

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

The background features a series of overlapping, curved, light gray lines that create a sense of depth and movement, resembling the pages of an open book or a stylized landscape. A dark gray, semi-transparent shape on the left side suggests the spine of a book.

Gathering The Water

Robert Edric

Gathering
the Water

ROBERT EDRIC



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For Hilary Aikman

Also by Robert Edric

WINTER GARDEN

A NEW ICE AGE

A LUNAR ECLIPSE

IN THE DAYS OF THE AMERICAN MUSEUM

THE BROKEN LANDS

HALLOWED GROUND

THE EARTH MADE OF GLASS

ELYSIUM

IN DESOLATE HEAVEN

THE SWORD CABINET

THE BOOK OF THE HEATHEN

PEACETIME

CRADLE SONG

SIREN SONG

SWAN SONG

The appointment was announced yesterday of Mr Charles Weightman, formerly of the Hampshire Water Company, to act as overseer to the draining of the Forge Valley. The Forge Valley Reservoir has been three years in preparation, and its dam was completed in April of this year. It is anticipated that fully another half year will elapse before the greater effects of the scheme become apparent and its benefits reaped. It is expected that Mr Weightman will lodge in the district, better able there to account for any business arising in connection with the removal of the inhabitants and the gathering of the water.

Leeds Intelligencer

Thursday, 27 October 1848

I was surprised upon my arrival here to find so many of the dwellings still inhabited. Surprised, too, and disappointed, to see so great a number of buildings where I had expected only a few, and those empty and awaiting the water. To hear the Board men speak, you might think I had been bound for a wilderness of unmapped moor crying out only for the civilizing of their scheme. To hear those men speak, you might think I had been handed the crown and sceptre of a fabulous kingdom, as yet unexplored, and over which I exercised sole and absolute dominion. I see now, looking about me, why they might have encouraged me in such a belief.

From where I stand I can see thirty smoking chimneys – signifying what? A hundred, two hundred people, where I had anticipated only a resentful and stubborn handful. The smoke from the stacks seldom rises more than a few feet before being drawn off and dispersed by the constant winds which are a chronic feature of the region.

Study the appearance of the remaining specimens, they told me. See how they are moulded by those cold winds just as an exposed tree might be twisted and stunted by them. And from what little I have so far seen of these people – their latest misfortune notwithstanding – they are undoubtedly formed in constant expectation of some hardship or other, of which, judging by the history and the stark, sour look of the place, there is a constant and never-ending supply.

It is a sooty smoke, the sign of poor or mixed fuel, fine and pale one moment, and then billowing and filled with black the next, with glowing embers rising and vanishing as they are caught in the currents of air.

An hour of daylight remained to me upon my arrival, during which I waited for the carter with my cases. He came two hours after darkness, seemingly unconcerned by the length of his return journey or by the impenetrable night through which he would make it. I asked him if he were a local man, or if he knew of anyone close by with whom he might stay, but he shook his head to both questions. It did not occur to me to offer him the use of my own ample lodgings.

He left me, and carrying no light he was quickly lost to the darkness.

I looked up, and because the moon was full and close, I saw clearly Cain and his thorns. The Fish glittered on the horizon, and the Bear sat directly over Caurus, whose presence I felt to my bones.

With regard to warmth and comfort there was little to choose between indoors and out. I stamped and banged around the empty house as though I were a small crowd.

This writing is thirty minutes' work, and I wish only that I were more wearied by it and by my long journey and better able to sleep.

My first visitor came today. It has been a clear, fine day, but rather than begin my outdoor work, I have been occupied in unpacking and investigating further my new home. I cannot question why the house was chosen for me – the views from its front are extensive – but a man used to the diversions and amenities of city living or a more sociable existence might wish for a better appointed place.

You are chosen in part for your tact and adaptability, I was told, already swollen with flattery and gilded with distant authority.

My visitor came up the hillside and stopped in front of the house, where the entrance gate once stood. He had with him four rangy hounds, which settled themselves around him where he waited. I had seen him coming from a great distance because of the slope. He neither knocked nor called, and it occurred to me that he had come believing the house still to be empty. I had been looking out all morning for my first delegation, the salvo of my opening speech – Caesar-like in its tact – long since primed.

After several minutes, and because my visitor showed no sign of either leaving or approaching closer, I went out to him.

I introduced myself, and was about to say more when he interrupted me and said he knew already why I was there. The largest of his dogs bared its teeth and growled at me. He silenced it with a word. Slaver hung in strings from the creature's mouth.

'Then you have been waiting for me,' I said boldly, hoping to learn more by this directness than by other means. Here, I guessed, was a messenger, whose knowledge of me might spread like a fire.

'I have come to show you something,' he said, each word emphatically pronounced. I saw then that his own careful preparations had also been made. Much of his face was hidden by his beard, and by the grey side-whiskers which grew unchecked across his cheeks.

'Show me what?' I had been told to expect land claims and property deeds thrust in my face, disputed mining and grazing rights, rights of forage and turbage. But this man had none of those things. He took several paces back from me. 'I'm a very busy man,' I said. 'As I'm sure you can appreciate.'

'We are all busy men here,' he said. If he was insulted by my remark then he was little dissuaded by it, and he continued to savour the moment of his coming revelation.

He proceeded to take off his boots. He wore nothing beneath them and his shins and feet were as dark and scarred as his hands. He laid his boots on the wall and came closer to me, grinning broadly.

Then he shouted at me – a cry which surprised me – and pointed down at his feet with both hands. 'Look! Look!' he shouted, stepping from the grass on to the stone slabs of the path. The closest of his dogs shied away from him. At first I could see

nothing, but then he raised one foot, grabbed it in both hands and pulled wide his toes. 'Raise your flood as high as you like, for I shall not drown,' he shouted.

'What in God's name are you talking about?' I said, and for the first time I felt myself threatened by his presence.

'Your flood, your water. I shall not drown. Look! Look!' He nodded to the foot he still held. 'See.' And he pulled his toes even further apart, revealing the membrane which stretched between them and joined them like the foot of a giant frog. And seeing my surprise at this – though in truth it was surprise more at the manner of the revelation than the thing itself, and as much at the animal-like stripes of clean and dirty skin as at the webbing – he lowered the one foot and raised the other to reveal the same thing there.

'What?' I said, wanting to let him know that I was not so impressed as he had hoped. 'What do you want me to say? It surely isn't such a rare occurrence.'

But he refused to be pricked into defeat. 'I shall swim,' he shouted. 'Your water shall come and I shall carry on living here, swimming from place to place just as easily as a man might now walk.' There was by then an excessive wetness on his lips.

'But everything here, all these places, will eventually be beneath the water. How will you swim to them? The whole of the land will be changed. There will be nowhere to swim to.'

'I shall swim *down* to them. I shall swim on top of the water and I shall swim *beneath* it.' He lowered his foot and swung his arms as he spoke. 'My hands also,' he shouted, thrusting his hands at me, palm up, palm down.

'What of them?'

'They too were once connected in the same fashion, but were cut by a surgeon when I was a boy.'

I almost laughed at the dry note of distant regret in his voice.

'Then stay and swim,' I said to this frog-man.

'I shall.'

'And what will you live on? Fish?'

The question stopped him. 'Will there be *fish* in the new sea?'

I did not know. Somewhere in the bundles of unread reports and assessments I had brought with me there would be something said about fish.

'Of course there will be fish,' I told him.

'Then I shall live off them.' He chewed the air.

I turned and left him, remarking on the business I had yet to attend to, and he, in turn, went back to the wall and put on his boots. He went down the hillside in a zig-zag, as though uncertain of the route he wanted to take, of where he might perhaps locate the first of the rising water. And one by one, because even in those untethered lives an order existed, the dogs rose from the grass and walked behind him.

As I was about to re-enter the house I looked beyond it to the crest of the hill and saw there someone else silhouetted against the growing light. I shielded my eyes, and as I looked more closely this single watcher divided and became two, and I saw that

these two were women. I saw by their movement and by the arms still held between them that one had been holding the other and that now this second figure was drawing away from the first. Thus separated, they stood motionless and looked down at me. I raised my hand to them, but received no acknowledgement. I considered climbing the short distance towards them, but some instinct – something, perhaps, connected to the way they still stood, apart and yet within reach of each other; the way the arms of one still seemed protectively half raised towards the other – kept me where I stood.

We observed each other like this for a short while, after which the taller of the two women pulled the other back to her, held her by her shoulders and then turned her away from me.

I have chosen the largest of the downstairs rooms for my workplace. Three heavy tables gathered in from the rest of the house will serve for my charts and plans. The fire is already laid and burning. Fires here are kept alight continuously throughout the winter, of which autumn and spring are lesser parts, and from which, seemingly, the summer is no more than a brief and unreliable reprieve.

It is a damp room, but I hope that the fire and the passage of air will keep this at bay and away from my papers. None of the Board men knew for certain how long the house had been standing empty, only that it had once belonged to a landlord here in the middle realm of the valley and that it had been quickly given up by him at their first offer of payment. I have with me the precise equations by which these sums were calculated and then pared down until the bones of double-sided greed lay exposed. I can see what a fortune it must have seemed to the landlord, what a bargain to those men of the Board.

The room has other advantages. From its two windows I have a view over the width of the valley along almost half its length. Except, that is, on days such as today, when the rising mist or falling cloud obscures everything but the upper or lower slopes.

My charts and instruments are already spread around the tables in the hope that they will deflect all enquiries and demands. The map entrusted to me showing the final extent of the water I will keep well hidden until the reality of the changes outside is all too apparent to be ignored.

There is a single picture left hanging in the house, a poor print of a martyred saint – the designation does not say which – resembling, as I imagine all martyred saints must, martyred Christ himself, and holding in his hands a cross and a bird, which, in the poor light, might – not inappropriately – easily be mistaken for a plump fish.

There is no water piped into the house, but a short distance away is a clean and reliable spring, boxed in with slabs of slate, and with a trough set into the slope beneath it in which the water settles clear.

I was told that I would be met upon my arrival, or shortly afterwards, by another of the Board's employees, a bailiff called Ellis, but the man has not yet made himself known to me.

Earlier, I spent an hour with a rusted saw levelling the uneven legs of the tables, but everywhere I lay my hand there remains imbalance.

The smoke from my resurrected fire later dislodged some soot, which fell in the afternoon and laid its fine black dust over everything I had set out.

It is six months since the completion of the dam, and two since the first of its sluices was closed. The plans of the structure make it appear far grander than it actually is. Elsewhere the Board might incorporate some ornamentation into its architecture – some memorial to a founder member, a nod at passing fashion – but here there is nothing, not even the small towers by which most of its other dams are anchored to their shores.

I cannot see the structure from my lodgings, but I have already walked to the scarp overlooking it. Several dwellings and a small mill were demolished to make way for it, and other buildings now stand close by: those to be drowned by it, and those to stand abandoned in its shadow.

The water, when fully collected, will rise to half the height of the dam. The outer wall is sheer, faced with gritstone blocks, already darkening. The inner wall, that to be submerged, is raised in a gradual curve. Here, too, it is faced, but the blocks are less precisely arranged. The centre of the dam is of rubble fill and poured lime. Again unlike dams elsewhere, there is no walkway along the top of the structure, only the exposed rim left unsecured against the elements. The surface is broad enough, and the blocks set level enough for a man to lead a horse across, but there is no connecting road or path at either side, only the exposed rock of the blasted hillside.

The valley downriver runs in a series of overgrown gorges until the water reaches its mother flow. By contrast, the land above the dam is broad and open. Downriver, the dwellings and mills are of necessity tightly gathered, surrounded by woodlands and small pastures, whereas upriver the dwellings are scattered and the only cultivated land is either taken in close by them or alongside the river on its small flood plain.

You might say the world was conveniently divided here, and that the dam was its neatly drawn line.

‘My name is Mary Latimer,’ she said at the instant of our unexpected encounter. She held out her hand to me. I was becoming accustomed to such abruptness – forthrightness, they would call it – but there was something in the woman’s manner and in her formality, her gentility almost, which led me to respond more cautiously.

I introduced myself.

‘There is not a single person here who does not already know you,’ she said. ‘And, as you must be well aware, that which they do not know about you they can easily imagine.’

‘And those who do not possess the imagination?’

‘Oh, lies, half-truths, speculation.’ She smiled at this, and though she remained reluctant to look me in the eye, I felt then as though an understanding existed between us. I knew from her voice, her choice of words and her accent, by the way she held herself, and by her reserve, that she too in some way stood apart from the place and its people.

I guessed her age to be between fifty-five and sixty. Her grey hair was held back from her forehead in a tortoiseshell comb. Strands hung by her ears, and she smoothed these back into place as she spoke. Her face, too, bore none of the more usual marks of age and hardship with which I was already familiar. Her skin was pale and little lined; her teeth even and white.

‘Do you live here?’ I asked her.

‘I have done for the past ten months. Before that I lived here as a girl and young woman.’ She looked around her as she spoke.

‘And are you back here because of the dam?’

‘Because everything is to be lost? Yes, in a sense. I am here to take care of my sister.’ At this last word she turned from me, and I knew then that she and her sister had been my silent watchers of several days previously.

‘You were on the hill,’ I said.

‘You raised your hand to us. You must consider us unforgiveably rude.’ She went on before I could answer her. ‘My sister is not well. We heard the raised voice of your visitor. She was alarmed by his dogs. Tell me, will the water come this far up the valley?’ There was no pause in her speech as the subject was changed and I was diverted from talk of her sister.

‘It can rise no higher than the height of the dam,’ I said, and regretted the glib remark immediately.

‘I meant will there be changes this far upriver? I know the hills will not be drowned.’ She continued to look around us. She showed neither anger nor remorse for all that was to be lost.

‘Where were you before returning?’ I said.

‘I’ve lived in many places. Some close by.’

‘But this is where your sister lives?’

‘This is where our parents lived. Lived and died. She and I were born here.’

‘And do you still feel some affection for the place?’

‘Very little. Surely, you must have heard from others about us. Surely, someone has said something. If not of me, then of her.’ She looked hard at me to determine whether my answer was an honest one.

‘Your name may be somewhere in my ledgers,’ I said.

‘My sister was committed to an asylum, in Colne, twenty-seven years ago. We still lived here then, with our parents. And last year she was released into my care and she would live nowhere else.’

‘Because this was all she knew?’

‘No. But she would go nowhere else.’

‘And is she ... I mean ...’

‘Is she well? She is an old woman, two years my junior.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, and again I regretted the remark.

‘No, I am the one who should apologize. I thought you knew. We are a constant topic of conversation, she and I. We keep ourselves apart, you see. Or, rather, *I* keep us apart. I imagined you knew about her and were avoiding saying anything.’

‘I know what it’s like to be talked about and to be kept apart,’ I said.

‘I imagine you do. But you possess a power that neither she nor I possess.’

I acknowledged the truth of this.

‘And now we must leave again,’ she said.

She told me the name of their home and where it stood, but it meant nothing to me. I told her I would visit her, expecting her to make some excuse to keep me away, but instead she said she would be pleased to see me.

I sensed that she was about to leave.

‘Have arrangements been made?’ I said.

‘Arrangements?’

‘By the Board. For you and your sister. A new home.’

‘I’m afraid neither she nor I meet your Board’s exacting requirements. No, I am making all my own arrangements.’ She gave a cold, hard emphasis to the word.

Before I could ask her any more, she again held out her hand, turned and left me.

I saw by the strides she took and by her pace over the uneven ground that, despite her age, and despite the fact that she was clearly accustomed to surroundings more comfortable, varied and stimulating, she was in no way unequal to this place and its demands.

Some of my charts contain very little detail of the land they cover. Some leave vast spaces blank, noting only prominent streams and landmarks, of which there are few. Not even a sketched tree or sheep or rabbit in place of those grinning fish spouting on the surface of unfathomed oceans. A man who was lost here would not find himself on these charts.

My initial response to this lack of information was one of enthusiasm: here was a place I might construct to my own design in its emptiness; a place I might map into existence as though it truly were my own small domain. But in harbouring such despotic intentions I had reckoned without the place itself.

Carrying my heavy instruments to these high places has proved an impossibility, and although recordings might be taken and heights and distances calculated in my note-books, any attempt to unroll a sheet of mapping paper and plot these with any degree of accuracy in the field is impossible on all but the stillest of days, and the present season is not renowned for those.

There is no distinct line of divide marking this valley from the one to the north, only a pale track winding across the peat top. In the prospectus to investors there is mention of vividly yellow gorse blazing here and there like fires in the wilderness. These are no longer in flower, but might be eagerly imagined amid such dullness.

The head of the valley is a confused place. Where elsewhere a river might rise out of the ground flowing from a spring, here the water draining from the peat forms itself into countless shifting channels, most no broader than my arm. In some places these have created valleys in miniature; elsewhere a flow forms in the impression of my heel, collects and then runs off.

Yesterday I walked up the valley as far as the lead mines and their spoil heaps. I was surprised by the size of the buildings, by the substance of their construction in so inaccessible a place, and by the great extent of their spilled waste, hillocks piled one upon the other running from the mines to the valley bottom, and looking from a distance like giant eggs laid neatly out across the slope.

This is my first stay in the north of any length and already I have started gathering the details by which the true spirit of the place might be best understood, and which, to my naturalist's mind at least, are worthy of record.

Those peat tops, for instance, are everywhere called 'hags'; the viper or adder is a 'hagworm'; the kestrel is a 'windhover'; the snail a 'wallfish'; and the rowan tree is still without reservation referred to as 'witchwood'.

Long before my arrival, but upon learning of my appointment, I was warned by my acquaintances – now mostly lost – that the language, manners and customs of the place would be in great measure unintelligible, and, where intelligible, then repulsive to me. I feigned concurrence with this advice, and then humour at every joke it spawned.

There are twenty names for the various rains which fall, and which often vary within a single shower. A storm of less than a day's duration is a 'small' storm, and the thrush is without fail called 'stormcock' because of its perverse habit of turning into every wind and whistling undisturbed by it.