet, the best they can manage from the rocks and the glacial till, the ubiquitous boulder clay that was clumsily smeared across the moors by the departing ice. With a nonchalant nod of the head towards the skyline, this land is euphemistically known by its crofting incumbents as the 'high ground', by which is meant poor-quality seasonal grazing of heather, coarse grasses and peat bog. Only the

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river flats have alluvium, and their productivity is persistently threatened by flash floods from melting snow in the mountains.

Everything up here in the hills is clean and resonant, like fine glass – the rocks, the air, the snow and the stinging rain. In sunlight the glen glistens and sparkles with the mica and quartz of its metamorphic schists and from its omnipresent water tumbling from the hills. The crash of falling water is never far away. It's as though in a last stand for independence nature is fighting off the lie and the whirlwind of romantic deception; you feel that it's had enough, clenched its teeth and refused to cooperate any longer with the advance of man's ambitions.

Such uncompromising country has always given sanctuary to wildlife, although man has long plotted against it. The wolf, the bear, the lynx, the wild boar and the beaver were all vanquished long ago, and their habitats of woods, wetlands and forests systematically removed with them, but, encouraged for sport, the red deer have thrived. Their furtive presence speaks plainly from the hatch-work of paths criss-crossing from moorland brown to valley green. Such relative rarities as the red squirrel, the pine marten and the wildcat still cling on, although all three have struggled to make it through the twentieth century and still face many threats. Yet roe deer, foxes, badgers and otters are commonplace and in the high hills golden eagles thrive on the inevitable harsh-winter fatalities from the surfeit of sheep and deer that have dominated this land for so long. Thankfully the woods are never empty of birds.

To the north there are no roads, save one track for

extracting commercial lumber. In this direction the bowl's curving side is curtained by spruce and pine; a managed plantation forest where the only relief is occasional rocky escarpments breaking through halberds of military green. And to the west, lifting above ever rougher and wetter pasture, the crimped valley light explodes across a smothering of blanket peat where a sea of heather and bog is lost in the milky haze of higher hills and clouds.

This landscape is unexceptional for this part of the Highlands. Our glen could have many names. How I came to live here is a tale already told in *Song of the Rolling Earth*, but these hills and fields and the wooded slopes I walk almost every day, the river and the burn and the wild creatures they harbour have been such a central part of my life for so long that writing about them is irresistible, a *force majeure* that has elevated the keeping of a journal – a personal record of the land and its wildlife in my time – from the status of a chore into a joy.



The loch is only eight acres in size. Its water is dark with peat. It is roughly heart-shaped, with one or two bays and sedgy marshes; an earth dam sixty yards long flattens the point of the heart. The burn from a smaller natural lochan flowing out across a rock sill was dammed in the late nineteenth century as a water supply, more than doubling the size and depth of the loch. Tucked neatly into its own hollow, the loch is its own secret, hiding from the visible world. It nestles there on the edge of human intervention: above it

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the wind sings across uninhabited moorland, wild woods of downy birch, eared willow and Scots pine, rowan and aspen, goat willow and wych elm, juniper, gorse and broom crowd in to its banks, and below the dam the manipulated quilting of forest and field is where people have always lived. Over the years I have created a circular trail around the loch. In places the water laps at the path's edge, which then veers off into the woods, winding over bogs and heathery knolls, only to be lured in again at a little bay or a marsh as though the walker has been drawn back, unhappy to be out of sight of the water for long. In summer water lilies burst from a surface of green plates; in winter my loch brims with pure sky.

On the loch's northern shore stands a timber fishing hut I built many years ago, called the 'Illicit Still', and where I sometimes sit to write. 'The day was squinting bright and ear-tinglingly cold', I would later enter in my journal.



*February 16th* In the afternoon I took off up the hill to the loch. I needed to stretch my legs and I wanted to check the snow for tracks. Straightaway I found the trail of a fox that had used my path while sauntering through. The single-file line of his unhurried paws wove a border of Celtic symbolism up the middle of the track that you could read like a text. That pleased me. I like the thought that the route I take is acceptable to the deer and the badgers, the foxes and pine martens around my home. Whether I meet them or not, I draw satisfaction from their presence. I followed this fox straight to the loch. He had meandered along, pausing

here and there; he had left the path to check out something in the bushes and returned again a little further on. I could see where he had stood as still as a gravestone, ears cocked, the heat of his pads burning deeper into the snow, listening to mouse or vole rustlings in the undergrowth, assessing, biding his time for the pounce, then abandoning it and padding on up the path.

The loch was frozen and that was where our paths parted. He carried on across the ice; I wasn't prepared to risk it. So I turned aside and went to the fishing hut. It has an old chair and a bunk and a stove, nothing special, just enough for backwoods comfort, somewhere I often come to think and write. I lit the stove and sank into the armchair beside it and kicked off my boots. I sat looking out at the white world outside and the frozen loch, waiting for the warmth to percolate through to my toes. Slowly I realised I wasn't alone.

A woodmouse, *Apodemus*, was eyeing me up from the woodpile stacked on the far side of the stove. 'Hullo,' I said quietly. I have always loved woodmice. They have style, real élan, and are as golden as hamsters, with huge, shining eyes and ears and a long, flowing tail that wafts behind them like a thread in the wind, never touching the ground. (They used to be called long-tailed fieldmice). They outclass the house mouse in every way. This particular mouse was not in conversational mood, and he disappeared back into the woodpile. But he wasn't alone. As I sat quietly for the next hour I heard constant rustlings inside the old sofa beside my chair, more in the roof. There were many more than three bad mice. It was a winter invasion and they were very pleased with the accommodation.

*At the Water's Edge*

There is a *realpolitik* about nature I have always admired. A ruthless opportunism simmers within every organism. There is nothing cuddly or cute out there, nothing sentimental or romantic, nothing generous or forgiving, nothing magnanimous or altruistic. Just sheer functionality honed to perfection, perpetually thrust forward by single-minded sexual hedonism and the narcissistic selfishness required for survival. Every species is driven by need for a home, for food and for the universal urge to procreate. To wild nature mankind's lofty notions are as meaningless as his grand pretensions. They are as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal, superfluous flights of fancy, there to be grabbed and exploited to the full. I built a fishing hut and a lochside hideaway for my own purposes and those of my family. The woodmice saw only a convenient, dry sanctuary from predation and an excellent place to rear their young. It was as though they had said, 'Thank you very much, that will suit us nicely.'

The sun was sinking. A golden gleam had caught the pines on the far side of the loch and tiger-striped the ice. Soon the woodmice would venture out for food and take their chances with tawny owls and foxes and the pine martens with which they share this little patch of wildness. For now this place was theirs. I had a home of my own and it was time to go.