

CELEBRATING ALAN DEVOE, HILLSDALE'S THOREAU

by Jay Rohrlich



To read Alan Devoe's exquisitely written essays is to marvel with him over the timeless wonders of the natural world. Devoe was a writer/naturalist, born in Montclair, New Jersey in 1909, who moved to Hickory Hill Road in Hillsdale, NY at age 25 with his wife Mary and never left. His acclaim as a lover of nature was such that when, in 1957, two years after Devoe's death at age 46, a Columbia County bird watching society was started, it was named after him. The Alan Devoe Bird Club is still thriving.

Devoe's fame as a writer was equally noteworthy. In a book called *Writer to Writer: Readings on the Craft of Writing*, his 1936 *Atlantic Monthly* essay "The Exclamation-Point Style" was included along with short pieces by the likes of Ernest Hemingway, George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, Robert Frost, Thomas Wolfe, and William Faulkner, among others.

It is time to resurrect Alan Devoe's stature and the contributions of this "native son." He belongs in the pantheon of America's great nature writers like Henry David Thoreau, John Burroughs, and John Muir.

Devoe's output was prolific. His articles about observations of nature from the 100 acres surrounding his small farmhouse, appeared frequently in the *Atlantic Monthly*, *The*

Saturday Review, Nature Magazine, Reader's Digest, The Rotarian, Outdoors, Yankee, Commonweal, and many others. He regularly appeared on radio and in the early days of television. His first book, *Phudd Hill*, a collection of his articles, and was published when he was 28 years old, two years after he abandoned urban life and arrived in Hillsdale. Of this experience, he says,

It is quite clear that most of my friends feel very sorry for me...what on earth do I find to *do* in the country? What is there to *see*?...My friends who speak of "loneliness" and "isolation" take no heed of the deep companionship of trees and rocks. Yet it requires no pantheist to discover, in lichen-covered boulders and in the cool smooth trunks of maples or the rough, pitch-fragrant trunks of firs, an essence of being with which it is very easy for a man to commune. These high hemlocks are my fellows upon earth.

Of Devoe's writing in *Phudd Hill*, the poet Arthur Davison Ficke (another Hillsdale resident) said,

In birds, beasts, and flowers, Alan Devoe finds material for intricate reflections on the deepest emotions of man...It is impossible to read *Phudd Hill* without feeling that we have been in contact with a rare and distinguished mind.

In his richly rendered essays in five subsequent books¹ about frogs, earthworms, trees, woodchucks, hummingbirds, mice, cicadas, and many, many other "neighbors" of his, Devoe taps into our ancestral commonality with all living things. He also sounds a warning about how modern civilization has alienated us from these roots. Alan Devoe's writings resonate deeply with discussions about today's life-threatening hazards from industrial pollution, pesticide poisons, and climate change. Here he is in 1940 when the brutality of war was raging in Europe.

It is a good time, now, to turn occasionally from the brutal chaos of human insanities, and to look at a sprouting wheat seed, or a *Promethea* cocoon, or a sassafras twig, or the pattern of deer tracks in a woods, and to refresh our spirit...in contemplation of the real world of gnats and fish and trees and oceans, to subdue to their proper stature those daily concerns. Yes, it is a good thing to know something about the earth. For to be initiated into knowledge of the earth—to feel a re-awareness of even the very simplest of her miracles--is really nothing less than a returning home. For out of the earth we are sprung, and on it we live, and into it we are interred; and it is still, in 1940, quite as much our mother as it was mother to the cave man. It is still full of the forces which are life to us, if rightly used, and death if wrongly. It is still—whatever happens in politics or economics or theology or art—our one and inescapable dwelling place.

¹ *Down to Earth*, 1940; *Lives Around Us*, 1942; *Speaking of Animals*, 1947; *This Fascinating Animal World*, 1951; *Our Animal Neighbors*, 1953;

Devoe makes very clear the distinction between a scientist and a naturalist. His books are full of scientific facts about animal behavior and plant life, particularly *This Fascinating Animal World* (1951), which gives us an encyclopedic grasp on all sorts of questions about animal life like “Can a fox climb a tree?” and “Why do night birds, like whippoorwills, have bristles around their mouths?” “You must,” he says in his 1953 book *Our Animal Neighbors*, “be determined to know why that veery sings in the green glen, and how it nests, and where it migrates, and what its relation is to other birds that look like it...but the very first thing that blazes in a young naturalist is simply love: love of the green places, love of the warm softly feathered little body of this bird...and while you may want to pursue and assimilate all you possibly can of science, it is rather along the lines of this warmer mood and spirit that you want to develop your possession of the world.”

Consider, as an example of this warmth blending with scientific exposition how he answers the question: “Why do we so rarely find dead animals?” This is from his 1951 book *This Fascinating Animal World*. It is a lengthy quote, but reading it through is necessary to do justice to the essence of his writing.

Most killed animals are eaten at once by others. Animals that die of disease or accident may be taken by various big scavengers...but an important part of the answer lies in the secretive chiefly nocturnal activities of an extraordinary little creature called *Necrophorus*. It's a black and yellow-orange little beetle, smaller than a finger joint. Its role in the animals' world is plain enough from its name. It is the Bearer of the Dead...It is a scuttling little being that performs tremendous offices in the darkness of the night...it's called the sexton. In the living laboratory of my own woods and fields, I've spent a good many dusk and early dawn hours watching sextons at their work.

Suppose, now, that a baby rabbit has gone blundering and crashing into the wire netting around our garden and has broken its neck. The small body twitches briefly and lies still. We notice it, perhaps, when we are out mulching the roses in the afternoon. We think: Tomorrow I must bury that poor beast. Then tomorrow comes, and we go out, and there is no rabbit...Between sundown and sunup, it has been interred. In the black hours, the sextons have been at work.

His intimate naturalist's style comes through as Devoe describes the delicate operation of the sexton beetle (so named because a sexton oversees the operations of a church and its graveyard) who creates a hollow under the rabbit's body and readies it for burial.

In the darkness, there is a whirry little clatter of beetle wings, like a smaller version of the buzz of a June bug. There alights beside the rabbit's corpse a small black and yellow beetle with powerful black legs. It comes to earth a few inches from the dead body, and waggles its antennae inquiringly to catch more precisely the smell of death that has brought it to this place from perhaps a

long way away. The odor of death, to a sexton beetle, carries great distances on the heavy night air...

For some minutes the sexton examines the corpse, touching it lightly here, there, with its feelers, pitter-patter, pitter-patter, as in a quick gesture of "running its fingers" over the body. It approaches the corpse again, wedges its dome-backed body under one side of it, scrabbles away at the earth to roughen it and clear away a little patch, and then in an adroit gesture the sexton flips over on its back...and insinuates itself under the dead body...As the sexton lies on its back, pushing upward with all its might with its six stout black legs, it is able to show a power almost unbelievable. The body of the rabbit begins to jiggle and rock...In a mighty pedaling motion, with all six legs, the sexton sends the rabbit's body lurching perhaps half an inch toward the edge of the garden bed. As the body drops to settle again, the sexton scoots out from under it, slips over...and now rests briefly, contemplating what it has wrought.

What the sexton is doing is moving the corpse toward a soft spot of soil which it has selected as a burial spot. It may need to move the body a foot. It may need to move it 10 feet.

Devoe continues the description of this remarkable process.

A female sexton arrives, and they work together, one supporting the cadaver and pedaling it forward while the female is at the rabbit's head, scrabbling frantically to clear away impeding twigs and pebbles.

He goes on in minute detail, to visualize for us the rest of the operation of these two beetles until the rabbit is invisible under the ground.

The beetles dig a side tunnel out into the earth from the burial chamber, and there the female lays eggs. While waiting for the hatching of the eggs, the beetles feed on the rabbit's body, and when the young beetles are born, the parents take mouthfuls of the decayed rabbit flesh to feed their babies. As soon as pupation has started, in a chamber under the soil, the young are in no further need of tending. The adult sextons come tunneling up from their fetid tomb, take to the air again, and go their ways.

It is discouraging to realize that almost 70 years after Alan Devoe wrote so admiringly of the sexton beetle, it is officially an endangered species and no longer exists in New York State. Reflecting, presciently, in *Down to Earth*, on what man has done to despoil the environment and its inhabitants, Devoe said "There are times when a man may well fall to wondering whether there is anything which he can usefully do towards stemming the tides of disaster which are everywhere so evident." His personal conclusion was to continue to celebrate nature through his writings and to raise awareness of what riches we have been given, and be determined to find ways to love and preserve them. "I

submit that, reflecting upon these matters, a man might do worse than go out and plant a tree.

Voices such as Devoe's are essential to keeping a focus on the preservation of our natural heritage. His writing is rich with admiring observation and love of the phenomena of nature. He exhibits no "exclamation point" style, the overheated "word inflation" that he caricatured in his 1936 *Atlantic Monthly* article that was included in the book *Writer to Writer* mentioned earlier. His descriptions convey a quiet personal connection to the drama of the natural environment and no aggressive polemic is necessary to create the reader's emotional involvement in what Devoe experiences or the messages he conveys.

Alan Devoe is keenly attuned to the delicate balance of nature in his writing, and very much ahead of his time in sounding the alarm about what happens when that balance is disturbed by the introduction of foreign species of flora and fauna. In his 1942 book *Lives Around Us*, he describes this balance as he peers through a window in his farmhouse study and muses about a vivid consequence of its disruption:

From the window beside which this is written it is possible to look out and see, framed by the frame of the window, a little patch of the planet: a few yards of a country creek, an ancient elm, some maple saplings, and a small stretch of meadow-grass in which there is a woodchuck burrow...Near the top of the elm two Baltimore orioles are clambering blackbird-fashion among the twigs, picking out lice and beetle-larvae from the interstices of the corrugated bark; on a lower branch a phoebe is perching, making periodic swift flights into the air to seize small insects in its flycatcher beak. Near its burrow among the stems of meadow-grass and yarrow the woodchuck is feeding. The small discernible surface of the creek is rippled by the movement of furry-legged water-striders and the occasional darting of trout and dace.

He continues that "there is nothing extraordinarily arresting in this fragment of quiet countryside," and that someone seeing it would take for granted "these commonplace phenomena of water and fish and birds and a mammal and a tree."

But in order that this little piece of landscape may exist, in order that there may be an elm with three birds in it, a woodchuck nibbling at grass stems under the summer sun, and the flash of fins in the cool algae-green water of the brook, there are operating forces and counter-forces, influences and cross-influences, so numberless and intricately complicated that they can scarcely be plotted or even counted. Here are manifold interdependencies, manifold contingencies, interlocking cycles beyond reckoning. Here is operating the subtle and delicate and unimaginably ramified thing called the Balance of Nature.

Devoe goes on with microscopic specificity about the multitude of precise elements that are being balanced in the water, earth, and air outside his window. For example,

There are in this soil and sunlight precisely those elements, in precisely the proper combination, that favor an elm tree rather than a hemlock or a red cedar; the bark of the elm is just such as to furnish food to a particular kind of lice a particular variety of beetles, that are food for orioles; the flesh of orioles is calculated to support small colonies of mites...

Then he muses about how “the human race has always had a taste for reckless interference with the balance of nature.”

A good deal of the interference has taken the form of thoughtless depredation, and some of our spoliations of this kind have often been chronicled—how, for example, out of stupidity or rapacity, man has plundered his planet of eagles and parakeets and cougars and some scores of other fauna; how he has laid waste forests and made once-rich earth into desert. But man has also from time to time seen fit to transport birds and beasts from one country to another, commingling the species in patterns pleasing to his taste.

Devoe returns to look at the elm outside his window to muse about nature’s balance and the human forces working against it:

In the hollow of the elm, where at this moment the orioles and phoebe are feeding, there were until this morning four baby bluebirds. They had escaped their natural enemies and were nearly ready to fly, to take their place as adults in the natural economy of this their native countryside as eaters of grasshoppers and beetles and caterpillars. This morning these native bluebirds were set upon by an alien visitor and killed. The attack on certain insects here this summer will be that much the less, the natural balance tilted by just so much. It is precisely accurate to say, and most illuminating to ponder, that the four bluebirds are dead today in this remote upstate rural region because in the year 1871 a man unpardonably ignorant of the consequences released in the borough of Brooklyn a pair of European starlings.

So it is that Alan Devoe, in his “possession” of the world he experienced on his Hillsdale farm and beyond, appreciated its wonders as well as its problems. His keen intellect and beautiful writing are waiting to be re-discovered, and a resuscitation of his voice can play an important role in keeping our planet intact. I hope that this modest article is a first step in bringing his important work back to our consciousness.

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