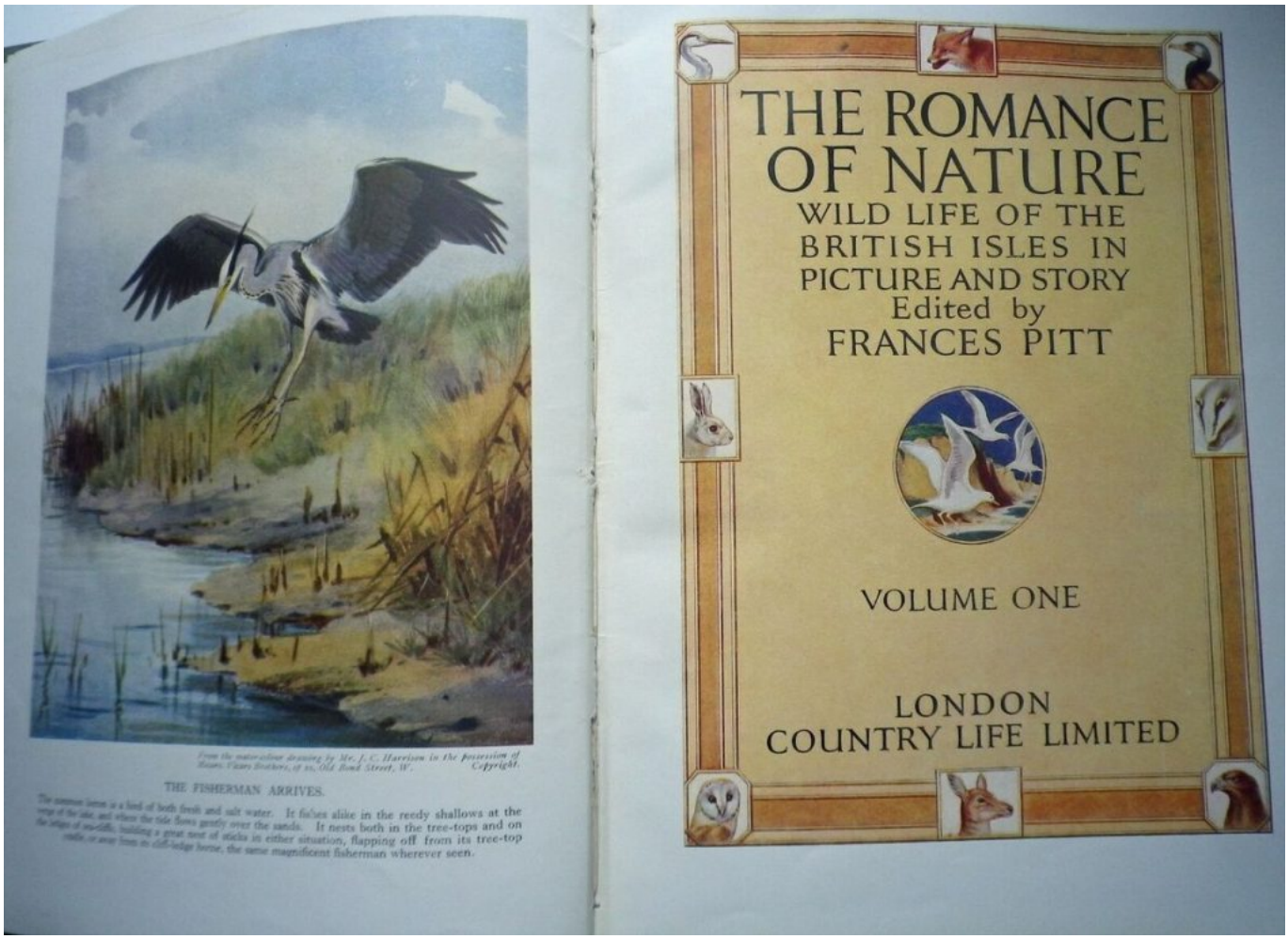
Judges of History



by Theodore Dalrymple

Last week, I gave a talk to my local historical society about a distinguished lady who lived locally and died sixty years ago this year. After my talk, a middle-aged gentleman—by far the youngest in the audience—came up to me and said something very revealing, which, of course, I shall leave to the end, as the writer of murder mysteries leaves the solution to the mystery to the last few pages.

The talk was about a lady called Frances Pitt, who was born in 1888. Her father was a solicitor and farmer, and in the highly enclosed provincial society of the day counted as a notable. He lived in a large house in the midst of his acres, and his wife was counted as a clever and economical domestic manager

because she had only four domestic servants.

Frances Pitt was never sent to school, though she had a private tutor. School lessons were not her interest, however; and from a very early age what captured her imagination was the wildlife by which she was surrounded. In those days, it was much richer and more plentiful than it is today. The decline in wildlife in Britain has been very startling: For example, judging by what she later wrote in one of her books, there were greater numbers of starlings (a common bird, even in my childhood in London) in the vicinity of her house than in the whole of the country today.

Miss Pitt became one of the most prolific and popular writers about natural history in Britain from the 1920s to the 1950s. She wrote many books and was also a prolific journalist; she wrote a weekly column about natural history in the London *Evening News* for 35 years.

She was more interested in animals than in people and lavished most of her capacity for affection on them. She lived with her parents until they died, in 1944 and 1949, and during their lives turned their house into what must have appeared like a menagerie. Apart from the normal domestic and farm animals such as horses, cattle, dogs, and cats, she kept (at various times) otters, badgers, foxes, rats, voles, squirrels, ravens, macaws, peacocks, and no doubt others. She called her parents "the powers that be," but I suspect that she was the main power in their very large house. After her parents' death, she lived with a lady companion.

She was a very close observer of all the creatures she kept and made many of them the subject of charming books such as *Moses, My Otter* and *My Squirrels* (among many others). But she was also a devoted observer of animals in the wild and spent many days in uncomfortable conditions on remote northern islands watching seabirds, for example. She was a pioneer of wildlife photography in Britain at a time when catching

animals in movement photographically was far more difficult than it is now.

But she was also a true amateur scientist. Her papers were published in such journals as the *Journal of Genetics* and *Nature*, publication in the latter still being the ambition of thousands of scientists worldwide. She was made a Fellow of the Linnean Society and of the Zoological Society of London (as was Charles Darwin), the former being the oldest society devoted to the study of natural history in the world.

She was clearly formidable, I suspect believing herself born to command. When she decided to visit Iceland and Scandinavia, she shipped her car there without the slightest recognition that this was an unusual, not to say extraordinary, thing to do. It was the kind of thing "one did," as a matter of course. She was not at all interested in politics and managed to visit Hungary in 1938 and Kenya in 1957 without mentioning politics in her sketchy account of her visits. In Hungary, for example, she was more interested in the wild geese on the great Hungarian plain than in the political situation in Central Europe, which at the time was not without significance, not only for Central Europe but for the world.

I think her book *Animal Mind* would bear reprinting. It is an accessible but intellectually rigorous examination of such phenomena as animal rage and revenge, playfulness, migration, nesting, herding, and so forth. Even if her conclusions have in some cases been superseded, one still appreciates the clarity of her thought and writing. She debunks, for example, the idea of telepathy among thousands of birds to account for their seeming ability to change direction all at once, a theory that was popular, and taken seriously, in her day.

At the end of my talk, I suggested that the town should erect a plaque to her memory. (I should add that our town, though ancient, is not one in which droves of distinguished people have made their home. We still have far more pubs than

writers.)

It was to this suggestion that the middle-aged man responded (in private). He and others, he said, had had the same thought, but they had met with strong opposition. This was because Frances Pitt, in addition to her other activities, had been a master of the local hunt—the fox hunt, that is. And since so many people consider this to have been a cruel sport (it has now been outlawed), they also consider that Frances Pitt deserved no memorialization. For them, her participation in fox-hunting more than canceled out her positive achievements.

I should point out that in her time fox-hunting was accepted locally as perfectly normal and even laudable. It was supposed to keep the number of foxes down at a time when chickens were not yet farmed in batteries. (Talk about cruelty!) The meeting of the hunt was a great social occasion for the whole town, in which almost everyone, hunter or not, took joyful part.

The miserable attitude of the local Savonarolas is surely an indication of how far has gone the habit of requiring all past figures to have complied throughout their lives with our current moral outlook before we honor them in any way. This means, of course, that we cannot honor anyone from the past, and if we cannot honor anyone from the past, eventually our civilization will collapse—as the Savonarolas and Robespierres of our town probably wish, seeing in it nothing but its defects, the better to feel morally superior. It does not occur to them that their own outlook might one day (possibly the day after tomorrow) be superseded.

That this destructive and joyless attitude should have reached our small and insignificant town is testimony to the thoroughness with which the ideological termites have done their work. Personally, I blame the disastrous expansion of tertiary education for this—but that, as Mrs Hawksbee said, is another question.

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