



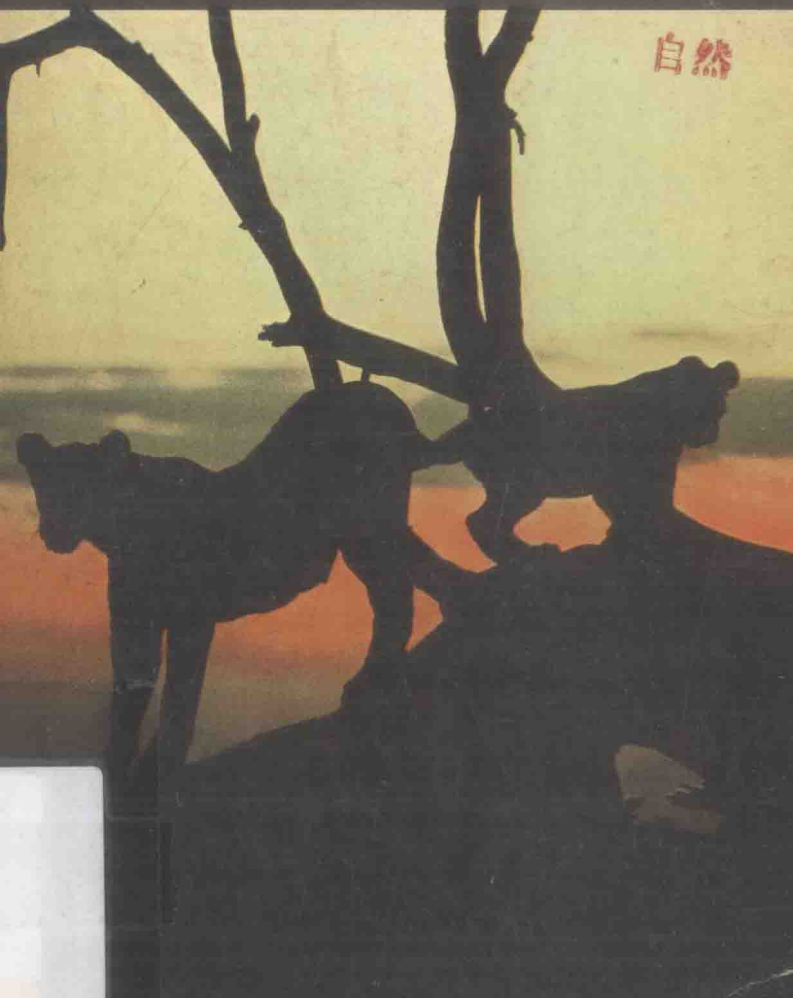
a Penguin Book

6/-

WILD COMPANY

Edited by Eric Duthie

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Wild Company

Eric Duthie was born in Aberdeen in 1903. His forbears herded sheep on the hills above Balmoral. He was educated at Aberdeen Grammar School and at Robert Gordon's College, and is a graduate of the University of Aberdeen.

His first job*was editing the *Travellers' Library* for Jonathan Cape, but he then went to Queen's University in Canada to teach English Literature for eight years. When he came back to England he returned to publishing, becoming senior book editor and later joint editorial manager of the book-publishing side of Odhams Press. He planned and edited many works of general education and books of an encyclopedic type for the young.

Eric Duthie says he likes an abrupt change of habitat, and has exchanged the cattle-truck life of the London commuter for an old manse in the Highlands, with a salmon river for a neighbour. When he wants the bright lights he goes to town with his caravan.

Recently he has made several anthologies, among them *Tall Stories*, *Father's and Mother's Bedside Books*, *The Boys' Bedside Book of Humour*, *Gallery of Rogues*, and the present collection. He has a mild tongue, but says he enjoys writing rude, blimpish letters from a left point of view.

Wild Company

Encounters between Man and Beast

Edited by Eric Duthie



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Foreword

Not so very long ago, only naturalists and sportsmen wrote about animal life, but now the stream has widened. Authors write about their dogs and cats, and Eton boys about their owls; collectors report their captures, and scientists their experiments. So I have set myself to choose from many sources a group of writings about wild creatures which together show something of the range and variety of our animal interests and contacts. This, then, is a book about man and beast, a book of animal encounters, human adventures, personal observations, protracted companionships, first-hand experiences, and, occasionally, imaginative speculations – a book of man-reported beasts.

There is something wholly likeable in most people who write about animals. Common to many of them is a strain of simplicity that lends them something of the worthiness traditionally attributed to bee-keepers. (This is said in no derogatory spirit – I keep a hive or two myself.) Take the great Fabre, an old man ever young. What excitement he finds in the smallest life, and how remote from every form of worldliness are his probings in the dusty earth. Or Jim Corbett, as simple-seeming man as ever walked the jungle paths, yet so entirely adequate – so unselfconsciously adequate – to his job. Never a false step nor a false word: a person of quality. Or Gerald Durrell, as interested in people as in beasts, and blowing away with friendly humour the stuffy White Man's Burden and the stiff upper lip.

Perhaps it is to Science that we are indirectly indebted

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for much of this book, for it is the scientist's study of the animal mind and senses that has enlarged our knowledge and sympathies so as to make possible those fascinating experimental relationships of the Adamsons and Maxwells. Picture the astonishment of the eighteenth century at most of the contents of Part One. In times past, animals were kept in their places, and, if dangerous, were safer dead. Cowper's hares never figured as 'the hares in the house', and the Reverend Gilbert White, one imagines, seldom played with his tortoise. Did not Dr Johnson himself go out to buy the oysters for his cat lest his Negro servant should feel hurt 'at seeing himself employed for the convenience of a quadruped'? As time goes on we begin to get to closer grips with nature. Eccentric Charles Waterton keeps a private menagerie and converses with a sloth, and Dean Buckland serves up for the delectation of favoured guests 'alligator, tortoise, potted ostrich, and occasionally rats, frogs, and snails' – a menu to which his son Frank – intent on augmenting the British larder – added snake and dead zoo jaguar. Soon the sporting books are full of people rampaging over Africa and firing at every creature as big as a barn door in sheer enjoyment of the target practice. As late as 1936 Ernest Hemingway gives classic expression to the schoolboy relish of the hunter in *The Green Hills of Africa*, a book that now seems somewhat degrading in that the participants are grown-up men. I enjoy vicariously the thrill of outwitting a man-eater, or facing the gorilla with a muzzle-loader, but tales in which the beast defeats the man are no great disappointment.

Most of us – even Darwin – remain ambivalent towards the conditions of life, consoling ourselves that 'the war of nature is not incessant', and accepting the meat on our plates. But who can shoot, skin, and chop up a hare without becoming for at least ten minutes a vegetarian? 'Cannibalism with the prime dish removed,' said Shaw. Disgustingly true, I think, when bloody with the hare;

but, when hungry enough, begin to wonder what Long Pig tastes like. 'God is a Great Mathematician' say the great mathematicians; but that God is a Great Butcher must be no less true, if much less respectable. Unable to take a swipe at the universe, I leave the hunters to speak for themselves.

We are lucky in our generation in that many of us have had a teacher who made us keep 'Notes on Birds' or taught us the difference between an oak and an ash. We may never have had a lion on our couch or an otter in our bed, but few nowadays can say that their lives have been totally devoid of natural history. Perhaps you have seen the mallard fly north up the Edgware Road through the electric haze of a November night. Or you live in the country and have caught the young kestrel on his first flight from the nest and heard the roe deer bark in the birch wood beyond your bedroom window. You may have bicycled down the glen with a couple of salmon concealed in your trouser legs, or sat in the straw-bale house and read the *Observer* as the old sow littered. Here, every year, house-martins and swifts besiege the eaves, chattering like budgerigars and screaming over the pines, a charming possession that Richard Jefferies longed in vain to have and that generations of window-cleaners have longed in vain to relinquish.

I will admit that to me animals have always been natural phenomena rather than 'poor earth-born companions', phenomena almost as enigmatic as the space in front of my face. They are 'fellow mortals' only when they live on the mat. I should be capable of letting them run in mazes to see how intelligent they are. My cat well knows he will be lifted by the handy root of his tail, and purrs while I lift him – to the astonishment of the R.S.P.C.A. And I am not above teasing the dog by pretending to be a ghost, till, like one of Köhler's apes, he proffers a trembling paw and pleads with me to be myself.

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But though we may affect superiority, it is easy to feel at one with the animal kingdom. Just steal up on a litter of small pigs, pop your head over the fence, and behold the *frisson* run over them as they freeze in their tracks, the grunt of fright caught in their throats, their very eyeballs motionless. I feel at one with them – for do we not all want the same thing? To be safe, to stay alive, alive-o! How deep is this need of the little pigs and how it links us with our aeons of ancestors! From the freezing of the piglets to the parson's hoped-for refuge in the everlasting arms, all life is surely one. Our stars are in our genes.

ERIC DUTHIE

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