

## THE VIOLENCE OF THE INNOCENT: GAVIN MAXWELL AND HIS OTTERS

**Patrick Parrinder**

*In his bestselling memoir Ring of Bright Water and other books, the Scottish writer Gavin Maxwell (1914-1969) tells of his life with a series of wild otters. His attempts to domesticate these highly intelligent animals involved a conscious return to the conditions of the mythological Paradise. Nevertheless, the otters proved capable of savage attacks on their keepers and on each other, and ultimately they had to be held in solitary confinement. This article looks at what the story of Maxwell and his otters reveals about the similarities – and the differences – between animal and human violence.*

What torture the human species inflict upon their 'pets'.<sup>1</sup>

In the 1960s, the Scottish writer Gavin Maxwell became famous for his attempt to repair the damage that, he believed, humanity had suffered in its 'separation from the soil and from the other living creatures of the world'.<sup>2</sup> Maxwell (1914-1969) lived in an isolated cottage with a number of animals including a series of wild otters – the first of which came from the marshes of southern Iraq – who were given the freedom of the house. But the idyll that he described in his bestselling memoir *Ring of Bright Water* (1960) was short-lived. While the otters had to be protected from human violence, their keepers had to face the fact that for wild, carnivorous animals 'violence was essential to survival and reproduction'.<sup>3</sup> Violence is so fundamental to animal life that, when we want to describe human depravity, we make use of such words as *brutality* and *bestiality*. Yet these words carry their own freight of human hypocrisy and self-deception. If nature, according to the Victorian poet Tennyson, is 'red in tooth and claw' ('In Memoriam', LVI), what shall we say of modern men?

Throughout human history and culture it has been held that we are morally superior to the animals – that we have a conscience, rights, and duties, and they do not. It may be for this reason that, in virtually all attempts to imagine a perfect society, nature has been domesticated and wild animals are excluded. Indeed, the classic

location of Utopia either as a remote island or a walled city-state seems deliberately designed to reduce the natural world to human control. Only the animals that men can put to work – sheep and cattle, horses, chickens and dogs – are likely to be allowed. For the idea of living in peace with the full variety of wild nature we have to look not to a utopian future but to the mythological past, above all to the story of the Garden of Eden.

Maxwell himself wrote that his life with the otters symbolised ‘freedom from the prison of adult life and an escape into the forgotten world of childhood, of the individual or the race’.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, if Adam in Paradise lived together with the animals, it was not on terms of equality. While they all share in the fruits of the earth, it is Adam who is told to name them and exert mastery over them. After the Fall, Adam and Eve are made to become agriculturalists, tilling the ground and wearing animal skins, and their son Abel grows up to be a shepherd. Animals are slaughtered both for food and to satisfy God’s demand for ritual sacrifices; the killing of animals, unknown in Paradise, is now both a material and a spiritual necessity. What the Creation story does not tell us is that very early in the history of agricultural communities, animals acquired another function that was less obviously related to the necessities of life. Not only were they put to work on the farm and kept as livestock, but in small numbers they were brought up in the home and cherished as pets. Mastery, in the human-pet relationship, coexists with peace and love, almost as if we could re-enter the Garden of Eden.

In modern, urban societies – paralleling the rise of doctrines of human equality – we have laws forbidding the mistreatment of pets; yet, like farm animals, most pets are highly artificial creatures, the result of such extensive human breeding that they could barely survive in the natural state. Food, shelter, medical attention and protection from other animals are all provided for them. Animals that turn violently upon their human owners are either killed or, exceptionally, they are kept safely in zoos. By the mid-twentieth century, however, feeling was turning both against wholesale animal slaughter and against confinement in zoos, and it was at this time

## *The Violence of the Innocent*

that Gavin Maxwell came to be seen (in the words of his biographer) as ‘the wilderness man, the wild animals’ friend, the strider of horizons, burster of cages, symbol of liberty’.<sup>5</sup>

Wild otters breed in Scotland and, once he had become an experienced otter-keeper, Maxwell was able to bring up two Scottish otter cubs successfully before releasing them into the local environment. Perhaps it was inevitable, however, that his search for a wild, undomesticated animal to keep as a pet would take him initially to what was then one of the last pre-industrial wildernesses, the marshes of southern Iraq. When he visited the marshes with the explorer Wilfred Thesiger in 1956, Maxwell knew that before long they would be drained and their traditional way of life would disappear. (Of course, he could have hardly anticipated that they would eventually be attacked by Saddam Hussein in what has been called a ‘wilderness holocaust without precedent’.<sup>6</sup>) Maxwell’s book *A Reed Shaken by the Wind* (1957) describes how he and Thesiger travelled through the marshes in a *tarada*, a slim, high-fronted canoe provided by a friendly sheikh. Thesiger had a kit of medical supplies and (though he had no training as a doctor) at each new village he set up a temporary clinic. Maxwell, who spoke almost no Arabic, had little to do apart from taking notes and shooting wild game for the pot. He was, however, intrigued to learn that the marsh people often tamed and brought up otter cubs, and he determined to buy one. His first cub, Chahala, soon died, perhaps poisoned by the digitalis that the villagers used in fishing bait. He found himself devastated by her death even though, as he wrote, ‘she was only one of thousands like her in the marshes, that are speared with the five-pointed trident, or shot, or taken as cubs to die slowly in more callous captivity’.<sup>7</sup> He had begun to experience the intense emotional attachment, the ‘otter fixation’ that these animals could inspire; and the marsh people who witnessed this attachment called Chahala his ‘daughter’.<sup>8</sup>

Some weeks later Maxwell acquired a second otter, given to him at the British Consulate in Basra and named Mijbil after one of his Iraqi hosts. Mijbil, it turned out, belonged to a species unknown to western zoologists and soon to be classified as *Lutrogale*

*perspicillata maxwelli*, or Maxwell's Otter. In *Ring of Bright Water* we see how Mijbil is taken to live in the author's London apartment and then at his Scottish cottage. He sleeps in Maxwell's bed and is exercised by being taken for walks on a lead on the London streets, just like a dog. But in other respects Mijbil seems more human than doglike, since otters have not just a highly articulate language but, Maxwell is convinced, a sense of humour.<sup>9</sup> They can get angry, too. Maxwell enjoys Mijbil's playful 'nips' until one day – foolishly trying to confiscate an eel that the otter is eating – he receives a serious bite. Bones are broken in his hand even though he is wearing three pairs of gloves. Already the young otter has a 'strength almost unbelievable', with 'enormously powerful' jaws', yet Maxwell continues to live with him on terms of extreme intimacy.<sup>10</sup> Once they reach the author's Scottish retreat, Mijbil is accorded almost total freedom; yet by now the pattern of Maxwell's otter-keeping has become established. As a travel-writer and historian living by his pen, he cannot stay all the time at Camusfeàrna (the fictional name that he gives to his remote Scottish house). He must find friends and, eventually, a series of paid assistants to look after his otters and other pets during his long absences.

Until the success of *Ring of Bright Water*, Camusfeàrna had no telephone, no electricity and no domestic water supply. It stood on the sea shore with no jetty, beneath a steep, pathless hillside that had to be climbed to reach the nearest road. Maxwell's furniture was made from fish boxes and other jetsam; he cooked on a Primus stove, and used a bucket to draw water from the river. Around the house there was wildlife in abundance – badgers, deer, pine martens, wildcats, seals, dolphins and much else. The cottage stood unfenced upon a green field edged by a fast-running stream. For Maxwell this was an idyll with mythological overtones, and his friends and assistants shared this feeling. Camusfeàrna was compared to Coleridge's Xanadu and to the Avalon of the Arthurian legends,<sup>11</sup> but it was the poet Kathleen Raine, who was deeply and unhappily in love with Maxwell and who shared in looking after Mijbil, who identified it with the Garden of Eden. It was 'to Gavin', she recalled in her 1977 autobiography, that she owed her 'return to the earthly

## *The Violence of the Innocent*

paradise'.<sup>12</sup> She would stay in the house in his absence and – though they never lived there together – she saw herself and Maxwell as a new Adam and Eve. Their pet otter was the 'gate-keeper who allowed us to pass, through his life, into the unfallen world',<sup>13</sup> yet it was while she was responsible for Mijbil at Camusfeàrna that he disappeared, not for the first time, and never returned. Maxwell arrived back in Scotland to learn that his beloved and all too trusting pet had been killed by a local lorry-driver with a pickaxe.

Camusfeàrna, in fact, was an idyll surrounded by dangers. Maxwell had always been aware of the hunting and casual slaughter of wild otters, and the use of traps to snare them. He soon found that the local sheepdogs, seen by some of his otters as potential playmates, were also trained to kill them. The success of *Ring of Bright Water* brought both an avalanche of fan-mail and a series of uninvited visitors, some of whom brought dogs off the leash. Soon he decided to build a high wooden stockade around the house, the first of a number of protective measures that would eventually make the otters' quarters as secure and fortified as in any zoo. For not only were the otters threatened by human and animal violence; they themselves were inherently violent and began to turn against human beings.

After Mijbil's death, Maxwell's attempts to obtain another otter from Iraq were thwarted by the country's 1958 revolution. Instead, a chance meeting in 1959 led to his adopting Edal, a one-year-old otter from Nigeria, who would stay with him until her death in the fire that destroyed Camusfeàrna nine years later. Through Edal, Maxwell discovered aspects of the otter's nature that had remained hidden during Mijbil's comparatively short life. She was joined by a male West African otter cub, Teko, in what Maxwell hoped would become an idyllic partnership; but Edal took violently against Teko, and the two had to be kept permanently apart. Then Edal attacked first one of Maxwell's visitors – a keeper from the London Zoo – and then her carer, Terry, who was wearing a sweater that the visitor had left behind. Terry was so savagely bitten that he lost two fingers, one on each hand. Soon Teko too started attacking his keepers, and after that both animals were locked up in secure enclosures.

Maxwell always resisted what he called the ‘act of wanton cruelty’ involved in sending his house-reared otters away to a ‘life sentence behind the prison bars of a zoo’, but the solution of solitary confinement at Camusfearna was not much better.<sup>14</sup> Each separate enclosure contained running water, a deep pool to swim in, and sleeping quarters warmed by an infra-red lamp; but the gates of Eden had clanged shut.

What drove these partially domesticated otters to violence? Few people knew animal psychology more intimately than Maxwell, and he was not short of explanations. He speaks of the animals’ jealousy and insecurity, their fear of interlopers and the unknown. Only with its ‘acknowledged foster-parents’, he thinks, can a tamed otter be fully trusted: ‘the emotions are too intense, the degree of affection accorded by the otter too profound’ for it to take its place in a wider human circle.<sup>15</sup> The implication is that animal violence mirrors human violence with, at best, rather subtle differences: what is ‘normal’ for the one is ‘abnormal’ for the other, and vice versa. Power relations are fundamental in each case. Teko, for example, never attacks Maxwell himself, and the latter observes that ‘I have at no moment truly lost the sensation of mastery in which lies my salvation’.<sup>16</sup> This is, perhaps, the lesson that Adam and Eve failed to learn in Paradise when faced by the serpent. Maxwell was proud of his aristocratic family background, and all who knew him attested to his charisma and ease of command. Kathleen Raine recalled with some bitterness that he ‘had the gift of making us all his slaves’.<sup>17</sup> Surely his animals were responding to the same gift, the power that quells the very violence that on other occasions it is likely to provoke.

The title of Maxwell’s last book *Raven Seek Thy Brother* (1968) is an Arab saying reported by Thesiger, and the book’s subject is the continual bad luck associated with the raven, which Maxwell feels has been his fate. An epilogue describes the fire at Camusfearna (caused, it would seem, by faulty electrical fittings) and the death of Edal. Yet Maxwell also tells how, after five years of complete confinement, he was able to achieve joyous reunions with both Edal and Teko, and to restore some of their lost freedoms, though they still had to be kept ri-

## *The Violence of the Innocent*

gidly apart. During the years isolated from human companionship Teko developed a 'zoo pattern of behaviour', 'repetitive, compulsive action born of boredom and frustration'.<sup>18</sup> Their captivity was all the more cruel, Maxwell suggests, because 'they had both received life sentences for actions which, [to judge] by the very hysteria that characterized them, were probably unremembered'.<sup>19</sup> Once again, the human analogy is both fascinating and deliberately understated. Not content with speculating about animal memory, he also implies that they have powers of reasoning, since their lack of understanding so clearly reflects ours. If their behaviour is bewildering to him, how much more so, he wonders, must his be to them? At the same time, however violent the otters may have been, in human terms they are clearly innocent and Maxwell loves them unreservedly for that. The joy that they show at being reunited with him cannot, in any case, lessen the guilt he feels at having imprisoned them for so long. Soon afterwards, Edal was burnt to death and Camusfearna left in ruins. In the following year Maxwell himself died, followed two weeks later by Teko, who, having grown 'old and toothless and testy', was found drowned at the bottom of his new pool.<sup>20</sup> It seems very possible that the violent, wild otter had been so far domesticated that, doglike, he could not survive the loss of his imprisoning human master. How far the dream of a shared, free life between man and the animals deserves or can achieve a less unhappy ending is for us to decide.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Maxwell, *Raven Seek Thy Brother*, p. 188.

<sup>2</sup> Maxwell, *Ring of Bright Water*, p. vii.

<sup>3</sup> Maxwell, *The Rocks Remain*, p. 120.

<sup>4</sup> Maxwell, *Ring of Bright Water*, p. vii.

<sup>5</sup> Botting, *Gavin Maxwell*, p. 296.

<sup>6</sup> Botting, *Gavin Maxwell*, p. 200.

<sup>7</sup> Maxwell, *A Reed Shaken by the Wind*, pp. 221-22.

<sup>8</sup> Maxwell, *Ring of Bright Water*, pp. 82-3; *A Reed Shaken by the Wind*, p. 203.

<sup>9</sup> Maxwell, *The Rocks Remain*, p. 29.

<sup>10</sup> Maxwell, *Ring of Bright Water*, p. 87.

Patrick Parrinder

- <sup>11</sup> Maxwell, *Ring of Bright Water*, p. 12; Botting, *Gavin Maxwell*, passim.  
<sup>12</sup> Kathleen Raine, *The Lion's Mouth*, p. 33.  
<sup>13</sup> Raine, *The Lion's Mouth*, p. 62.  
<sup>14</sup> Maxwell, *The Rocks Remain*, p. 101.  
<sup>15</sup> Maxwell, *The Rocks Remain*, p. 120.  
<sup>16</sup> Maxwell, *The Rocks Remain*, p. 118.  
<sup>17</sup> Raine, *The Lion's Mouth*, p. 71.  
<sup>18</sup> Maxwell, *Raven Seek Thy Brother*, p. 4.  
<sup>19</sup> Maxwell, *Raven Seek Thy Brother*, p. 192.  
<sup>20</sup> Botting, *Gavin Maxwell*, pp. 517, 562.

**WORKS CITED**

- BOTTING, Douglas. *Gavin Maxwell: A Life*. London, HarperCollins, 1993.  
MAXWELL, Gavin. *A Reed Shaken by the Wind*. London, Longmans, 1957.  
MAXWELL, Gavin. *Ring of Bright Water*. London, Longmans, 1960.  
MAXWELL, Gavin. *Raven Seek Thy Brother*. London, Longmans, 1968.  
MAXWELL, Gavin. *The Rocks Remain*. London, Longmans, 1963.  
RAINE, Kathleen. *The Lion's Mouth*. London, Hamish Hamilton, 1977.