

**NATURE CURE – The Times Cheltenham Literary Festival.
Monday 10 October 2005**

Introductions by Richard Wakeford, *Countryside Trust*

Its my pleasure introduce you to Richard Mabey and Richard Kerridge here this afternoon and I will say the absolute minimum by way of introduction. Just to say that this event has been sponsored by the *Countryside Trust*, which was established by Marjorie Broadbent who was a doctor who lived lately in West Yorkshire. She left money to have a trust set up to encourage people to enjoy all aspects of the countryside and as a doctor and as someone who understood the spiritual contribution that the countryside can make to people's lives, I hope that she would approve of some of the topics that may be raised this afternoon. The speakers tell me that it is not so much they are going to have a ding dong of a debate and it certainly isn't going to be black and white but more likely to be different shades of green we will see how that goes for us and will look forward to the talks. I have to say a big thank you to Richard Kerridge for stepping in at the last minute. He isn't the person on the programme, but is strong in the field of eco-criticism and a founding chair of the UK branch for the Study of Literature and The Environment. Richard Mabey will be well known to you as well. But I think probably I am going to stop now and let them get on with it.

Richard Kerridge.

Thank you. Well I am sure Richard doesn't need any greater introduction, his work has been well known to you for the last 3 decades and what has always interested me in Richard's work is that I suppose it has a rather different emphasis from a lot of nature writing, that genre has been going through rather lean times until rather recently and it could almost be said that Richard Mabey kept it alive in Britain through the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s. But his work rather differs from the romantic tradition of nature writing, in that he has an abiding interest in the communal experience of nature, and if we think of some of his books about *The Common Ground*, about the whole idea of history and commons, the *Book of Nightingales*, which is a collection of myths and stories as well as scientific facts about that wonderful bird, and most impressively and memorably and monumentally of all, I think, *Floral Britannica*, a wonderful bulging reference book of British flowers and plants put together using contributions, stories, data, sent in by thousands of people, nearly 10,000 people I think. And what this points to all the time is, what I think is, a deep concern not only in the traditional romantic way about the solitary experience of nature, that very private sense of wonder and emotional release that comes from venturing alone into the wilds, but the way that communities experience and recognise and cherish nature. And I wonder Richard if you could say something about the relationship between those two kinds of writing because you actually do both don't you?

Richard Mabey.

Yes. I am wondering where that interest in the communal came from in me. And I think if one conventionally looks at a background mine wasn't one of traditional country dwellers, my parents came out of the east-end of London and fled the war in advance out to the Chilterns in the mid 1930s and they may have brought with them some egalitarian notions that perhaps thrive more in cities than they do in the countryside. Certainly when I was growing up there was an odd piece of what one might call 'class justice', that happened outside the back of our house, our estate of 1930s villas was built on the degraded land that had belonged to Graham Greens' uncle who had been disposed during the great property crisis of the 1920s and had to sell off, and half his land went for the building of the first great council estate in Berkhamsted and the other half for the building of a private estate and between the two was a fantastic no-man's land which was the old Greene's landscape park, which our local gang simply took over. It was a hundred acres of decaying giant red woods and cedars of Lebanon and collapsing walnut trees and invading thorn scrub, and I supposed we lived in it like the Aborigine's in a way that children today, god help us, aren't being allowed to do, we ran wild in that patch. Every holiday and in the spring and summer after school, we went out there, we lived in camps, we built fires and cooked our own food, we learnt how to churn milk by making up a system of our own, by strapping a milk bottle to the back wheel of a bicycle and whipping it round that. And I suppose at that point I absorbed two crucial things. Firstly, was an instinctive love of wildness, of that tangled edge to things that happens when they are simply left alone, but also that this was a shared experience, it never occurred to me that this land might actually belong to someone. It did actually, it happened to belong to a local smallholder who happened to be benign enough towards our juvenile antics to let us get on with them. It built in me a gut reaction to the land was that it 'belonged', and now I would put that in inverted commas, 'to all of us', and not to someone who had the outrage to say 'this is mine', though of course we weren't entirely pure in that respect. When the equivalent gang from the council estate used to stray into our bit of the field we had some pretty strong territorial disputes, but they were always resolved moderately peaceably. So, I think that that may be a route and I know that as that moment of childhood idle ended and I began exploring further a field I took with me that gut instinct, and it got me into a lot of trouble, straying hither and dither into barricaded estates, being seen off at gunpoint more times than I care to remember. But I would add two things to that. That experience does not seem to me to be in anyway incompatible with a personal, spiritual, or emotionally involvement with the natural world, what it is about is a hostility to a human appropriation of it, to one person or one group of people saying 'this is ours', be they scientists or landowners, whatever, saying, this is in our definition, we decide how it works, in that the one distasteful that perhaps comes out of the rural experience is that expression; 'you don't understand how we do things here', well sometimes we understand it well and its not always particularly tasteful. So, I think that's one thing, and I would add one other thing, and I think this was beginning also out in those Aboriginal moments in what we called The Field (it didn't have any other name, just with a capital 'T' and a capital 'F' as if

there was no other field in the entire world) that we shared that space with a lot of other creatures. We shared it, at the most elemental level, with an enormous herd of Highland cattle which we attempted to ride and do things that makes my face go white now, but we also shared it with barn owls, and I can remember very vividly that the territorial delineation of that field was precisely the same for us as it was with that barn owl. In the evenings we would watch tacking up the old walls which had once been surrounding the old tennis courts, turning left up by the rim of poplars that separated the lowland from the highland and its boundaries were ours as well. And so when Richard quite rightly says that I do celebrate the communal in nature I would extend the community, the community is the constituency, if you like, to include other species now. The great American writer, Garry Schneider, wrote a wonderful essay about the Commons and it was partly a refutation of that pessimistic, American Garrett Hardin, who said, you know, that private property was the only way to solve the problems of the planet and when you had communality in a system it only led to greed and over-consumption, he had never seen an English common that's for sure. But Garry Schneider had, and he just put a very brief definition of the commons at the beginning of this wonderful essay, he said the commons is a level of society in which other species are also members and I think that pretty nice.

Richard Kerridge.

I agree, though I think some world developments recently may seem to support Hardin's pessimism. If we think, for example, if we think what's happening to fisheries in the oceans, which have been called the global commons, Hardin's argument for people here who might not know it, essentially was that individuals will always make excessive demands on anything which is possessed in common, individuals will not respect the common nature of it, they will try to maximise it their own advantage, like a farmer on commons putting too many animals on and as a result the commons will be degraded, it will be spoiled. And that does seem to be what happens with a lot of global exploitation of natural resources doesn't it?

Richard Mabey.

I think on a global level where there is no comparable social relation between the people who are doing the exploitation, yes it does happen, but I think in common lands (perhaps lands is a more advisable thing to use here) throughout the planet, where people have engaged with each other and engaged with that parcel of land that they have agreed between themselves is common they do respect it. Its not always out of altruism but its out of some degree of self-interest, if they cease to respect it, if they trespass upon either the resources rights or their neighbour's rights they suffer themselves, they might even be 'duffed up', as they were in during the history of the English commons, they might find that the resource that they thought was unlimited isn't. In a contained system like that, and I think the difference with the sea is that it appears not to have the kind of circumference that the landed commons does, there are checks and balances. And I think one of the beautiful things about the common landed

system as it's been in Europe is that in it humans have to behave with the same kind of territorial sensitivity that animals do and I think that this is one of the reasons that commons have been so wonderfully rich for wildlife in this country. You will know this round here, the Cotswolds commons, despite the enormous public pressure they have are still some of the great areas for woodland and grassland wildlife in this part of the world.

Richard Kerridge.

But is there a tension here in that often I think the motive involved in the love of nature among birdwatchers or people who love certain landscapes isn't motive often quite private, a desire to escape the crowd?

Richard Mabey.

Um, yes. I don't quite see what the problem is there.

Richard Kerridge.

Well it's not necessarily a problem; it's a sort of tension or dialogue. I mean I find, for example, that a lot of work I have done is on recent American writing, because in America the genre has been much more popular, much better recognised, though in Britain it's longer history is very rich. But there a lot of it of course, is dominated by the concept of wilderness, you know, that is to say, great tracts of land which, although this is hardly ever absolutely true, nonetheless seem to bear no markings of human habitation, humans haven't made much difference, great forests, great deserts. And the characteristic in that drama, I suppose ever since Thoro(?), is a drama of lonely surgeon, who retreats into the wilderness, stays there for some length of time, has some sort of visionary experience connected with observation of nature and then usually returns like a prophet from the wilderness bringing the message. And that's true of Thoro himself, that's true of Edward Abby, Annie Dillard and many other writers. Now we have that tradition as well, and I think for us it's mainly the tradition of Wordsworth, but we have the other kind of nature writing in which you excel as the most recent example, that kind of nature writing which almost deliberately doesn't seek the very remote, which delights in the as you say the margins, the little glimpses of things that can occur even in the most urban settings, but of course from the point of view of the passionate environmental campaigner there can often be a tension between these two things, there can often be a tension between the desire to conserve wilderness and human communities. Now you'd be more sympathetic to the human communities I think.

Richard Mabey.

Yep. I think you have put your finger on what I think is one of the great and, I hope, exciting viewpoints in our relationship with nature in this country at the moment. I mean Richard is absolutely right about the two traditions in the writing of America which had a wilderness to refer to and Britain which never did or didn't for maybe 2000 years. Yet I will add as a rider to that the single most

extraordinary, luminous and reverting book in the whole nature writing canon on this side of the Atlantic was precisely a solitary quest. And it was J A Baker's book *The Peregrine* [Wonderful - Richard Kerridge], a book like no other that has been written, or probably will ever be written, about one man's quest for peregrines on the Essex coast during the 1960s in which he reinvents the English language to heights which one can scarcely credit. That is the most solitary quest of all, you know the man becoming the bird almost. But yes, both the tradition of English writing and of the English landscape, I mean a kind of symbiosis between the two that had necessarily to exist, is about the communal one and about the English landscape, the British landscape, being a cultural landscape. I was only a few weeks ago having a barney with a landscape architect about what to me, and in a sense I'm going to refute Richard's image of me as this communitarian at the moment, about the exciting, astonishingly exciting developments that are happening in East Anglia to rebuild the great fenland wildernesses that were there, 1000/2000 years ago. These are massive projects that dwarf the extents in which we normally think of nature conservation in this country, not the little 50 acre reserve but we are talking 100's of 1000's of acres of land in East Anglia that are now quite actively being prepared for return to wetland. Now, what can one say about this? I was arguing with the landscape architect saying we need this experience in this country, we have the most wonderful cultural landscapes in this country and no one is ever saying that the old hay meadows or the managed coppice woodland should be replaced by anything else at all, but what we miss precisely is what the Americans have; the opportunity to experience nature setting its own development programme, something which is beyond our management schedules that isn't in the biodiversity action plan. Nature has been at it for 31/2 billion years and every time we write one of these things we assume we know better, and I think it would be salutary for us to see patches of land in our island where nature had called the shots and it wasn't the local conservation volunteers, it wasn't English nature or any of these, it was the natural system itself, I think it would do us good.

Richard Kerridge.

Yes, I agree again. But I think when you look closely at them even those American 'wildernesses' many of them are precisely managed [yes – Richard Mabey] you know the Grizzly Bear have little radio collars or chips inserted so they can be mapped and so on. There is inevitably a very high degree of surveillance which goes with that management, which I think people often try to pretend isn't happening because we still want to think of nature as the infinite, as the unknown, the world that can surprise, don't we. Though of course, I suspect, that even the project that you describe would involve lots of micro-management, wouldn't it, if only to protect its boundaries, if only to protect from interference?

Richard Mabey.

Yes, I mean, absolutely. But I think micro-management is a very important qualification, it is the management programme of the beaver rather than the estate manager that one is talking about, nibbling away doing small scale stuff,

the big scale stuff is very much setting the boundaries and kick starting the whole project, and bringing it down to a small level. The thing which I repeatedly am unpopular about is challenging tree programmes as a way of establishing woods. Now I know that this is a splendid way of getting, children particularly, out into the countryside and feeling some kind of responsibility for it, but I am forced to ask those people who do it, what kind of mindset does it give to a child to believe that a tree is depend upon it for its existence? Do we really think we have replaced the tree's reproductive systems in our little publicity stunts about Trafalgar woods and things? It's all socially very good but it is ecologically ridiculous. And I profoundly believe that the minuses in terms of its effect on our psychology greatly outweigh the bonuses in terms of giving children the opportunity to get their hands into the earth. I think, again, that if small areas of land, getting bigger all the time perhaps, were set aside as demonstration plots, to make us re-remember the fact that woods and trees are entirely natural tufts of the earth, they do not have to have little holes dug for them and humans to insert seedlings to make them grow, they do not need to be staked and they do not need to be watered. England was cloaked by forest many thousands of years before foresters or tree planters were invented, and it is a lesson that would be good for us to learn again. And again it is a question of degree...

Richard Kerridge.

So we should relinquish control and accept the risk of what might happen?

Richard Mabey.

Yes. But I again I hope that I wouldn't be such an ideologue to say that you impose this upon people. But in areas where it is possible, the fields next to existing woods where there is a massive seed source, where perhaps you could plant a few landmark trees to say look these are signals to the public to that this land is dedicated to woodland but we are going to allow nature to turn it into woodland, it is not in our gift to do that. I think that would be a splendid thing.

Richard Kerridge.

This reminds me in a way, and I think it is consistent with your criticisms in *Nature Cure* of some television nature programmes, even David Attenborough's, because it seems to me that there again what you are objecting to is excessive control, a fear of the spontaneous, a desire to stage manage. And in that book, as some people will know, you have some quite severe things to say about that.

Richard Mabey.

Yes. At the fear of getting hounded off the stage, it is part of what I feel about television's attitude to nature, and I'm sure everyone here would agree, the over-emphasis on sensationalism, that dreadful Australian man who goes around whipping crocodiles and snakes into a frenzy so that he can show how macho he is in defending himself against them, long may we be spared this. But also the extraordinary obsession with technology in wildlife filming, you know, the greater close up, the slower slow motion, the endless repeats, every time one reads a

serious, or half serious review of a nature film the only terms of affection or criticism that are given for it are 'brilliant photography'. What other sphere of human study would we reduce to that? People have ideas and dreams about the natural world. All the stuff that we read, the literary tradition on both sides of the Atlantic that Richard has mentioned, are about the most extraordinary relationships of emotion and fantasy and myth and dread about wild creatures, none of this is reflected in the wildlife films we have, sure they are brilliant photographed but that is it. If one had a history program of which all you could say was that it was brilliant photography it would be regarded as a rather bad criticism and I would like to see some intelligence and artistry and some philosophy behind our wildlife and nature programs.

Richard Kerridge.

Do you think this is a sort of loss of nerve, a fear that the public has got tired of the subject and they have to be sensational in order to whip up interest in it again?

Richard Mabey.

I think this is the response you would get from the program planners, who would say we can not get American money unless we have 16 predator, you know, big cat - antelope chases, the argument here is the same as in all television, an assumption that the program planners know what the public want. On occasions where real personal intelligence has gone into documentary filmmaking, and I would just off the top of my head think of Simon Chandler's *Landscape and Memory*, and that wonderful series on Venice by Francesco da Mosto, which I think blew ever other English-based series on travel out of the water, you can see that the public is profoundly prepared to accept intelligence and quality in nature documentaries. And, you know, again I am not so much saying that the nature programs are bad, that they are simply paltry, they underestimate the enormity of the debate about nature that is going on in our culture at the moment.

Richard Kerridge.

Yes. And I suppose it is partly because it is very hard to translate real observation of the natural world into the timescale of the dramatic plot that we are used to in television programs. Which is perhaps why, as has been said, they focus so much on sex and violence in the animal world. And I think that leads to a larger and more urgent question, Robert McFarland writing in *The Guardian* a few weeks ago suggested that novelists and poets and writers and all kinds and perhaps artists of all kinds have failed so far to do nothing much with climate change and global warming. That this has been recognised by many, by scientists, by some politicians even by our own prime minister at least nominally, this has been recognised as the most dangerous threat that we face more dangerous, according to some, than terrorism and yet artistic representations of it are very few and far between. There is a feeling really that all the artistic media have barely begun to engage with this. Is that partly because of difficulties with representing it, or is it a fear of the subject, or what do you think?

Richard Mabey.

I think it may be all those things, but I think it may be most fundamentally a problem about the point of view. I don't see how one could do a really serious confrontational account of global warming if it were not from the planet's point of view rather than ours, because it is the planet's crisis and not just ours. And at this moment and as it has looked for some years now, the planet regards humans as its pest species and it is doing its best to cull us. The last 9 months have seen a series of what climate scientists call 'extreme events', the Asian tsunami, two of the biggest hurricanes ever seen in the southern American states and now the Kashmir earthquake. Earthquakes aren't usually discussed when it comes to climate change but they were there on the agenda when climate scientists told us of what would happen, when you think about it, the warming of the earth isn't just the warming of the earth's atmosphere, it is the warming of the entire earth's surface and that promotes extremities such as earthquake events. So what we are now reaping you cannot now make a judgement about the causes of any one single event but taken together they are beginning to exactly resemble the patterns of more extreme events more closely compacted together that the scientists had told us was going to happen when they first starting talking about global warming 10 years ago. And how do you begin to talk about this? How do you begin to say that as well as the absolutely splendid efforts to aid people in disaster zones at the moment, we should be perhaps besieging today Gordon Brown's house and asking him why he made that absolutely outrageous statement two weeks ago suggesting that petroleum supplies should be massively increased in order to bring the price down.

Richard Kerridge.

That captures perfectly the politicians' fear of the subject and reminds of the way the government was intimidated by those fuel protests a few years ago into abandoning even the very small measures they had started. But in terms of how writers might represent this, how writers might begin to do something with it, I suppose I begin to wonder whether a lot of the traditional nature writing, the richest nature writing that we have, the whole pastoral tradition may be worse than not very helpful, it may actually be harmful, because in that tradition there is a very deep belief that nature will always be there, that the natural world will always be something that we can turn to for consolation. And of course in that pastoral tradition it nearly always involves stories about someone who flees the city, who has suffered some sort of stress or danger in the city and finds in the countryside or in closeness to nature, comfort, peace or self-discovery. Now its not that one wants to reject or renounce that tradition, that tradition has in many ways given rise to environmentalism, there are a lot of continuities between the old pastoral traditions and the new environmentalism but there have to be differences as well as and I think those differences are what writers are finding it hard to grasp. Though I do think that you've begun to do so in *Nature Cure* in the way that, of course what you are doing there is writing about it in a quite personal way about your own consolation in the natural world after a period of depression,

and moving I think between the personal significance, that for example, the swifts have for you – early on in that book there is an account of finding a fledgling swift that can't fly, finding it on the attic floor and launching it out of the window and the joy that comes when the swift is able to fly – but also then, in a very tentative way, beginning to imagine a perspective that has to be the swifts own, because it is not a perspective that humans could share, no one could follow the swift on its migratory journey, the distances that it crosses, the perspectives that it has. So you do begin to imagine that in literary fashion and I wonder if you think that global warming requires more of that kind of writing.

Richard Mabey.

I think that I wouldn't say that kind of writing could ever replace the kind of writing that Robert MacFarland was saying is absent, you know, a direct creative engagement with the implications of what this is for us and for the planet. The only book which I know which has done that (and it's not really a literary book even though it is beautifully written) is Bill McKibben's book *The End of Nature*, written about 12 years ago in America. A book which suggested that our very understanding of nature as a separate state from us, a thing against which we measured ourselves either out superiority or our inferiority but at least our difference had been destroyed because every single part of nature, because of climate change was now being directly by the things that we did, it was now inescapably our puppet. This is a very profound observation which I do think is untrue, I go back to the very first observation that I had in the field about the essential energy of wildness and I am still enough of an optimist to think that even though the human species is definitely in for a rough ride in the next 50 years or so nature is exuberant and creative and devious enough to be able to do a few unexpected things because of its essential wildness. And by wildness I do not mean wilderness I mean the fact that elm leaves, as Annie Dillard said, have so many perforations around the edge and nobody knows, and the fact that species of moths have on them hieroglyphics that moth experts call the moth after you know the Hebrew character moth, why isn't there an Iranian character moth? Are we being told that that inscription on the back on the moth is essential to its survival? I don't think so. I think that in nature there is an inbuilt blind desire for exuberance and experiment and energy, and I hope that will be thing that if we are prepared to meet it will see us through the crisis. But for a writer it is a profoundly difficult balancing act as Richard has quite rightly said, a collection of my essays a few years ago was once fairly well hammered by the environment critic of *The Independent* who likened them to postcards from Hiroshima, the implication being that while the world was beginning to burn I was looking for pretty things to write home about and there is a element of truth in that. But increasingly, even though I was very hurt at the time and felt that he had missed what I was trying to do, I would in a sense defend it and say that part of the duty of the writer is to join a revelation of the things that are in crisis with an exposure of nature's capacity if only we would allow it to help us to heal it and in *Nature Cure* I try this on several occasions. There is a passage near the end of the book, which is in a sense a postcard from Norfolk's Hiroshima, where

instead of going down into my favourite kind of fens and wild places I walk in exactly the opposite direction up on to the grain plateau which is the devastated and ecologically degraded area of central East Anglia that the agriculturalists call 'England's bread basket'.

Richard Mabey reads from *Nature Cure*.

This is my postcard from the wastelands: '...so for a change one day I turn north from the house away from the valley fens and up to the edge of Norfolk's grain plateau its landscape taken to its economic limit, the fields stretch from lane edge to horizon dwarfing the hedges and copses into irrelevant doodles, the grain silos overtop the churches. The sugar beat harvest has started early and the huge machines are chopping through the fields like galleons trailing wakes of gulls. For a few weeks weeds and stubble will be the field crops, the sharp straw seems absorbent as full of mirages as a heat haze, birds materialise from seemingly blank spaces, a flock of goldfinches erupts from about 20 yards in front of me, a puff of sequins and chaff. I first see the sparrow hawk as not much more than a shadowy thickening of the air, it is a female, fallow brown, gliding impossibly slowly only a yard or so above the fallows, her wings have the slightest upward tilt like a Harrier, her head is bowed, glaring, implacable, it is as if she is drawing a scalpel above the field opening its skin for the slightest tremor of life beneath. In Spain, they call the link between the two dancers, that electrifying link, the *doende*(?), that is the magnetic pull this sparrow hawk has with the field. She draws it into tension, into attention, the wagtail's nerve breaks first from nowhere like the goldfinches half a dozen birds spring up and pursue the hawk, they move like the waving tail of a Chinese dragon, a cloud of larks erupts ahead of it. Suddenly the hawk has had enough and in a flourish seems to unfold, it changes shape, turns bulky and furious and correas away to the east. Walking up here today is like gazing into a crystal ball echoes of ancient landscapes surface from the flats like overlooked birds, I pass Nordle corner, Folly Lane inscrutable mementos of some older order in the fields. Then just before dusk I see half a dozen birds darting low over the bank of the Hall's old park the Gold Plover, Norfolk's Whistling Plover are back, about 50 birds are feeding with Lapwings in the winter wheat. Through my glasses they look as tranquil as doves but in flight they are wild and tremulous, they scramble repeatedly into dark and reckless packs, as if methodical feeding were just too mundane for birds that have flown here all the way from the tundra. It was a revelation, and I began going up to the fields most days at last light. For a few weeks before the wheat grew too tall there were birds everywhere, I saw more Sparrow Hawks working the stubbles, sometimes two at once, and immense flocks of Fieldfares every bird pointing and edging in the same direction, heads held high, chests out, onwards, onwards. But the Plovers were more elusive, mostly they were in the distance or high above me, slicing through the loping lap winds like arrow shards. A tiny bit of me wished they weren't here making excuses for these spend thrift arable wastes but that is the benediction of the wild to see opportunity in the briefest of openings, the narrowest of windows. Tomorrow the fields would be clotted with overgrown cash crops, today they were dancing.'

Thank you.

Richard Kerridge.

Before we have questions from the floor I just wanted to mention Richard's recent book *Fencing Paradise* which is a book partly, I suppose, about the Eden Project in Cornwall, and that is its starting point and its frame. It is a book about the idea of Eden, its history, its implications, perhaps in some ways the harm it can do as well in its idealisation of nature and repeated narrative of loss of perfection and exile. But just as a final point to you I wondered whether in writing about the Eden Project and writing about it with great admiration you are a bit more reconciled than you were in *Nature Cure* about this idea of simulating nature and making stage effects, because that is what the Eden project does.

Richard Mabey.

Reconciled I'm not sure. The Eden Project invited me to do a piece of creative writing for them in the way that they invite artists down there, they said come down and write something so I did. And it's partly a kind of travelogue of some weeks spent down there which spark off all kinds of reflection, on the myth of the garden of Eden itself and how it's haunted us down through several thousand years, and the myths of plants in general, but most of it is about what its title says. About the idea of *Fencing Paradise* and about whether Eden, and as Richard said I think it is a fun theatre, they call it the theatre of people and plants, but whether the model that it is giving us of society of a perfectly ecological unit contained in a bubble is what we are all going to live and if so what is the purpose of what is outside the bubble. That is the kind of question I ask in it and again it's a book about the wild. At the very end my major criticism of Eden is that it says it's a theatre of people and plants but in fact the plants are very much in second position, these are the planets that humans have found useful. There is not an exhibit dedicated to the plankton that keep the oceans going and which may be our major help in combating climate change, nothing about the unnamed micorisa fungi that help our trees to grow. It's a book which is about economically useful plants, plants which humans decide and believe to be useful, even in our great ignorance we think that we have the finalist and we don't.

Richard Kerridge.

So are you saying are you saying that part of the problem is with our idea of the human self in that we not really able to see ourselves thoroughly in ecological terms, that is as inseparable from an eco-system which nourishes us and which we nourish, so that you might even begin to think of the role mitochondria and other bugs in the human body?

Richard Mabey.

Well absolutely. As a distinguished college in the states said, you have not begun to take ecology seriously until you start talking about the conservation of bacteria. But yes, I think what I am saying is that we do have to take on board, both practically and ethically, is the fact that we are members of planetary

community, Richard started this session with an idea of communality and perhaps the way to end it, we are all in this together.

Richard Kerridge.

Good. Shall we have some questions from the floor?

Questioner.

Richard, thank you very much for all that. Your account of your childhood upbringing in Berkhamsted raised great evocations of *Bevis: The Story of a Boy*, Richard Jeffries' great book. It ought to be better known, it ought to be republished, you should use influence on someone, the Folio society or whoever to produce a new edition with a good introduction by yourself. What do you think of *Bevis: The Story of a Boy*?

Richard Mabey.

Well, yes I am all for the re-publishing of almost everything. The market for books is very hard at the moment, Geoffrey's is certainly not fashionable, and I have to say that even though he was the single greatest inspiration when I was writing as a teenager I find his melancholy a little bit overpowering these days, may be I'm not as much of a fan as I once was, so perhaps I'm not the best person to write an introduction on *Bevis*. But absolutely, all this stuff should be coming back into print and believe me it's not for want of a small number of us trying very hard.

Questioner.

Richard on your journey from your childhood home in *Nature Cure* you took as a companion John Clare, the majority of the books were John Clare's books could you share with us what John Clare means to you?

Richard Mabey.

So many things. John Clare was a commoner; I think that would embrace many of things that I feel about him. He was a man without privilege in social terms but with the most profound gift for language, he was a man who was prepared to write about the other organisms he shared the planet with from their level. Anyone who is familiar of his sequence of nest poetry, Nightingale nests and many of the others, will know in them the image of Clare in there down on the ground at the level of the bird he is writing about, describing its own plumage in terms of the colours of his own clothing. It would be facile to say that he was identifying with the bird, he was not, he knew it was a nightingale and he was a human, he had the gift of poetic language, it had the gift of song, but he knew that they shared Emonsale's(?) heath together up in Northamptonshire. He was writing out of solidarity with the bird if you like. And so many of his poems are astonishing battle hymns against enclosure, remembrances and the moors are fantastically powerful pieces of writing composed on behalf of the entire community, the humans and the land itself. There are two of his poems which are written in the voice of a piece of land, extraordinary things in which he speaks

of the land's experience as though it had a voice itself, he gives it a voice. That was part of his vision of the poet's role, to sing the song of nature for it in a way that we could hear. Those are some of the things that make him touch me.

Questioner.

I would like to ask why there is not more writing about global warming and those sorts of issues. I mean they are huge and interconnected. [But I remember way back in 1950 and 1960 ? saying that there has been a colossal?] The other problem I think is that there is a sort of snootiness about science fiction and I don't know what we do about that.

Richard Kerridge.

May I take this one? It is true a lot of science fiction has begun to tackle this subject and as one might expect sooner than realistic fiction, one might mention particularly the novels of Kim Stanley Robinson, I don't know if its snootiness exactly. I suppose one thing that I've sometimes imagined would be some sort of hybrid between science fiction and the realistic novel that gave sufficient complexity of human point of view alongside the imaginary world, scientific, futuristic element. That might be something that might begin to happen.

Richard Mabey.

Yes. I think that science fiction is the one area in which it has happened, but the problem with science fiction is that it is seen as a sort of side-step, you know, we can't really deal with it in the real world so we deal with it in the imaginary and may be that isn't enough at the moment.

Questioner.

This is an observation. An observation that is to do with the idea that somehow nature writers here have ignored the whole question of global warming and so on I think there are some reasons for this, I would just like to offer some ideas. I am interested in Richard's idea of communalism which I am in sympathy for, but I think what is ignored in a great deal of writing about nature in Britain is a fear of getting involved in the politics of the thing. Now what we have seen here is the absolute triumph of capitalism and the trashing of communalism and co-operativism and so as we now accept and we are told by the 3 major political parties that we must accept the export of capital, we are also encouraged to fear and dread the import of persons and you can see a parallel in nature with this, the dread of Canada geese, the dread of Sanda's(?) in the rivers, the dread of grey squirrels and so on. And faced with the import of people in return for the export of capital we don't want to know this and this may be bound up with an kind of un-stated fear that if we get loads of Indians or loads of Pakistani's or whoever here they won't understand our nature they won't understand our history of nature.

Richard Kerridge.

Well it is certainly true that nature writing has had a rather dark history in that way and particularly in the inter-war period which was a time when nature writing was extremely popular and there was a great deal of it as a any second-hand bookshop will show you. But it was also a time, I think, when it was identified with a very fearful rejection of modernity and that did often involve a sort of mythical idea of England that was hostile to cosmopolitanism, hostile to immigrants and perhaps nowhere more so than Henry Williamson, who was perhaps the greatest nature writer of that period, who did become a member of Mosley's fascist party, largely because, I think, of his absolute horror of the idea of another war with Germany. But nevertheless I think that nature writing and love of the country has taken so uncomfortable turns at times.

Richard Mabey.

No I'd agreed. Right across Europe in the 1930s the literature of, as it was called, 'Blood and Soil' was very ambivalent and I think that is a warning for the discipline that one needs about inclusivity and again, community. Much of this is solved if one begins to think not in terms of self and isolated partial groups but in terms of systems and communities.

Richard Kerridge.

Yes. In an antidote to Williamson one might think of George Orwell's essay on *The Common Toad*, [Richard Mabey: Yes] which for those people who don't know it, in which his great point is in a sense of democratic nature of an experience which there for everybody you don't have to pay for it.

Questioner.

I am independent wildlife film make and going back to your comments about sensationalist wildlife television programming I completely and utterly agree and the vast majority of producers both within big corporations and smaller independent units they all want to make more conservation type programming but the general consensus is that the commissioners above them are not willing to commission such programs because they feel that the public do not want to come home after work and watch a program that is more difficult to view more challenging, that doesn't give them happy fluffy pictures. I guess I have a two fold question. One, why do you think that people can stomach it more in writing terms, say you write quite often for the BBC wildlife magazine, so why can people cope with it in a written sense more than visual or moving sense. And also how do you think that the public and wildlife/nature writers can encourage the powers that be and the public to raise their voices so that the commissioners can give the public more credit that they might want to know about these things?

Richard Mabey.

I wish I knew the answer to the second one. I personally don't believe that given the chance would reject it. It might be minority interest rather than the large majority that television is repeatedly seeking to ensnare, but I am absolutely certain if in some way the wall could be breached that they would find, you know,

an indigenous public interest in this that is as great as it is in many other things. I have to say that this may sound like a special pleading but it's not, the most remarkable nature documentary which I ever saw on British television was an Islamic one about 10 years ago, it was a film about lava, the lava from a volcano. It had no commentary, it was simply an exploration of the extraordinariness of the matter, about how lava flowed, of the geometric and chaotic shapes that it made, about how it set and moved about the surface of the earth. It was intoxicatingly beautiful and very meaningful because it said something about the stuff that is at the root of everything we're talking about.

Richard Kerridge.

I think we will have to finish there, I am sorry I know there are more questions than we have answers for. Just to add one little to that very good question which I think is one of the most pertinent we've heard, I suppose that I would perhaps take hope from what I think is the subtlety and complexity of interest that people have in the natural world all the time and that you meet in all sorts of ways, not only amongst amateur hobbyists, bird-watchers, ramblers, but also in the whole sub-culture of, if you like, amateur writing about natural history at local societies, people who come on day-courses and things like that. It seems like there is a huge public for something much more sophisticated and subtle and I think that the problem is that media managers are too frightened and unwilling to give people enough credit for that. I'm afraid we could say a lot more but we ought to finish here.

Richard Wakeford

Well Richard and Richard thank you very much, you've given me something personally to think about in the job that I do in terms of whether our approach to commons here can say anything about the way in which we tackle global warming regarding the earth's climate as the common. And I'm not quite sure whether we are the guys in the owner-occupied land and whether the Americans are from the council estate or whatever it is, but whether the ways in which we have managed commons in history can teach us something about the way we solve the problems facing the world today. That is something that certainly struck a cord with me this afternoon. All of you will have had your own thoughts and inspirations this afternoon and I'd like you to join with me in saying thank you to Richard and Richard.