The Annual William Condry Lecture 2010

William Condry

(A credo by proxy)

"MACHYNLLETH: A man I used to know had a passion for curlews. His house overlooked the estuary of the Dovey river so closely that the tide washed against his garden wall and curlews were his constant neighbours. He saw other creatures too. Sometimes with the tide came grebes, divers, mergansers, or big leaping fish with porpoises or grey seals after them. And when the tide ebbed off the mud-flats he would watch the wader-flocks gather for the worm-harvest. Sometimes he slept badly and would lie awake listening to the estuary: the gentle lap-lapping of a neap tide under his wall; or the urgent hissing and gurgling of the great springs. But on some nights even the estuary would be quite without sound, the whole vast expanse of mud and water lying in absolute silence through the sleepless hours.

"But sooner or later, lying there he would be sure to hear the deep wailings and liquid bubblings of the curlews and this gave him intense delight. When he died he left behind him several scrapbooks in which he had collected a mass of curlew lore; poems and bits of prose clipped out of innumerable books and magazines, every one of them about curlews. Clearly he was not the world's only curlew devotee. And now I live near the estuary and at times I wake in the night and hear the curlews crying in the darkness. Then I remember my old friend."

It is often suggested that when we write about others, the qualities we discern in them are our own, reflected. Certainly for me this piece of writing from forty years ago captures precisely the character of its author as well as its un-named subject (E.H. Bible, I believe.) So perhaps we can take this sketch as a brief self-portrait by the subject of our lecture today. If so, it is a very apt and accurate one, self-effacing, its focus entirely on the external world and its haunting beauties and rhythms. Fifty-three years ago last Saturday, the first "Country Diary" by William Moreton Condry for what was then the *Manchester Guardian* was published.

Now Mancunians have always been liberal and broad church, so extending an invitation to contribute to our local paper to a naturalist who was Welsh-based and a Brummie by birth was perhaps not so extraordinary a gesture, and it turned out to be a very fortunate one. What was entirely exceptional was the use that Bill – and let's use the familiar appellation here, because he was the least stuffy and formal man you could hope to meet – made of this opportunity, on a fortnightly basis, every other Saturday for the next forty-one years.

To people of my generation, who grew up in the urban wastelands of the post-war epoch, the by-line at the end of those lapidary weekend evocations of the natural world, the heading of "Machynlleth", were promises of regular sustenance and of keenly-anticipated delight. Another distinguished writer to have made his home along the Dyfi estuary, Simon Jenkins, has it that "Bill Condry put Machynlleth on the map". I suppose historically we can let Simon's fond hyperbole, with its potential slight on Welsh nationhood, pass, since there weren't any maps in Owain Glyndwr's day; and we can also quote Bill's own description of his *Guardian* writings to invoke the presence of a freedom-fighter of an entirely different kind:

"…my first diary …was about butterflies in Indian summer weather; and I have gone babbling on ever since about whatever topic has happened to take my fancy. Often it has been on straight natural history, an account of maybe a saxifrage on Snowdon, a pied flycatcher in the woods, a hawk-moth, an otter, a grass-snake, anything I have met with in the last few days.

" Or I've been walking the hills or the sea-cliffs. Quite often I have ventured into controversial issues and said my say about access to moorlands, forestry, farming, reservoirs, mining in national parks, atomic power stations, the urbanization of the countryside, the excesses of tourism, low-flying aircraft, over-population, the pet-trade, blood sports and so on."

(I would have loved to have heard what he might have had to say against *wind-factories*, and the arguments of the sustainable-energy zealots for their inappropriate siting in the Welsh hills. What would he have thought about the proposal – to bring Glyndwr back into the equation - to mar the incomparable wild skyline of Hyddgen with 120-metre-high wind-turbines, for example? I rather think that most of us here have a pretty good idea…)

Bill's comment on his country diaries that I've just quoted captures perfectly the wryness, the self-deprecatory humour, the promiscuous interests and the passionate concerns of a man who was surely one of the Twentieth Century's very greatest amateur naturalists – and how refreshing and old-fashioned that term is to us, who are perhaps more than a little jaundiced at the proliferation over the last thirty years of compromised and narrow-schooled career-conservationists, and the environmental quangoes employment within which is the height of their interest and aspiration – quangoes, I should remind you, if you need any reminding, that through those three decades have presided over a loss of species and habitat unprecedented in our history. Perhaps we need the aforementioned Simon Jenkins with us today to explain why and how, from the late spring of 1979 onwards, those selfsame quangoes were stuffed with factional and political interests inimical to their proper operation as conservation agencies? Thus was British landscape offered up on the altar of progress, and the bodies which did so were rendered accountable to none. For those who detect a certain tartness here and there among Bill's writings, this is the explanatory context.

I'm very conscious of the fact that, in talking to you about Bill Condry, many of you here today will have known him far better than I did, and for far longer. You, then, will be especially aware of how great a privilege and a pleasure that was. You scarcely need me to tell you that to keep company with Bill in the natural environment was in itself a liberal education, and a good-humoured one at that. He was both profoundly knowledgeable in all the disciplines proper to a good field-naturalist; and a highly cultured man – a Classics teacher; a devotee of Proust, and the Belgian Symbolist Maeterlinck, and of Yeats; a scholar, whose area of postgraduate study was Jean Giono - the twentieth-century French novelist whose celebrations of

the living and harmonious power of nature have been a significant influence within the European ecological movement, and whose beautiful allegorical novella, *L'Homme qui Plantait des Arbres* ("The Man who Planted Trees") is a classic of eco-literature.

All this learning was lightly worn. Though we sensed the presence of it, its assertion was never grated across our sensibilities. In talking to you about Bill today, I would like to take the hint from the man himself - who wrote, towards the end of a long life full of experience and of what the great American nature-writer Barry Lopez calls "radiant encounters", an autobiography of sorts, called *Wildlife, My Life*.

If you want to know about Bill's childhood, about his parenting, about his education and wartime experience, about his courtship of and his long and loving marriage to Penny – who steals as quietly into this festival each year as she does into the pages of Bill's book, and seats herself discreetly at the back of the balcony, watching – if you want to know about all this personal detail – and you know, humankind is incorrigibly nosy and I wouldn't blame you for it – then Bill's autobiography is the last place to look. Let me read to you the author's preface to give you the flavour of it:

"Despite its title this book can hardly claim to be an autobiography. The story of my unadventurous life would not be of the slightest interest to anybody and I have written instead about the world of nature as I have witnessed it, finding it convenient to use the passing years as a series of pegs on which to hang a succession of wildlife pictures and experiences as they are recorded in my memory or in the diaries I have kept since the days of my youth.

"Certainly it is out of doors that I have always felt most at ease, well away from what Richard Jefferies called 'the endless and nameless circumstances… of house life'. What I have written here has been conceived in the open air and I pray that a fresh wind still blows through it. As time passes I become ever more convinced

that it is in the wild places that we have the best hope of finding such little sanity as survives in the world.

"In the preface to Selborne *Gilbert White wrote that even if the book was not a success he would still be able to console himself that his pursuits, 'by keeping the body and mind employed, have, under Providence, contributed to much health and cheerfulness of spirits, even to old age'. I cannot wish more for my own book."*

There is a good deal within the apparent simplicity of this statement of intent on which I would like to pick up, and to which in due course I will return. Its modesty and its self-effacement, as well as that lovely reference to 'cheerfulness of spirits', were hallmarks of Bill's character. His focus was never on the inner wilderness of the ego, but on the variety, the complexity, the myriad-faceted beauty of wild nature. Nor did he have much truck with society. That typical throwaway comment about "such little sanity as survives in the world" is one which is replicated in differing forms throughout his writings.

I have a personal memory here of my own first contact with Bill. It was in the 1980s, and I had got myself into a considerable degree of trouble with the National Trust by writing an article (it was entitled "Trust is Just a Five-letter Word", which I suppose was mildly provocative) in which I published leaked minutes of a meeting at which the Trust had agreed to lease land recently acquired through Enterprise Neptune and the National Heritage Memorial Fund – by public subscription, in other words – on the Ceredigion coast to the Royal Aircraft Establishment for the siting of electro-optical tracking devices to monitor commercial weaponry trials on the Aberporth ranges – devices which, because of their danger to the public, necessitated large exclusion zones around them.

Concerted efforts were made by senior figures in various Welsh conservation bodies of the time to stop publication of this article – the facts related in which were not open to question. It only appeared through the good offices and doughty support of Eirene White, the then-president of the Council for the Protection of Rural Wales

(now the Campaign for the Protection of Rural Wales). She had summoned me to her Cardiff office, scrupulously checked my facts and sources, and told me with perfect candour what would happen:

"I will see that the article appears, because it *must* appear, and those officials and committee-members *must* be shamed. But once it is out they will be after you; they will vilify you in every way; and there will be no further protection I can offer."

So it turned out, and for a while I was given a pretty rough ride. Yet my presiding memory of this time is of a postcard which appeared on my doormat one morning out of the blue – or rather, out of the greenwoods of Eglwysfach – and on it a simple, brief message:

"Dear Jim,

You have chosen to live your life outside the stockade. It can be a hard place, as no doubt you are learning. But it is the only honest place to be.

Yours ever,

Bill Condry"

I hope you'll excuse me for having dwelt on this small personal anecdote. I relate it because I want you to have a glimpse of the steely principle that underpinned the character of this modest bucolic, this simple naturalist with his "uneventful life".

Bill's unanticipated postcard was the beginning of our friendship. My next book after this event was sub-titled "Essays from Outside the Stockade", in homage to him. Ten years later, when my own book on Snowdonia appeared, it was dedicated to Bill, as "best of teachers".

By then I had been on excursions with Bill, had filmed with him for a television series, interviewed him for the *Guardian*, read every scrap of his writing that I could lay hands upon, had him as guest reader on a course I was running at the *Writers' Centre for Wales*, where the wry charm of his presentation, and his graceful manner with everyone he met, were a warm entrancement.

I want to give you an impression of the young Bill Condry now from a remarkable woman about whom I could tell you many stories – all of them entirely inappropriate for this context – the writer and mountain guide Gwen Moffat. She came across Bill during the time that Penny was youth hostel warden of Cae Dafydd, at the foot of Nantmor:

"Bill was an enthusiastic ornithologist; walks with him were sheer delight. He seemed to know where nests were by instinct. Birds had just been birds [to me] before, although I knew a curlew now and coloured ones like woodpeckers, but most of the others were little brown birds, or big brown ones, just flashes across the landscape. Now I started to distinguish between them, to see shades of colour and observe behaviour. A whole new world was opening before me."

So it is with the great teachers – they show you how to use your eyes, and reinforce the truth of Thoreau's great precept that "It is not what you look at, but what you see". One bitter January day I was with Bill on the bluffs above Llyn y Gafr, on the north side of Cader Idris, searching around to find out if the purple saxifrage was yet in flower. Bill had taken us there in the hope of beating one of his botanical sparring partners, Mr. Dewi Jones of Penygroes, to be the earliest to record them that year.

"…and you tell me climbers are competitive with each other!" I jibed, in response to his raillery against the activity in which I'd spent far too much of my life.

He gave me his sidelong, amused look, conceding the point, and brought my attention back to the matter in hand – literally in his hand, which was caressing the saxifrage leaves, parting them gently as a lover, to celebrate their secrets:

"See here – these little white spots on the leaves – lime, exuded, so they say. Look for the habitat, and you will find your plants. Or you may, if you're lucky and don't give up too soon," he added, with another of those hovering expressions of amusement.

Another matter which is hovering here is the question of Bill's expectations of his students, which were as modest and reasonable and at the same time as rigorous as he was himself. We'll have another piece of Bill's writing at this point, so that you might understand a little more about his values, what he demanded of his students, what he held to be of importance. If I were one of those preposterous wine-critics, I might alert you here to citrus notes, and a certain astringency on the palate:

"MACHYNLLETH: The lady with the Oxford degree looked across to the hills. 'The high one,' she said, 'is called Mynydd Mawr. We went up there last summer. There's nothing of interest.' Then she went on with her dazzling conversation about Sartre and existentialism until none of us had any doubt that she was very well read in French literature. My own regret was that she had not read a little more English. She might then have met that poem about ships in bottles that Lawrence wrote especially for the likes of her. But would she have seen the point of it? Certainly I could not see the point of all this learning if it left people unable to appreciate places like Mynydd Mawr.

"For in summer on Mynydd Mawr the larks sing like heaven. Ravens and buzzards soar beautifully overhead, ring ouzels pipe from the rocks, blackcock bubble and leap among the heather. On Mynydd Mawr there are sheets of the lovely mossy saxifrage and there is roseroot there, starry saxifrage, mountain sorrel, oak fern, and ledges with globe flowers. But perhaps this hill is most notable for its traces of ancient man: on the summit a line of noble cairns; on the slopes many hut-circles and

cromlechs; everywhere the remains of the lives of simple people. I wonder what the lady with the Oxford degree expected to find up there. A reading party, perhaps, or a few volumes of Proust?"

…in fact, he rather liked Proust. There's a lot more subtlety and humour in Bill's writing than he's often given credit for. Your senses need to be as fully alert and engaged here as when you were out with him in the natural world. Which brings me back to the author's preface to *Wildlife, My Life*. What he was doing there – and I'm sure this didn't escape your notice, you *attentive* audience – in his quiet and disclaiming way was sketching out the long tradition of English nature-writing to which he belonged; and within which, to my mind, he was one of the most important exponents from the latter half of the Twentieth Century.

To use an appalling Americanism for which Bill would surely have mocked me, the first writer he "name-checks" is Richard Jefferies, and he slips in a quotation from *The Story of My Heart* - the autobiography in which Jefferies expounds his own mystical relationship with nature. In *Wildlife, My Life* Bill tells of how, in his youth, "in the library I found another book that entranced me: *Bevis, the story of a boy"* – Jefferies' fictionalized chronicle of rural childhood which makes some kind of a naturalist of everyone who reads it (which is far too few young people these days, of course). Bill records how he went on "to soak up all that Jefferies ever wrote about nature and the countryside."

The other writer named in this preface is Gilbert White, whose *Natural History of Selborne* of 1789 is an enduring classic of our literature, and written in the form of letters to the great Welsh naturalist Thomas Pennant, and to Daines Barrington – both of them Fellows of the Royal Society, and it tells us much that they were both indebted to the scientific accuracy of White's observations. Elsewhere, Bill picked up on this aspect of White's work and wrote about it thus:

"...in their way his journals are wonderful too. Their cleanly chiselled, staccato utterances stand out from the page and have more force than many of the

beautifully turned sentences of other writers. Possibly as he thumbs back through his daily log it may sometimes seem to him that he has merely accumulated a mountain of trivialities. But among them are observations of a new and brilliant kind. For he was looking at nature in a living, dynamic way that was being neglected by the leading scientists who were then preoccupied with classification and were studying mainly dead specimens of plants and animals. Of this difference White was fully aware."

He goes on to comment on how White gives us "the facts cleanly and frankly without trying to sell them to us in a wrapper of fine writing", and continues by thanking him for "chatting with us so amiably and teaching us so much without for a moment giving the impression that he is trying to teach us anything. And for communicating the delight of finding things out for ourselves. And for so subtly appealing to our sense of wonder about the world of fields, woods, hills, swamps, stars, planets and all the winds that blow."

Again, we recognize much of Bill himself in this characterization of another. The influence of Richard Jefferies and of Gilbert White upon Bill's work is very obvious in his searching curiosity, his painstaking attention to detail and to behaviour, his capacity for wonderment and surprise.

But there is a fourth guest at this feast. He is perhaps the most important of them, and his presence in Bill's preface is only implied, as though his were the name we scarcely dare speak. You will find him in the crucial sentence which reads as follows:

"As time passes I become ever more convinced that it is in the wild places that we have the best hope of finding such little sanity as survives in the world."

Recognize the voice? The gravity? The apophthegmatic style?

You cannot escape from it in Bill's writing. It is his constant touchstone. It belongs to the subject of Bill's first book, and it permeates every worthwhile piece of "nature-writing" from 1850 to the present day.

It is, of course, that of Thoreau, the greatest of all nature-writers, of whom Bill wrote an elegant and gracious biography published in 1954. The sentence I've just quoted is a knowing allusion to, a paraphrase of, the famous one, *"In wildness is the preservation of the world",* from Thoreau's posthumously-published essay "Walking" of 1862. Once you begin to search out the wholly benign and useful influence of Thoreau on Bill's writing, you are mining a very rich seam. And I will leave you to it, with no further need to comment, because Thoreau has another purpose to fulfil in this present address. He takes us right back to that childhood about which Bill contrived to tell us next to nothing in *Wildlife, My Life*.

You see, Bill's parents, about whom we learn so little from his autobiography, were Clarionites. They were subscribers to Robert Blatchford's weekly newspaper *The Clarion*, which was one of the major precursors to the foundation of a political Labour Party in Britain, and more widely to the whole outdoor movement which came about in the first half of the last century. The holy scripture of Blatchford's *Clarion* was Thoreau's uncategorizable and extraordinary masterpiece *Walden: or Life in the Woods*, first published in 1854. I would say that *Walden* did rather more than merely influence Bill's writing – and Thoreau as one of the pre-eminent stylists as well as one of the closest observers of nature in American literature was a very sound model to the young naturalist. He was also – and perhaps even more significantly - a man around whose values and social and moral tenets Bill was to construct the simple and sturdy framework of his adult life. Here's a diary entry (from one of the voluminous and marvellous collection of notebooks held in the Condry Archive at the National Library of Wales) by the sixteen-year-old Bill Condry, in which I think it's not entirely fanciful already to detect in its movement from precise observation to implied moral comment the influence of the Master:

"Very fine cock Bullfinch, very conspicuous white patch at tail base in flight, in garden feeding on Snapdragon seeds, which it removes while fluttering in the air. A bird fond of sitting motionless for prolonged periods…"

You come across passages like this time and again in Thoreau's *Journals*, which are essential reading for any budding naturalist. The prose-rhythm, the quality of observation, the tonal shift, the elliptical concluding comment in Bill's diary entry are all thoroughly and delightfully Thoreauvian. And I want to pick up on the implied duty the final sentence places on the naturalist and would-be nature-writer – for like the cock Bullfinch, these poor mere humans must perforce be "fond of sitting motionless for prolonged periods" - to measure Bill's writings against the way in which the genre within which he worked has evolved in the years since his death, in the hope that by doing so the exemplary nature of his work will be the more clearly seen.

It seems to me that the cultural signs of a yearning for the renewal of a close relationship with nature ("perhaps the most complex word in the language" according to Raymond Williams) proliferate by the year, and pose a question for which we have yet to formulate an adequate answer. It runs thus. What measure of compensation can be found in contemporary life for the loss of connection with process and the natural cycle which was woven through the whole human life-fabric in a pre-industrial world, the disappearance of which has left us with a kind of psychic insubstantiality by comparison with those who, in a marvelling and resonant phrase from Barry Lopez, "radiate the authority of first-hand encounters"?

Of whom Bill was one.

Recent British nature writing with varying degrees of success attempts to give us as if by proxy, and also to urge us into our own experience of, those animating encounters. But I wonder if it does so with the kind of rigour that, reading between the lines, we realize that the Condrys of this world bring to the task?

One term that has been brandished around much over the last couple of years is that of "the New Nature Writing" – a self-serving formulation first popularized by the publicity department of the publishing company *Granta*. Bearing in mind T.S. Eliot's insights into the vitalizing role of historical precedent, we might be well advised to drop the misconception that the writing to which it refers is "new" in the sense of marking a radical departure from the practice and preoccupations of its antecedents. However much our culture may insist on novelty, we should always acknowledge the living influence of what has gone before.

This point of view, unfortunately, would appear to be anathema to the editor of *Granta* 102, dedicated to *The New Nature Writing*, whose "Editor's Letter" begins thus:

"When I used to think of nature writing, or indeed the nature writer, I would picture a certain kind of man, and it would always be a man: bearded, badly dressed, ascetic, misanthropic.

"He would often be alone on some blasted moor, with a notebook in one hand and binoculars in the other, seeking meaning and purpose through a larger communion with nature: a loner and an outcast."

(Lecturer leaves lectern, walks over and scrutinizes photograph by Peter Hope-Jones projected on to screen behind. It's of an amiable, beaming, scruffy, binocularеd and anoraked Bill Condry sitting with his back to the stone wall of a hide on the north end of Bardsey:

"H'm! No beard. And that's not the hut on Walden Pond, in case you were wondering."

Lecturer returns to lectern and continues...)

Jason Cowley's need to genuflect before contemporary gender-issues aside – and a glimpse at the contents page of *Granta 102* confirms the mere gesturalism – this sneering caricature is interesting. It roots in a set of perceptions dimly recollected from Evelyn Waugh's *Scoop*. The *"badly dressed"* is particularly odd - I had not realized that attention to nature demands study of the looking-glass to see if we pass muster with the *metrolitterati'*s style-police; nor that negative values attach to a *"blasted moor"*, to asceticism , wearing a beard, possession of notebook and binoculars or seeking a *"larger* [than what, Mr. Cowley?] *communion with nature"*.

Cowley's remarks are, of course, pure tosh and the disrepute they engender is compounded by his ignorant misrepresentation of the entire tradition of nature writing in English, the only three works of which he's read appearing to be Lopez's *Arctic Dreams*, Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, and Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

Puzzle that out for yourselves – and puzzle out too what all this has to do with the kind of luminous, knowledgeable, authentic and evocative accounts of the natural world with which Bill Condry enthralled us for so many decades. Whilst you're doing so, here are some relevant thoughts on the "new nature writing " of sixty years ago from a truly authoritative naturalist and writer on nature, and a man whose high opinion of Bill is evidenced by the two books he commissioned from him. James Fisher, in the third issue of the journal which accompanied the launch of Collins' magisterial publishing project, the *New Naturalist* series (it was for this that Fisher commissioned the two books from Bill), wrote of the bucolic effusions of his day:

"Others are… by authors whose excessive consciousness of the exquisite nature of their prose, and the distinction conferred on the reader by a peep at their personalities, are so grotesque as to baffle description."

Application of that formula pins most of our so-called "new nature writers" firmly to the specimen-board. Fisher again, with perfect rigour:

"Do these people really believe that the search for truth is less important than the search for poetry or art or aesthetic satisfaction or 'happiness'? Do they not understand that the purest source of these imponderables is in the realms of fact, and that the establishment of facts is most simply done by the ancient methods of logical science? Once facts are despised, fancies replace them; and fancies are poisonous companions to the enjoyment and appreciation of nature."

In the very next issue of *The New Naturalist* after Fisher had given his acerbic verdict on the "new nature writers" of sixty years ago, another great field naturalist, Brian Vesey-Fitzgerald, gave a salutary description of what is crucial if you wish to be a naturalist. The Welsh-speakers in the audience will, I am sure, recognize the following as an excellent working definition of "dyn neu ferch eu filltir sgwar":

"…first, the local naturalist must know his country. Knowing a country, even a small area, takes time. It is not a matter of knowing merely the boundaries or the footpaths over fields and through woods. To be a really good local naturalist you must know the geography of your district as well as you know the geography of your own house; not just the paths through the woods, but the woods themselves; not just the paths across fields, but every fold in the ground in every field; not the hedges alone, but the lie of the hedgerows to the compass, their 'set' to the prevailing winds (if you had to live on what you could trap, you would soon realise the supreme importance of that point); the streams and their depths and eddies; the local weather and the local signs foretelling it; and so on and so on. A working knowledge of these things is acquired only slowly and over years, and at the same time the keen local naturalist will be learning the movements of the animals in his district. It is not often, in this country, that one may see a wild animal in person and by chance, but no animal can move over ground without leaving some sign of its passing. Too little attention is paid to such signs in this country. Of course, all these things will not be learnt by any one man in a lifetime (the man interested in spiders will find spiders which would be overlooked by another naturalist, equally observant, but interested in some other animal) but a good all-round working knowledge can be gained with just a little trouble taken."

A good, working *credo* there for all who are interested in natural history, and one evidence for the practice of which is little apparent between the covers of *Granta* 102.

Bill Condry understood and accepted that good nature-writing has always been founded on two crucial principles - applied knowledge and close, disciplined attention – allied to a willingness to be in the right place at the right time, however uncomfortable that may be and for however long it takes. These are the qualities that make Barry Lopez's writing so frequently outstanding. Among our current crop of nature-writers from this side of the Atlantic, they are what distinguish the hugely-ambitious and finely-executed writing project of Mark Cocker, our pre-eminent British contemporary nature-writer. They are qualities present throughout Bill's writing, and they serve there as an example and a delight to us all.

I would like to bring to a conclusion this talk about a man whose example I hold most dear by reading to you an extract from one of the two books he wrote for the *New Naturalist* series. This is from his 1966 *New Naturalist* volume on the Snowdonia National Park, and the chapter entitled "Hebog, Moelwyn, Siabod".

"I sat so long in the warm dusk at the top of Hebog that it was already dark and starlit as I made my way down the west side; yet it is surprising how much light the pale grass holds and all the way down I could see the difference between dark rushes, light grass and palely gleaming rocks. I unrolled my sleeping bag by a murmuring stream and went to sleep looking at Jupiter bright over Hebog and thinking of the botanist J. Lloyd Williams who, when a young schoolmaster here years ago, found the Killarney fern, Snowdonia's rarest species, along one of the streams on this side of Hebog. It has not been seen since because the precise locality was never recorded; but it probably grows there still in the spray and shade behind some little waterfall."

Let me add a final postscript to this lovely passage. I mentioned earlier Bill's botanical sparring-partner Dewi Jones of Penygroes, on the far slope of the next ridge west of Hebog. Both Bill and myself, sworn to utmost and eternal secrecy, in about 1995 were taken by Dewi to see the Killarney fern in just such a locality as Bill describes.

The moment, the place, the plant – all were exquisite. And I am bound by a promise to say no more than that about them.

To those who make right choices, as Thoreau did, as Bill Condry did, this life is truly one of gifts.

Jim Perrin, Bro Dwyryd, Hydref 2010