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The Stubborn Light of Things

A Nature Diary

faber

For all the weekend explorers, urban observers, hopeful gardeners, all-weather dog walkers, garden bird lovers, city park sunbathers, the very new to nature and the lifelong outdoor types

INTRODUCTION

There was an overgrown pond in the next village when I was a child, choked with shaggy bulrushes and silver with frost in January. I wrote about it one afternoon at primary school, in my English lesson, and my teacher, a kind, generous woman called Judith Jessett, kept me back after class to tell me it was good.

I was a bright child, but I didn't have enough confidence to be truly creative: what made me feel safe was getting things right – not taking risks. Yet her words that day meant more to me than any qualifications I later achieved, either at secondary school or university; I carried them with me through my twenties like a tiny flame, precious but insubstantial. *Mrs Jessett once said I was good at describing nature*. But what use could come of that?

I was in my early thirties before I realised that there were people whose job it was to write descriptively about ponds and meadows, birds and trees. Kathleen Jamie's *Findings* was the first modern nature writing I discovered, and then Roger Deakin's *Wildwood*; Robert Macfarlane and Esther Woolfson came next. And then the whole canon opened up to me like a magic box: Richard Mabey, Mark Cocker, Nan Shepherd, Kenneth Allsop, J. A. Baker, Clare Leighton, Ronald Blythe, John Stewart Collis, Edward Thomas,

Richard Jefferies, all the way back to the parson-naturalist Gilbert White. On and on it went, wonderfully, transformatively; and as I read I began to make connections with the books I'd adored as a child, like *The Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady*, *Animal Tracks and Signs* and *The AA Book of the British Countryside* – even the four seasonal Ladybird books, *What to Look For in . . .*

Yet I didn't think I would ever qualify as a nature writer; for one thing I lived in South London, and more importantly I wasn't enough of an expert to hold forth on plants or birds or ecology. Instead I wrote a novel set in a city, *Clay*, into which I crammed all the noticing and description and love of the natural world I could. I contributed short pieces to the wonderful Caught by the River website, and began to pick up work reviewing books such as Helen Macdonald's *H is for Hawk* and Esther Woolfson's *Field Notes From a Hidden City* in the broadsheets. Still, what I most wanted to do was write descriptive non-fiction about the natural world. But while my expertise was growing exponentially as more and more of my life shifted to focus on nature and the countryside, I still didn't think I was allowed.

When, late in the spring of 2014, *The Times* got in touch to invite me to be one of a new team writing the Saturday 'Nature Notebook', the call came out of the blue. It was an amazing opportunity – not just to do the work I felt most called to, but also to share my beliefs about the value of nature and our precarious relationship to it with a more traditional readership than I had previously been

able to reach. So I said yes, and although in the early pieces I can hear myself trying to find my voice, before long I was channelling the seven-year-old who had gazed at an icy pond and then conjured it up for a favourite teacher in a Silvine exercise book at school. Since then my monthly columns have been an absolute joy to write, and the warm, supportive and thoughtful responses from *Times* readers have given the lie to the modern journalists' advice about never looking at the comments below the line.

But while my column has continued uninterrupted for six years now, my life during that period changed a great deal. In 2014, I was the author of one novel, *Clay*, and I lived with my husband and rescue dog, Scout, in a rented flat in Streatham: a slightly down-at-heel area of South London with no Tube station, and boasting Europe's longest high street. Today I am the author of three novels and a work of nature writing (*Rain: Four Walks in English Weather*), the editor of four seasonal anthologies, and the writer and presenter of a hit podcast; I live alone in a Suffolk village and have Scout to stay as much as I can. So much happened between and around the world described in the columns; seeing them collected together is a reminder both of the continuity of the natural world and of what it was like to live through a period of intense change.

There are simple stories you could tell about the trajectory of these changes, and none of them would be true. One would be to set the countryside above the city; to turn my move into a classic 'nature-starved Londoner

makes new life in rural idyll' narrative. But my love of nature was gloriously nourished in the city, something that's eminently possible for any city-dweller willing to start looking and noticing – a process I describe in my column for December 2014. I still feel a huge amount of affection for Streatham's wide avenues of Edwardian semis, its spacious parks and multicultural communities, and the busy, vibrant life I led there.

I didn't choose the countryside over the city; I decided I needed both. When I moved to Suffolk I continued to stay in the Smoke for two weeks a month so that I could keep working at dance music magazine *Mixmag*, something I'd done since I was thirty-one. First staying with friends in Bethnal Green, then in London Fields and latterly at the Barbican, the contrast with rural life continues to be something I need.

Yet for a nature writer to find herself in a place like this is still an astonishing gift. For my first year in Suffolk I lived in a brick-and-timber labourer's cottage that looked out across a water meadow where rabbits fed, hares boxed, egrets stalked the ditches and a barn owl quartered the long grass. After my landlord decided to move back in himself, I bought a place just a few miles away, a one-time one-up one-down built in 1701, set in a tiny village surrounded by arable fields. Farming around here isn't organic, and the hedges are in a bad state (as they are almost everywhere); but the small field sizes, plenty of woods and copses (important for pheasant shooting) and

mixed, rotational cropping mean that while it's far from a rosy picture, there's more wildlife here than in the open, prairie-style agribusiness of the East Anglian peatlands, or the denuded uplands like Dartmoor and the Lake District – the bleak, unforgiving landscapes I loved first, and still long for. Here, nightingales and nightjars still arrive to breed each April, turtle doves purr on the village power cables, you can still find glow-worms and ruby-red corn poppies, and linnets and yellowhammers sing from the hedgerows in spring.

It was to share these riches that I began making the *Stubborn Light of Things* podcast in April 2020. With many of my urban friends enduring Covid-19 lockdown in gardenless flats, I wanted to make Suffolk's woods and fields available to as many people as possible, to help them keep in touch with the natural world and the changing seasons even if they couldn't go outdoors. With all the technical side taken care of by my brilliant friend the musician and producer Peter Rogers, and with the generous support of Faber, I began taking a field recorder out with me on my walks, capturing sounds from the dawn chorus to bell-ringing practice and describing the wildflowers, the weather and the crops in the fields. Each weekly episode included a poem, some entries from the Revd Gilbert White's diaries, one of my *Times* Nature Notebook columns and a guest appearance recorded often on just an ordinary smartphone and emailed in to me. The thousands of messages I received in support of

the podcast were one of the things that got me through all those weeks living entirely alone. You can hear it at www.melissaharrison.co.uk/podcast.

I'm still writing my monthly *Times* column and enjoying it just as much as I did six years ago. It's a central strand of the connective tissue that runs through everything I make and do: the hope that I can engender a connection to the natural world that feels as rich and rewarding as it does to me – and which might even inspire readers to protect it in turn.

~ Melissa Harrison, November 2020

CITY

23 August 2014

The man from Lambeth Council has paid his twice-yearly visit with backpack and glyphosate spray gun, and now all the wildflowers on the pavements around my flat are browning and dying back.

It has to be done – or so I'm told – but I'll miss them nonetheless: Streatham's scruffy, litter-blown Zone 2 streets have been in modest bloom all summer, garden escapees like snapdragons, asters and lobelias competing for even the tiniest cracks with yellow corydalis, shepherd's purse, annual sowthistle and great willowherb. Some of the seeds, like the asters' airborne parachutes, will have blown in on the wind; others, like those of the shepherd's purse, may have arrived in birds' droppings. Some doubtless escaped from hanging baskets and window boxes and grew where they fell. A motley bunch, these 'outlaw plants' each found some tiny, unsanctioned purchase and quietly got on with growing and flowering, briefly greening the pavements and feeding bees, butterflies and other pollinators in the process.

It's a case of swings and roundabouts, though – or at least, central reservations, because around the corner from our flat, on Streatham High Road, Transport for London is trying to turn the ugly brick beds between the lanes

into a long strip of wildflower meadow. For years they had been neglected, home only to litter, a few stunted ceanothus (Californian lilacs) and the odd clump of daffodils, but at the beginning of July these were removed and rolls of turf laid down in protective mesh, packed with young plants of fifty native and non-native species, including cowslips, meadow cranesbill, greater hawkbit, toadflax and yarrow. Spring, rather than high summer, might perhaps have been a better time to establish them, but so far most of the strips seem to be surviving, and hopefully they'll come into their own next spring. How well they do in the long term, given the need for regular watering and weeding, and the risk of nitrogen oxides and carbon compounds from traffic pollution over-enriching the soil, remains to be seen.

Streatham High Road is, according to a clearly erroneous 2002 poll, Britain's worst street – something that's doubtless at the back of the minds of those driving the recent campaign of beautification. Half a mile south of the wildflower experiment, a regiment of espalier lime trees has been planted between the busy lanes of the Red Route: trained on to what look like huge metal griddle pans, identical and evenly spaced, they look impossibly strange – hardly arboreal at all, but something else, sculpture perhaps – though they'll hopefully look a little better once they fill out. Sadly, a traffic accident did for five not long after they were planted; they have yet to be replaced.

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Elsewhere the borough's trees are in fine fettle, fruiting wildly – albeit largely ignored. Not far from our flat a patch of pavement is covered in the purple skin, golden flesh and crunchy stones of the tiny sweet plums that have been raining down on it for a fortnight, unregarded; on my route to the bus stop pears dangle promiscuously over a tall fence, and on a nearby strip of waste ground a wilding apple – grown, I like to imagine, from a core thrown out of a passing car – will soon be ready to scrump.

On Tooting Common, where my husband and I walk our rescue dog, Scout, the tangles of blackberries are already in heavy fruit thanks to the recent mild winter, early spring and warm summer. A few people gather them, pushing circumspectly into the thickets with Tupperwares and sandwich bags, but mostly they rot on the briars. We have a damson tree in our garden and have already made crumble and five pots of jam; we spread out blankets, shake the trunk and another two kilos of fruit tumbles down, sticky, split and holding all the trapped sweetness of summer.

I miss the birds in August. I miss the dawn chorus – what we still have of it, given that an estimated 44 million British birds have been lost since 1966; I miss my local blackbird's ballsy evening performance from next door's gable; I miss the heart-stopping swifts screaming and dogfighting above the streets. The breeding season is for the

most part over; few, except the bellicose robin, will defend territories over winter, so there is now little cause to sing. And of course many songsters, like our local thrushes, are in moult.

Replacing an entire set of feathers takes energy and can even impede flight, making moulting birds vulnerable; it's hardly any wonder they keep quiet. In August, rustles from the undergrowth are often all I hear of my avian neighbours. Soon their ranks will be swelled by migratory birds overwintering here from Northern Europe – but not yet. August is a silent month.

27 September 2014

Two thirds of London's landscape is made up of gardens, parks, woods and water, making it one of the greenest major cities in Europe. It's a richly diverse wildlife habitat, with two national and one hundred local nature reserves, thirty-six Sites of Special Scientific Interest, more than twelve hundred Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation and several nationally important Biodiversity Action Plan areas, including acid and chalk grasslands, grazing marsh, heathlands and reed beds. It may seem surprising, but many parts of the capital are more wildlife-friendly than traditional farmland, where non-organic agriculture can create monocultures in which little else thrives. A fledgling campaign even aims to turn the city into the Greater London National Park, reimagining its sixteen hundred square

kilometres as a vast working environment for both wildlife and people.*

One of London's most important contributions to biodiversity is its 3 million gardens, whose mixed borders, bird baths, compost heaps, lawns and hedges echo the 'ecotones' that are, all over the world, so rich in life: those areas between one type of habitat and the next, like the edges of woodlands and the margins of streams. Over three hundred species of bird have been recorded in the capital, and to them, gardens aren't the little kingdoms we experience them as, but long strips of green lying parallel to roads, with regular, useful fences to perch on and to act as windbreaks, plenty of cover for roosting and nesting, and lots of food: not just bird feeders, but seeds shed by the great assortment of plants we cultivate, and the caterpillars, greenfly and other invertebrates attracted by what we grow.

So to the city's busy, patchwork habitat now comes autumn, just as it does to the fields and farms: slowing the lawns' growth, stripping the trees and preparing plants for winter's long sleep. Blackbirds pick through the leaves rapidly accumulating on tired, dry lawns or cock their heads to listen for worms in the London clay, while red admirals and small tortoiseshell butterflies are beginning to seek out sheds and garages to winter in.

On our side of our road it is the north-facing back gardens that succumb to autumn first; the fronts of the houses

* London was officially declared the world's first National Park City on 22 July 2019.

get the sun, and many are still bright with late-season colour. While it may be far less pretty than the bought-in bedding plants that decorate our porch, the shaggy old ivy covering our shady back fence will feed late bees and shelter many birds through the coming colder nights.

Another sign of the new season is arachnids, as at this time of year they come into the open to seek a mate – sometimes venturing into our homes. This autumn is predicted to be a bumper one, as mild temperatures have led to an increase in the invertebrates spiders feed on and may well produce a spike in numbers. The Society of Biology has even launched an app, Spider In Da House, to help people identify and learn more about the twelve species most commonly found indoors – the idea being that with knowledge comes interest, and with interest comes a greater willingness to live alongside these fascinating creatures.

My bathroom is usually home to several slow-moving, long-legged *Pholcidae* whose only impact is the odd corner cobweb and the necessity for an occasional rescue from the shower; for the last fortnight it's also been home to first one *Tegenaria*, or house spider, and then a second. Larger, hairier and alarmingly fast, they have set up home behind my *Penguin English Journeys* series of books, and although they occasionally give me a start, I can't fault their taste.

It's the time of year when walking Scout begins to be problematic, as everywhere grey squirrels are down on the

ground and caching food, instead of up in the canopy, out of sight. Half Jack Russell and half Australian shepherd, Scout was a stray in rural Ireland for the first year of her life, and the hunting instinct – strong in terriers and terrier crosses – dies extremely hard.

Squirrels are astonishingly numerous across the capital; when my husband and I tried to switch the focus of Scout's obsession from squirrels to a squeaky ball using a method described in a book, we were unable to find a single green space to train her in that wasn't overrun. They scamper across roads and scurry up trees; they sit on garden walls and scold us as we pass, flicking their tails. The key to their success, and that of the other creatures that have learned to live alongside us, is adaptability: like rats, foxes and crows, these are intelligent animals that have learned to assess the risks, and the benefits, of human proximity. Squirrels have also learned some clever tricks – like only pretending to bury food when they think they're being watched, but actually hiding it elsewhere. As for what they're eating, I've found monkey nuts, an avocado stone and even a whole heel of bread buried in my planters. Who could help but admire that?

25 October 2014

The birds are on the move and it's exciting and unsettling in equal measure – as intimations of change often are. At night, now and again, I hear redwings calling overhead, and

fieldfares have arrived in my local park from Scandinavia. Migrating birds tend to travel along 'flyways' – routes in the air that trace lines on land like rivers or even roads – and the sky over London has several; as a result, places like Parliament Hill, the Lea Valley and even Regent's Park can host big flocks of migrants as well as single rarities resting en route – and crowds of birders with binoculars and long lenses.

Following a few ornithological tweeters at this time of year populates your timeline with a real sense of seasonal excitement, whether it's huge, 4,500-strong flocks of wood pigeons passing over the Dartford Crossing, a short-eared owl arriving in Wanstead from Russia, or ring ouzels stopping off in Dagenham: there's a sudden feeling of influx, of adventure, of thousands of tiny feathered lives being trusted to the wind, the weather and our populous and sometimes hostile urban spaces. I would never have known that a migrating nightjar had stopped off on Middlesex Filter Beds on its way to winter in Senegal had I not seen first one, and then a cascade of incredulous tweets; it stayed for three nights in the end, resting on the same branch during the day in the species' characteristic elongated pose – despite a growing crowd – and setting out each evening at precisely 7.15 p.m. to hunt for moths.

With their huge black eyes, extraordinary camouflage, dramatic display flight and otherworldly, ventriloquial churr, it's hardly surprising that so much superstition has accumulated around these charismatic birds. Once known as fern-owls, nighthawks and goatsuckers, they

were believed to steal animals' milk and cause distemper in calves; some even thought them to be the souls of unbaptised children. Of course, we know better these days, yet to find one in the hipster-driven borough of Hackney, albeit only for a few days, did feel almost supernatural – not a haunting, perhaps, but certainly a visitation from another, wilder world.

Migrating birds aren't the only incomers to London's cosmopolitan ecosystem; this week the writer and musician Ben Watt discovered a scorpion in his North London home. Trapped by his teenage daughter under a glass in her bedroom, it was taken to London Zoo, where the Head of Invertebrates identified it as a female *Euscorpius flavicaudis*, or European yellow-tailed scorpion. Rumours of breeding populations do crop up from time to time, with sightings everywhere from Ongar to Docklands, but it's thought that this one, common on the Continent, probably made its way to the city in a suitcase. With a rarely used and all but innocuous sting, these interesting invertebrates are no more of a threat to humans than the small population of non-native Aesculapian snakes that have established a colony in Camden Lock and which became the focus of some shamefully alarmist reporting earlier this year. Contrary to reports in the local press (and more widely), these non-venomous reptiles are not 'deadly', nor are they capable of 'taking out' dogs or babies; in fact, they subsist on rats and pigeons, something that many Londoners

would doubtless consider a useful service. Sensibly, the London Invasive Species Initiative has no plans for a cull.

After dark, foxes are everywhere in London: silent shapes slipping across busy roads, weightlessly scaling six-foot walls or lingering in driveways like little *genii loci*. Sometimes they remain invisible, and my only clue to their presence is Scout, whose entire posture and gait changes, her usual casual trot suddenly soundless, spring-loaded and utterly engaged. Foxes fascinate her, and the feeling seems to be mutual: last year one would regularly follow us a few paces behind, a game of Grandmother's Footsteps that sometimes brought it right up to our gate, through which it would watch, wide-eyed, as I got out my keys and let us into the bright house. Currently there is another – very young, I think – that will sit, like a puppy, and call repeatedly to Scout, a quiet, inward yip accompanied by a head-bob that makes Scout freeze, and stare, and stare. What is being transmitted between them, I often wonder, in their congruous language of posture and tail position and ears? What arcane, mysterious information is being exchanged?

22 November 2014

We're getting a 'B-Line', apparently. It's not a new Tube line but part of the government's recently unveiled National Pollinator Strategy, a ten-year plan to protect

and support the UK's pollinating insects – not just bees, but flies, moths and even beetles – in recognition of both their economic and environmental value and their increasing vulnerability. Here in London, nine organisations have come together to create a corridor running from Enfield in the north to Croydon in the south, linking existing pollinator hotspots (or 'nectar points', as they're doubtless not allowed to call them) like nearby Brockwell Park. All along the B-Line, managers and owners of green spaces, from parks to gardens, will be encouraged to create pollen-rich habitats and manage them for wildlife – initially for five years, during which time insect numbers will be monitored, and hopefully beyond.

It can seem as though environmental groups are always coming up with new initiatives and plans – as well they might, if they are to respond effectively to new pressures on wildlife and new opportunities to protect it. But there are two things that make the London B-Line plan exciting to me. The first is the way it brings together several groups in order to achieve a clear common goal. The UK's conservation sector is fractured, with many organisations, from the large to the very specialist, having a shared stake in places and projects – but not always collaborating effectively, and often having to compete for scarce funds. So to see the London Wildlife Trust, the RSPB, Buglife, the Greater London Authority, Bee Collective and others teaming up is refreshing, a model for the kind of joined-up work that the environmental sector needs to do more of in future.

The other reason I like the B-Line project is that it's part of a slow sea change that's going on in the public understanding of nature. We're finally learning to think beyond what is either cheap, practical (for people) or merely decorative – and instead understand that our own priorities are just one of several things that need to be considered. For too long we've had a tendency to make decisions as though nothing counts but us humans; now, the cost of that short-sightedness is becoming clear.

Next year, when I walk around London's green spaces, I hope I'll see far less sterile summer bedding and insecticide spray being used, and far more unmown grass, native wildflowers – and weeds. Let the local letter-writers scribble their complaints to the council; the loss of our pollinators is a far greater concern than a few riotous parks and verges.

We've had our first frost – far later, no doubt, than everyone else. It was gone by morning; I wouldn't have known had I not taken Scout out just before bed and found it silently silvering the car windows on our street. So we brought in the spindly lemon tree that spends all summer soaking up the sun (and the traffic grime) on our porch. This year it produced three actual lemons – compared to none at all on our friends' far healthier-looking, but wholly outdoor-dwelling, Dorset specimens.

Frost is a signal plants respond to in different ways, from damage to dormancy; it can improve some crops,

and 'blets' fruit like quinces and medlars, making them sweeter. A good frost was once valued for breaking up soil and killing pests and fungal spores; our fear of it, as modern gardeners, is partly due to our insistence on cultivating tender species from foreign parts, rather than those that have evolved to cope with our climate – like my poor long-suffering lemon tree.

It's the time of year when robins' song really starts to stand out – particularly as they're sensitive to artificial lighting and often sing at night in urban areas. Last Sunday my friend Peter, a DJ, returned from a gig at five in the morning, and rather than wake his sleeping household he wandered around south-west London for an hour or so as the dark sky slowly paled and a fingernail moon faded out. 'There were no cars, no trains running,' he told me; 'nobody about. But everywhere there were robins singing.' At last, he walked up the long road to his house as the street lights above him flickered off, one by one, the robins quietened, and a new day began.

27 December 2014

I grew up in leafy Surrey, the county with the highest concentration of trees in the UK. It wasn't the countryside, exactly; but it was very green, something I took entirely for granted. But when I moved to central London, seventeen years ago, I quickly became insulated from the seasons.

I lived at first in a flat above a garage in a treeless part of Zone 1, and worked in an air-conditioned office; rarely did I have a sense of the year's cycle except in terms of what to wear for each day's weather. And it sapped my joy in life until I felt empty and desolate, in need of something I didn't quite realise I had lost.

Finding my way back to nature took time. Moving a little further out and – eventually – to a flat with a little garden, adopting a dog and discovering green places to walk her helped; but I also had to change the way I looked at the city, and the things I let myself see. I needed to retune my eyes (and my other senses) to notice how much life there actually was around me, and to help me make imaginative relationships with the places I passed through each day.

Now I live a richly connected year, marked by seasonal events: the first snowdrop in my garden, cut and brought inside; the first blackbird's song listened out for, the first swift seen overhead; the first pocketful of glossy conkers brought home from the park, and the changing colours of my potted acer's bright leaves; the annual Perseid meteor shower, and Orion gradually clearing my neighbour's roof; the spring and autumn equinoxes; the shortest night, the shortest day.

And each December I pull up skeins of ivy from the garden and cut sprigs of holly to make a wreath for our door. I could go out and buy a much nicer (and neater) one, but to me there's a value in these rituals that runs

deep. The city streets may be lit all night and our houses and offices warm; we can buy strawberries or asparagus at midwinter, if we want them, and carpet our pocket-square gardens in fake turf that never gets muddy and never dies. But there's a cost that comes with these privileges, these ingenious ways of disconnecting ourselves from natural cycles, and it is the loss of a great part of the richness of life.

Yet, invent what we may, the seasons still come to the city: the grass in the parks and verges sets seed, the swifts fly south and the year's midnight approaches and passes by. How much we see and feel of it all is in our hands.

Winter is great for enjoying goldfinches. They form busy 'charms' at this time of year and often occupy a whole tree or hedge, twittering 'like distant playgrounds', as the writer Paul Evans has said. Bright, enamelled jewels, they were once popular as captive birds; my father's copy of *British Birds in Their Haunts* by the Revd C. A. Johns, first published in 1862, says that, caged, they are 'known to tens of thousands of city folk who never heard the wild song of the Thrush, nor saw a Redbreast under any circumstances'. Happily, things have changed: not only is it illegal now to take birds from the wild, but robins and goldfinches have become common in cities too.

Once amber-listed, goldfinches came in at number seven in this year's Big Garden Birdwatch as more and more people put out nyger seed in special feeders, boosting their

numbers and tempting them away from farmland where thistles, once their major food source, have proved no match for modern herbicides.

I love deciduous trees at this time of year. Leafless and stark, they seem more fully themselves; their branches form black traceries against the dull December skies, exposing their essential shape and structure and the way that each has grown: part nature, part circumstance. It is like character revealed.

Ash trees stand out, when their pennant leaves are down, for their large black trunks and drooping, beckoning twigs, while London planes are often pared back to pollarded fists. One oak on our nearby common leans in a way that's hard to make out when it's clothed in foliage; a rotting stump nearby suggests that it was shaded, while young, by a long-dead neighbour, and inclined sideways to reach the light.

When I am warm indoors, winter winds are revealed by the way the bare branches beyond my window sway silently against the sky. Stress builds lignin in a growing tree's fibres, strengthening them so that a wind-whipped tree will be tougher than its sheltered cousin; similarly a dry year, inscribed in a tree's heart, makes for slower growth and hard, dense wood. Each tree, then, is a record of difficulties faced and overcome: tempered, as we all are, by each passing year.