

BOOK MARK

FRANK FRASER DARLING: *WILDERNESS AND PLENTY* (THE REITH LECTURES)

by Margaret Elphinstone



'If I were asked to interpret briefly what I mean by Wilderness and Plenty I would reply: population, pollution and the planet's generosity – meaning the history of man and the effect he has had, and is having, on the economy of nature since he appeared on the planet.'

Thus Frank Fraser Darling began his Reith lectures on BBC radio in

1969. His measured delivery and the scientific reasonableness of his argument, coming over the air waves into our familiar sitting rooms, belied the electrifying nature of what he had to say. He told us, without evasion or compromise, that our civilisation was causing environmental decline so severe that it would, unless drastic action were taken, destroy the living planet we inhabited, and ourselves with it.

Darling was not the first to express such views, but their broadcast in the Reith Lectures gave them new prominence and authority. Once I'd heard Darling's exposition of the effect man [sic] was having on the 'economy of nature' there was no going back to a state of ignorance. The apparently normal and unchanging world of my childhood was in fact a moment in history – indeed, probably a moment near the end of history – when the effects of exploiting wilderness were coming to a head.

I knew that changes were necessary. 1968 had been the year of student protest: we supported civil rights and gender equality; we were against the Vietnam War, South African apartheid and nuclear warheads. Along with countless others, I interpreted Darling's lectures solely as a call to action. I believed that as a species we could do something about the situation we had created. It eluded me that Darling had not expressed any such certainty. If anyone had told me that forty-three years later the situation would have grown exponentially worse in precisely the ways Darling predicted, I would have been horrified. Darling, if he'd lived to see it, would, I suspect, have been far less surprised.

The wilderness, Darling argued, is manifestly no longer limitless. Not only is there nowhere left to go, but the remaining wilderness may not be vast enough to recover from human depredation. Population explosion, with its concomitant problems of pollution and environmental damage, is the greatest problem facing the human species, and the earth it lives on. Darling was not afraid of stating uncomfortable truths. In his first lecture he links the introduction of preventative medicine to increased squalor

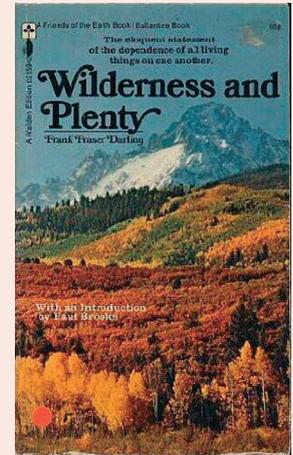
and deprivation. As mortality rates fall, population outstrips food supply leading to political unrest. He makes oblique reference to the Catholic Church in the fifth lecture – 'Religion has often wished to imply that whether desired or not, reproduction should be accepted as a consequence [of sexual intercourse] not to be hindered.' Not only were his analyses politically controversial, but they took the debate into a different sphere, suggesting that

the roots of the problem might lie in the limitations of the human mind. He couldn't foresee everything; for example he couldn't have known that climate change and civil war would undermine the promises of conservation in Africa, although he acknowledges that the displacement of peoples to create national parks in Congo is 'a mistake'.

Darling's insights come not only from his scientific training but from his own experience of belonging to the land. His books express deep-rooted affinity with the Highlands and Islands, which informs his empathy with others, like the verdurers of the New Forest (in lecture 5), who uphold their land with knowledgeable passion in the face of external exploitation and well-intentioned intervention. Darling eschews sentimentality, insisting upon intellectual rigour. He stresses the necessity for a new science: 'We must be guided constantly by the discipline of ecological observation, otherwise we are in danger of being rather silly.' But ecology is also something more: 'A less anthropocentric philosophy of restraint, of identification with, rather than exclusion from, nature is developing its own ethic of love.' Throughout the lectures he returns to the ethical, aesthetic and spiritual aspects of man's connection to the wilderness. In the forty-three years since he spoke, this aspect of his message has become more crucial than ever. It has become all too clear that neither reason alone, nor science, nor politics, will stop the careering juggernaut of environmental destruction, fuelled as it is by greed, vested interest, and fear of the truth. Darling knew that, and in the second lecture he expresses it in a splendid metaphor:

'Government and local authorities have the legislation enabling them to tackle dereliction, but in fact most are log-rolling, acting fragmentarily with a maximum of show, rather like funeral horses trained to trot magnificently at a pace slower than a walk.'

Fraser Darling was pessimistic about the future. To his



informed eye the explosion of human population, and the exploitation and depletion of wilderness, were already out of control. He was one of many voices warning what would happen if immediate measures were not taken. My youthful response was to desire at once to implement those measures. I'm now almost the age that Darling was when he gave the Reith lectures. Like Darling in 1969, I've lived long enough to know that humanity cannot divert the course of history, prevent the collapse of a civilisation, or safeguard an endangered planet. In 1969, with my own future before me, I couldn't take on board what Darling meant when he said 'This always troubles me, the necessity of expressing faith which at bottom I do not feel.'

In the succeeding forty-three years I have observed the voices of warning fall silent in popular media. I have heard implausible faith repeatedly expressed. Meanwhile the world's wilderness has been depleted far beyond what Darling postulated as hope of recovery. I understand now that Darling's 'qualified pessimism' contained a more profound reality: that one must face the hard truth and continue to live in one's own

place as lovingly as one can. The lectures conclude:

'The near landscape is valuable and lovable because of its nearness, not something to be disregarded and shrugged off; it is where children are reared and what they take away in their minds to their long future. What ground could be more hallowed?'

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Wilderness and Plenty (The Reith Lectures)

by Frank Fraser Darling. BBC Books, 1970.

(The cover image overleaf is from the Ballantyne Books, 1971 version.)

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